

III. Enemies Oppose the Work – Chap. 4

Verses 1-3

1. How did Sanballat react to the work on the wall?
2. What did the enemies attempt in order to discourage the work? What did Sanballat and Tobiah say?
3. Application: What are some things people say to discourage God's people today?

The opposition of Sanballat and his companions had begun in chap. 2. When they had heard of the work, they had mocked and ridiculed. In this chapter the opposition continued and significantly intensified. We will see how Nehemiah and the Jews dealt with it. From their example, we can learn important lessons about how we today should deal with the opposition we face in service to God. See notes on Ezra 4.

God's people have always faced opposition in their work for God. People are rarely truly neutral about God and His true work. Either they support and defend it, or they oppose it. The methods of opposition are similar from generation to generation, so we can learn from the examples here.

A. First Method of Opposition: Mockery and Discouragement

Sanballat's anger and ridicule

Sanballat had been introduced in 2:10,19. He had been upset to hear that Nehemiah had come to work for the benefit of the Jews. Here he became even more angry as he heard the work on the wall had actually begun and was progressing.

His first effort to prevent the work had been mockery and attempts to discourage the work (2:19). Here he continued those tactics but in more extreme forms. He evidently hoped that he could discourage the Jews from succeeding by mocking their efforts and reminding them of the enormity of the task they faced.

He appeared with his brethren, the army of Samaria. This shows that Sanballat was a Samaritan, part of the people that the Assyrians had moved into the area after they removed the Israelites. Intermarriage with various other people had made them a mixed race. In any case, they had no real inheritance in Israel (see on 2:10).

Sanballat began taunting the Israelites that they were too feeble to do the job they had begun. He points out the greatness of the task. Did they think they were strong enough to build fortifications? Were they able to make sacrifices? Did they think they had begun a job that could be completed easily with little work, like a one-day job? He pointed out the heaps of rubbish that stood in their way, much of which had been burned. Did they think they could raise stone walls from the rubbish. This turned out to be a real concern (see 4:10).

No doubt all these were real problems, and Nehemiah and the Jews had surely considered them. But Sanballat's intent appears to be to discourage the workers by convincing them they could never complete so great a task, so why bother to try?

Tobiah joins the ridicule.

Tobiah then joined the mockery by saying the wall the Jews built was so feeble that it would fall down if a fox or jackal stepped on it. This was obviously an exaggeration, but the purpose was to make the people think their work was not worthwhile. He hoped they would view the effort as not being worth the attempt.

We face similar ridicule today.

People attempt to discourage us saying how small and weak our efforts are. The church is small and many people disagree with us. We are a minority opposing large churches with powerful hierarchies and wealthy organizations. We have no political power, no wealth, no influential members, and no seminary-trained preachers, so how can we succeed?

But remember, if people really thought it was impossible for us to succeed, they would not bother to say anything or do anything at all! People do not bother to oppose what they truly believe to be ineffective. They just laugh and go about their business. The very fact they find us worth their time and effort to refute proves they feel at least somewhat threatened by our work.

Verses 4-6

4. How did Nehemiah respond to this ridicule? What did he say?

5. What did the Jews do? What was the result? What can we learn?

Nehemiah's response: Prayer and trust in God

Nehemiah dealt with the discouragement by going to the ultimate source of strength: He appealed to God in prayer. Likewise, when we are taunted regarding our apparent weaknesses, we should remember that true strength is not ultimately found in any of the sources that people say we lack. True strength does not lie in numbers, wealth, influence, etc. True strength lies in God and His word. So when we face discouragement and ridicule, we too need to turn to God and the strength He can supply. (Cf. Psalms 123:3,4.)

Nehemiah called on God to hear their taunting and be aware of the fact that His people were despised. He called on God to turn the reproach back on those who spoke the reproach. That is, let the people suffer who wanted to cause suffering to God's people. (Cf. Psalms 79:12.) They did the wrong, so let them suffer for it, instead of God's people suffering.

He said God could even send them as captives to a foreign land. This is the punishment that God had put on the Jews for their rebellion against Him. Now they had returned to serving Him and had come back to the land, and now they were being mocked for the weakness that had come upon them. A fitting punishment for those who mocked them would be for them to now be sent into captivity!

Further, he called on God to not cover or overlook the iniquity of the enemies – they had not repented of it, so they should not be allowed to go unpunished but should be punished even as the Jews had when they had refused to repent of their sins. The things the enemies had said were not just a reproach on the people who were building the wall; they were a reproach on God Himself, because it was God's work the people were doing. (Cf. Psalms 69:27,28; 109:14,15; Jer. 18:23.)

Likewise, when people today revile the people of God who are doing His work, they are actually reproaching God. Such conduct angers God and is worthy of punishment.

The people then continued the work.

Having prayed for strength, Nehemiah and the people just kept working. The result was that the wall was built and completely joined together to half of its height. Clearly God's blessing was behind this work, but it was also possible because the people had a mind to work.

God does not bless those who will not work for Him. So to be successful, first we must trust in God, then we must be willing to work for Him: Trust and obey, faith and works. If we think we cannot succeed in God's work, and if we look at our own weaknesses and problems, then we get discouraged and do not work. But when we trust God and work willingly, He can accomplish through us much more than we even thought possible.

Are we of a mind to work in the church today? Could it be that the church is often unsuccessful in God's work today, not because we are lacking numbers and wealth, etc., but because we do not trust in God enough to work diligently at the work He has given us? Instead of having

a mind to work for God, could it be we have a mind to make money for our own benefit and enjoy pleasure, entertainment, sports, TV, and other activities for ourselves instead of for God?

B. Second Method of Opposition: Plots of Violence and Warfare

Verses 7-9

6. How did the enemies react when they saw the work continuing? What did they plan next?
7. Special Assignment: List other Bible examples in which enemies attempted physical harm against God's people.
8. How did Nehemiah respond to this problem (v9)?

The enemies plot attack and violence.

Sanballat and Tobiah, along with their companions the Arabs, Ammonites, and Ashdodites, heard that the work on the wall was progressing and prospering. The walls were being restored and the gaps were being closed. This made the enemies very angry. Enemies of the truth today are likewise especially angry when they see our work for God is progressing and prospering.

So the enemies determined to move on to more extreme measures. They plotted to attack the workers in the city and create confusion. If they attacked while the wall was still incomplete, they might succeed in causing such confusion, disorganization, and discouragement that the work would stop.

This has often been the pattern of the enemies of truth. First they mock and ridicule God's people. But if that does not stop the work, then they move on to physical violence or threats of violence. Many examples exist in the early history of the gospel. Consider the deaths of John (Matt. 14), Jesus (Matt. 27), Stephen (Acts 7), and James (Acts 12). Consider the imprisonment of Peter (Acts 4,5,12) and Paul (Acts 16; etc.), and others (Acts 8).

While our society frowns on physical violence against religious people, it is sometimes threatened. And imprisonment is not unknown. And who knows what the future holds?

Nehemiah responded by further prayer and setting a watch.

The response to the mockery and ridicule had been based on prayer to God. When the opposition became more extreme, more prayer was needed. Some lose faith when the opposition is not easily overcome. They think God does not hear them or does not care. But Nehemiah continued to trust God and just encouraged more prayer.

But again they responded with work as well as prayer. They set a watch against the enemies day and night. That is, they assigned people to be on guard to watch for the enemy to attack. Then the Jews could be warned to defend themselves. Note that we are responsible to work to bring about what we pray for. Prayer is not an excuse to leave everything to God while we do nothing. Rather it obligates us to do what we can.

So today when people plan to do violence to God's people, we need to continue to pray. And it is appropriate for us to be watchful for the harm they can do us. Of course, we do not respond with physical violence – neither Jesus nor His disciples ever defended themselves with force against their spiritual enemies (John 18:36). We fight a spiritual battle (Eph. 6:12), so we must be on guard spiritually for the spiritual attacks of Satan and his people (1 Peter 5:8; 2 Cor. 10:3-5)).

Verses 10-12

9. How did the Jews themselves express discouragement (v10)?
10. What did the enemies say to increase the Jews' fears?

The people began to become discouraged.

At this point the pressures of the task and the threats of the enemies began to take a toll on the people, and they did begin to become discouraged. Some warned Nehemiah that there was

so much rubbish that the people could not work on the wall. The strength of the people was failing. They began to think they could not finish the job.

Likewise the enemies continued their pressures. They plotted sneak attacks in which they would come unexpectedly into the midst of the people and kill some of them. They hoped this would cause the work to cease. Apparently they did not realize the Nehemiah was aware of their plans, or perhaps they thought they could still attack unexpectedly and create enough havoc to defeat the work.

Note how similar this is to modern terrorism: unexpected sneak attacks that kill innocent citizens with the hope of discouraging the people till they give in to the terrorists' demands. Such plots are nothing new. We will see how Nehemiah dealt with them.

The knowledge of this danger began to cause the Jews to become fearful, especially those who lived closest to the enemies. Ten times they came to Nehemiah appealing for protection. They implied that the enemies would attack at whatever place Nehemiah turned from – i.e., when he moved away from an area, that is where the attack would come. He could not be everywhere at once and defend everyone, so they were insecure.

Important works face critical times of discouragement.

Such points of discouragement are typical in the course of important tasks. When the work first begins, people are enthusiastic. The enthusiasm carries them over the hurdles and hardships. And when the task nears its end, people can see that the end is at hand, so they are encouraged to continue working to see it through. But somewhere in the middle of the task often comes a point of discouragement in which people are not sure they are able to finish.

Often this is a combination, as in this case, of internal and external problems. People within the group begin to grumble and complain or become discouraged. People outside the group are attempting to make the work as difficult as possible. So the enormity of the task combined with opposition of enemies begins to take its toll.

Nehemiah and the people faced such a critical time, and we often do likewise in our work today. If we can get through these times and still keep on working, often we can get the job done. But if we allow the discouragement to overwhelm us, we fail.

Verses 13-15

11. What arrangements did Nehemiah make for the defense of the people (v13)?
12. What did he say to urge the people to courage (v14)?
13. Application: How would these principles apply to us today?
14. What happened when the enemies learned of Nehemiah's preparations?

Nehemiah's plan to keep the work progressing

Nehemiah was wise enough to realize that the work was at a critical point and that steps could be taken and needed to be taken to keep the work going. First he positioned people with weapons at the openings in the wall and behind the lower parts of the wall. Here he grouped them by families.

This appears to me to be a means of providing protection at the weakest points of the wall, perhaps combined with a measure to make sure all the people were within the safety of the wall. Instead of being exposed in those areas near the enemies (v12), the people and their families would be behind the walls. This is expressly stated to be the case at night in v22.

Then he gave the leaders and the people encouragement. He reminded them that they did not need to be paralyzed by fear; they should not act as cowards but be strong. First, he reminded them that God was on their side. He would fight for them, as He had so many times in the past (Num. 14:9; Deut. 1:29; 2 Sam. 10:12). This did not mean they would not have to fight, but it meant that God's strength would sustain them in that fight.

Then he urged them to be willing to fight for their families and property: their wives, sons, daughters, brothers, and homes.

Note that his plan did not include giving in to the threats of the enemies. When we give up the work and give in to the demands of terrorists and those who threaten us, we have rewarded them with success. Such appeasement will not motivate them to leave us alone. Rather, it encourages them to try again with other demands. If they get their way by threats and violence once, they will just offer more threats and violence to get their way again and again. What is needed instead is a plan to overcome the danger while continuing to do the work.

The enemies' plots are defused.

The enemies became aware then that Nehemiah and the Jews knew about their plans. They were not going to succeed with surprise attacks, as they had hoped, because the people were protected behind the walls and were on guard. Furthermore, they were prepared to fight and defend their families.

This led the enemies to be the ones who were discouraged. They were apparently unwilling to fight if it required a direct attack on those who were prepared to fight back. Like terrorists, they sought to harm defenseless, unprotected citizens whom they thought would not fight back. So they did not attack at all!

As a result, the people were able to return to working on the wall. It appears that initially the work was discontinued as the people prepared for defense against the enemies. But once it became apparent that the enemies would not attack as long as the people were prepared for defense, they could return to the work.

Note that God was given credit for bringing the plot of the enemies to nothing. This was God's answer to their prayers. (Cf. Job 5:12.)

We need similar plans today.

As already discussed, we do not fight physical battles in God's service today (see v8). But we need similar strength and courage in our spiritual battles. We should not be afraid but remember that we are doing God's work. So if we trust and pray to Him, He will work and fight for us, just as He has always done for His faithful servants.

Likewise, we need to be concerned enough for our families that we are willing to fight the spiritual battles required by opposition to sin. We must never allow temptation, false doctrine, and especially the forces of evil in the world to take our family members into sin without a fight! We must take out the armor of God and the sword of the spirit and fight the good fight of faith!

Family members must decide for themselves whether or not to faithfully serve God, but let them never leave the faith without a fight on our part to save them from sin! We cannot be certain that no family member will ever be lost to Satan; they are free moral agents. But diligent effort and courageous spiritual warfare will defeat him if our loved ones truly want to serve the Lord.

Verses 16-18

15. How did Nehemiah's servants work afterward (v16)?

16. How did the workers protect themselves?

Nehemiah's provisions for defense as the work continued

Although the enemies' initial plots had been defused, the very nature of such plots is that they demand God's people to be always on guard. Had the Jews discontinued their vigilance, the enemies could simply proceed with their original plans. So Nehemiah made ongoing provisions for the people to be protected even as the work continued. They were now convinced that they could return to the work, but they also had to provide defense as they worked. Both were now needed.

From that time on, half of Nehemiah's servants worked on the wall, while the other half continued armed and ready for battle. (This appears to me to refer, not to the people in general, but to Nehemiah's own special servants – note v23. The people in general are described in the fol-

lowing verses.) Meanwhile, the leaders continued to give the people support, encouragement, and guidance.

When workers carried burdens, they arranged their loads so that they carried with one hand and kept a weapon in the other hand. As they did construction work on the wall itself, people were also armed, having a sword or weapon with them at all times.

Meanwhile, Nehemiah had a man with him at all times who was prepared to sound a trumpet. We will see his purpose as the description proceeds.

The point of these measures was constant preparation for defense even as the work continued. The danger was not allowed to prevent the work, but the work also did not prevent the defense. Both measures were needed.

Verses 19-21

17. How would the people be warned to come to the defense when the enemy attacked (vv 19,20)?

18. Where did the people spend the nights? Why?

Provisions for attack if it came

Everyone was armed and prepared for battle. But Nehemiah explained to the leaders and the people that the wall was large, so the workers were widely separated from one another. When an attack came, it would surely occur at some particular point on the wall, not on the whole wall at once. But they could never know where an attack would come. So some means was needed to rally the people to the point of attack, wherever it came.

This is what the man with the trumpet would accomplish (v18). The trumpet would warn the people where the attack was occurring, so the people would know to gather there to fight the defense. (We are not told exactly how the trumpeter would indicate where the attack was occurring. Perhaps the choice of notes sounded would indicate the place or perhaps the trumpeter would go to the spot and blow the trumpet there.)

But in any battle that came, they were to remember that God was with them and would fight for them (cf. v14; Ex. 14:14,25; Deut. 1:30; 3:22; 20:4; Josh. 23:10; 2 Chron. 20:29).

So in this way “we labored in the work.” Half held spears from morning till night, even as the others worked (as on v16, I am not sure whether this applied to the people in general or just to Nehemiah’s personal servants).

Verses 22,23

19. How was the diligence of Nehemiah and his servants described?

20. Case Study: Some people say we should always be positive, so they object if we oppose other people’s religious views. What application would this context have to such thinking?

21. Summarize lessons we can learn from this chapter regarding opposing error.

Further provisions for safety

The final descriptions of the provisions included that all the people and their servants were to stay in the city behind the wall at night. One advantage of this was that the people could all serve to protect one another. None would be exposed to special danger by being near the enemies without protection, as the people had feared (v12). All would be behind the wall to be protected and to help protect the others. The other advantage was that all were in the city so they could help in the work on the wall during the day.

The diligence of Nehemiah and his servants

Nehemiah, his servants, his brothers (presumably his literal brothers), and his special guard that accompanied him were always on call to meet a need in the city. They never even took off their clothes except to wash (presumably to wash themselves and/or to wash the clothes). This

meant they were always ready to respond to any emergency. They would not even have to take time to clothe themselves.

The next chapter tells more about the dedication of Nehemiah and his servants to the work of God.

The need for positive and negative work in the kingdom today

Many lessons can be learned from Nehemiah's efforts to protect the people and deal with their enemies. The most basic one is our need to trust God and pray to Him for care and protection. Another lesson is the need for constant vigilance against enemies.

But a special lesson is that our work for God is both positive and negative. It involves both offense and defense. We must build up God's kingdom (as the Jews built the wall), even as we fight the forces of evil. Our work is neither entirely offensive nor entirely defensive but a combination of both. We must protect the Christians from being taken captive by Satan to sin and destruction, even as we help them grow and help save the lost from sin.

The ultimate goal is positive: we seek to build up the kingdom by helping souls be saved and grow up in Christ. But to achieve this we must also fight against temptation, sin, and false doctrine both within the church and from without. We fight evil, not because we enjoy being negative or combative, but because it is necessary to help people be saved.

And finally note that all people need to be both offensive and defensive. Everyone needs to be prepared to fight against the forces of evil even as he works to grow and to help others to be saved and to grow. This is not the work of just a few. We cannot leave the fighting up to others while we try to be constructive, nor vice-versa. All must be prepared to work in both ways.

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