

How to handle opposition?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 10 May 2026

Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 00] Amen. So, as we open up another chapter in Nehemiah's prayer diary, we're discovering from him that opposition is real.

And we're also going to find clues as to how we can handle opposition. Because opposition is normal for Christianity and for the Christian church.

Let's begin with Jesus' honesty. He said to his disciples, if they hated me, they will hate you as well. Or think about shortly before his arrest when he said, in this life you will have trouble, but take heart, I've overcome the world.

And while we sit here today in peace and security, between 600 and 700 million of our brothers and sisters in Christ are part of what's known as the suffering or the persecuted church.

And they know this all too well. But it's not hidden in the small print. Opposition is not to be a surprise for the church. And in fact, the honesty of Jesus in the Bible sets right expectations for us.

[1 : 12] So, if we find ourselves in school or uni, the only one in our class who's a follower of Jesus and we get a hard time from our friends. Or we come to new faith in the Lord Jesus and we share it with our family and that news is not welcomed.

Or we work among colleagues who don't share our faith and our values and they make things uncomfortable. Or as we are part of a church which is sometimes mocked within wider society, Jesus would say, don't be surprised.

This is normal. And it's here in Nehemiah's story and I think we can learn from the story and from him. Three things that I hope we can learn and you can follow these in your bulletin.

First, what does opposition look like? Secondly, how should we respond to opposition? And thirdly and importantly, why choose to live this kind of life that involves opposition? So, first of all, what does opposition look like?

Just by way of a quick recap. So, here we are, 5th century BC. We're with Nehemiah. He was cupbearer to the king of Persia. But God calls him to go and rebuild the city walls of Jerusalem.

[2 : 22] So, he prays and he plans and he is sent and he's been acting and he's pulled the people of the city together and they've started the rebuilding work and they've been making good progress.

And probably as we were listening to the Bible reading, we heard some of that progress. So, in chapter 4, verse 1, we hear that they're rebuilding. By chapter 4, verse 6, the wall's now at half its height.

By chapter 6 and verse 1, it's all but secured. It just needs the gate so that by the end of our reading, the wall is done. So, the building is happening but also lurking in the shadows and we've met them every week.

There are enemies of God and His people and His great building project. And so, they bring opposition. And maybe there's a principle there.

When God is at work, we can expect opposition and trouble. There are three basic strategies in this opposition.

[3 : 26] You may recognize them. You may have experienced them. The first is mockery. Look at verses 1 to 3 of chapter 4. It begins with Sambalot and he's angry.

Why is he angry? Because he wants to exploit these people. But here is Nehemiah and he's eager to do good and he's not happy.

And listen to the words of ridicule. What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring stones back to life? Even if a fox climbs on the wall, it's going to tumble it down.

So, they mock God's people and they mock their efforts. Sometimes you might have had this experience. If you are someone eager to do good, sometimes you'll become a target.

Because you make other people look bad or feel bad. If you're the person that doesn't cut corners. If you're the person that doesn't share gossip. If you practice honesty and integrity, God honors it. [4 : 32] But the people around us might not. And there may well be mockery that we experience. You don't seriously believe that, do you?

That ancient book, those primitive beliefs. So, there's mockery that we can expect. Secondly, in Nehemiah's story, it moves towards intimidation.

Look at chapter 4 and verse 7. When they hear that the repairs are still going, they've failed with their mockery. They're very angry. And they plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble.

And notice in verse 7 that we get a whole cluster of people. And these people represent the four points of the compass. So, Jerusalem is surrounded by trouble north, south, east, and west. There is trouble from every side. There is threat. There is violence. There is an armed mob beginning to move on the city. And we sense the effect on the people within the city.

[5 : 32] Verse 10, the strength of the laborers is giving out. So much rubble we cannot rebuild. Verse 11, they hear what the enemies are about. Before they know it or see us, we'll be among them.

We'll kill them and put an end to the work. People in Jerusalem, many of them are fatigued. Many of them are fearful. Intimidation is no joke.

I wonder if you've ever felt pressure to keep your faith private. I wonder if you've ever had the experience of holding Christian values with integrity and causing great offense to people.

Coming under attack as a bigot perhaps. And then think about our brothers and sisters in the suffering church.

They experience an intimidation far greater. Sometimes from the government or from local government. Sometimes it's being expelled by their family or their community.

[6 : 35] Sometimes it's in the form of kidnapping or forced marriages. The suffering church knows intimidation as they seek to follow Jesus. And then there's the slander.

And that's there in chapter 6. The building work, as we see, is going along well. And so this becomes, as it were, a last roll of the dice for Sambalot and the other enemies.

And the strategy they now take up is this one. Well, let's try and target Nehemiah because if we take down the leader, then perhaps the rest will give up. You know, it's a good battle strategy. You know, history would say if you could take out the king or take out the general, then there's a good chance of confusion and maybe the troops will surrender. So at the beginning of chapter 6, they begin by trying to distract Nehemiah.

Hey, Nehemiah, come over here and have an important meeting with us, us important people over here. Four times they bring it. And what's Nehemiah's response? I am carrying on a great project.

[7 : 39] I'm doing God's work. I'm not going to be distracted. And so they need to shift. So the fifth time, this is persistent opposition. The fifth time, the plan is let's misrepresent Nehemiah and what he's trying to do.

Let's misinterpret what's going on. And so there's this open letter. That means it's going to be heard publicly. Nehemiah, we know you're plotting against the king of Persia.

Of course, he's not. He's come with the king's permission. Nehemiah, we know you're plotting to make yourself king. And we know he's not because he's a very humble servant leader. But as this word is getting out around the city, how does Nehemiah reply?

He simply says, listen, you're just making this stuff up. It doesn't seem to warrant any of his attention. He just tells them to be quiet and he moves on.

And so they move on. Verse 10 to verse 13, we see this attempt to tempt him, to trap him, so that they can discredit him. And so this guy is saying, oh, Nehemiah, I've got your best interest at heart.

[8 : 50] And I know the enemies are coming. And I know where there's a really safe place. Let's go at night to the temple and let's hide there. Nehemiah sees right through it.

Nehemiah knows that's the place only the priest is supposed to go. And so he's not going to disobey God's law. And he's not going to destroy his reputation. And so he says to them in verse 11, should a man like me run away or should someone like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go. I will not do it. And anyway, it's wrong. And so they have these persistent attempts to oppose Nehemiah and the building work.

Now, we are very used to, I think, hearing about leaders facing pressure and attack. You know, think about the news coverage and the pressure on the leaders of political parties.

Every policy, every speech, every mistake, every failure at a polling station comes under the microscope. And we see something of that with Nehemiah.

[9 : 53] But there's this added dimension for Nehemiah because he is a spiritual leader appointed by God. And so there are forces of darkness that come against him that are out to destroy God's work by destroying God's man.

Now, we need to see this is not a new tactic that the devil and dark forces are applying here. This has been a tactic since the beginning, since the Garden of Eden.

The devil who hates God began a rebellion against God couldn't bring God down. So when God creates man as image bearers, he sets out to destroy.

The climax of this comes when Jesus comes, the Son of God who becomes one of us. He comes to do the great kingdom building work to establish the kingdom of God in this world and in hearts and lives.

And the devil absolutely has him in his crosshairs. And we see it all through the Gospels. We see it in the fact that Jesus is tempted in the wilderness. But that's not the only time Jesus is tempted.

[11 : 03] All through his life he's tempted, but he's always faithful. We hear so often Jesus being mocked and slandered and ridiculed because of where he came from or questions about his parentage or questions about his claims or his beliefs.

To read the Gospels is to read of Jesus being hated and attacked by a people who wanted him dead. He was doing the ultimate good, exposing darkness and people hated him for it.

He was betrayed by someone from within his inner circle and he was killed by a conspiracy of evil of Jews and Romans coming together. And yet wonderfully, as the Bible tells us, what the devil and wicked people intended for evil, God intended for good.

The cross is God's means of saving many lives. Jesus come to forgive our sin, to deliver us and give us eternal life.

As we face opposition, as Christians, as a church, let's remember that Jesus told us we would. Let's not be shocked and let's not give up.

[12 : 19] Let's also remember the Gospel. Jesus faced opposition to the point of death. That you and I might be saved. Let's remember that Jesus walked that path before us and now he walks it with us.

He understands, he is present and he has power to help us. Often, when we're honest, we can feel a lot like those wall builders.

Discouraged and weak. Surrounded by opposition. We can be tempted to fight with what we face personally or in society.

What we need to do is to take heart. Remember Jesus. The one who said, You will have trouble, but remember I've overcome the world. Now, before we leave this idea of opposition, it's important to recognize that today you may be here in a position of being opposed to Jesus because you're not trusting him as Lord and Savior.

You haven't asked him to forgive your sin. You're not worshiping him as God and Savior. And the message of the Bible and the message even from within Nehemiah is to be so careful.

[13 : 46] To recognize and to consider the danger of that position. And then consider Christ who came that you might be saved. Trust him. So, that's what opposition looks like.

Secondly, let's think about what we can learn about how do we respond to opposition. Because as I'm sure we all feel, it's really hard to face opposition.

It's hard to be a minority. It's hard to feel like a small person in a small church. And it's really easy to let fear or weakness turn us inwards. We want to pull up the drawbridge and just, it's fine, it's nice and comfortable in here perhaps, not think about how to live outside.

You know, Jesus says, you know, you are the light of the world. But when we're honest, sometimes it feels easier to switch the light off. There's a lot less trouble that way.

What can Nehemiah teach us about a good response to opposition? Three things that we see from Nehemiah's story. First of all, and it should be no surprise, we have the call to pray always.

[14 : 54] Nehemiah lives a praying life. And we see the power of a praying life. So, in verse 4 and 5, we hear him pray, hear us, our God. Verse 9, we prayed to our God and posted a guard.

Chapter 6, verse 9, when everyone's getting frightened and weakened, I prayed, now strengthen my hands. For everything that Nehemiah experiences, he faces it with prayer.

He hears the sad story of what's happening in Jerusalem and he laments and he prays. He needs to present a plan before the king and before that he prays.

Now as he's faced with enemies, he prays. In the building work, in the heat of spiritual battle, he prays. For strength to lead in God's kingdom, he prays. And in this, we understand the importance of living a praying life.

Jesus' wisdom, watch and pray so you do not fall into temptation. Ephesians 6, end of the armor of God section. Pray in the Spirit on all occasions.

[16:04] When we are aware of opposition, are we praying? Now there's one prayer in here that I think we need to give a minute or two of our attention.

Verses 4 and 5 of chapter 4. Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity.

Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they've thrown insults in the face of the builders. What do you make of that prayer? Does it seem shocking, surprising, brutal?

Can we pray this kind of prayer? One thing that's always so important when it comes to these kind of psalms is to remember our context. So again, here we are.

Comfortable, leafy Edinburgh. Perfectly secure. I don't think it's possible for us, but imagine if we could place ourselves in the position of being a Christian when you're sitting in a church that's been torn down in rubble, where members of your congregation have been falsely accused and been dragged away, beaten and tortured, stripped from their families.

[17:20] Then our approach to the prayer becomes very different. And it's so important, I think, for us to think widely as we come to sections like this.

But a few observations to help us when we come to prayers like this, to recognize what Nehemiah is doing here is really praying the psalms. And he's praying the psalms because he desires God's justice.

He desires for God's honor. He desires that in the end there be judgment of enemies so that salvation for God's people can come.

That's all the hope of God's people. Notice, too, that Nehemiah prays for God to act. There is no sense of personal vengeance here. Rather, he's leaving justice in God's hands.

Recognize, too, what he prays against. The building project is God's project.

[18:22] It's for God's kingdom and God's glory. So when these men stand against that, this isn't Nehemiah holding a personal grudge against a neighbor he's fallen out with. He is opposing someone who is steadfastly opposed to the work of God.

They've made themselves enemies to God's kingdom. And recognize, too, and we've been hearing it, we're in chapter 6 and we've heard it in every chapter, there is no sign of repentance from these enemies.

This is a picture of consistent, stubborn hatred and hostility towards God, His people, and His kingdom. Some of us were here on Wednesday when our friend Adam was asked, how should we pray for the suffering church?

And his answer was very clear and came very quickly. Pray that God would bring down an evil regime. The suffering church needs us to pray prayers like this with them and for them.

But Nehemiah helps us to be realistic that the Christian life is spiritual battle, therefore prayer is vital. I remember from church history lessons of Martin Luther, who began the Reformation, when he felt the weight of opposition and the weight of responsibility, the challenges facing him would often say, friends, to the 124th.

[19:48] And he was talking about the 124th Psalm, and he translated that Psalm personally with the opening line, were God not with us at this time, we would surely be defeated.

The church needs prayer to strengthen faith. So we are called to pray. We're also called to prepare prudently. That's there in chapter 4, really from verse 9 onwards.

And remember we're seeing two things in the story of Nehemiah. Nehemiah rebuilding is both God's at work for his people and God's people are doing what they can for his kingdom.

So Nehemiah's wisdom helps us to avoid, well, I'm just going to let go and let God. You know, I'm just going to be passive and sit back. But it also helps us to avoid, well, let's just crack on with the work and let's, you know, just forget about God.

We pray and we work, we trust God, and we do what we can. Some of the examples of the prudent preparation of Nehemiah, you can see in verse 9 of chapter 4, we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night.

[20 : 59] So there's 24-hour guards. They're not daft. They know there are enemies around them. Verse 13, when the people are beginning to get discouraged, I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families with swords, spears, and bows.

So they're stationing, he's stationing families at key points and they've got the right weapons. Verse 16, there's this lovely picture, isn't there? From that day on, half my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows, and arrows.

So there is people who are ready for building and they're ready for battle, and they're going to do both at the same time. Verse 23, neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes, each had his weapon, even when we went for water.

Constant vigilance, constant readiness, because this is spiritual battle. Nehemiah is called to a great cause, rebuilding the city that represents the presence of God, the glory of God, the worship of God, and he shows careful commitment and planning so he's not going to be caught off guard. And that says to us, remember we are always called to pray, to pray for the work of God's church, and to be prepared, to be prepared for the reality of opposition, and to be prepared because we have a concern for God's kingdom and for God's glory in this world.

[22 : 23] And then the last tactic, responding to opposition, is simply to press on. And don't we see that in Nehemiah's story? Nehemiah is one of those leaders, you know, there are leaders who give wonderful speeches from time to time that really stiffen the spines of their people.

Churchill was one of those leaders, I think, in wartime. We will fight them on the beaches. If you've ever read or heard that speech, we will never surrender. Nehemiah has one of those speeches. Look at chapter 4, verse 14. Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord who's great and awesome and fight for your families. Don't fear men, but fear God. Remember His covenant commitment. Remember He is great and awesome. Trust Him. His project, His promise, His power all belong to us. So we fight. There are also, I think, examples of leaders whose bold action restores hope in the hearts of their followers.

And thinking about this made me think of Tolkien's Lord of the Rings. If you've seen the movies, it really brings out vividly the Battle of Pelennor Fields. The men of Gondor are under attack and the tide is beginning to go against them.

[23 : 34] And then at the crucial moment, you have King Theoden and the riders of Rohan. And then you have Aragorn coming over the hill, riding in to rescue the men at just the right time.

And instantly, the mood and the battle changes. Nehemiah is an inspirational servant leader. When everybody seems to have him in their sights, for example, chapter 6, verse 3, the scheming of his enemies, listen to his words.

I am carrying on a great project and I cannot go down. Or verse 9 of chapter 6, when they were trying to frighten us, thinking their hands will get too weak for the work.

Nehemiah prays, now strengthen my hands, a servant leader who's going to lead by example. He's not distracted. He's right there with his people and he's setting the example of, here's what it looks like to have a concern for the peace and prosperity of Zion, of God's kingdom.

Now that was the 5th century Jerusalem. We're really far away from that. We're in 21st century Edinburgh. How can Nehemiah help us today?

[24 : 53] Well, think about our context. If you're here and you live in Scotland, you'll probably be aware that maybe somewhere between 2 to 4% of the population are Christian.

That means 96 to 98% of the population are not. We absolutely live in the margins in terms of power and, it didn't used to always be that way, but absolutely it now is.

The church is on the margins. When we get to the personal level, you and I will absolutely experience what it is to be isolated as a Christian in our community, in our classroom, maybe even in our own home.

we follow a faith that is often opposed. Sometimes, you know, Christian faith is seen as not being reasonable. Other times, it's seen as not being relevant.

Other times, it's seen as being intolerant. we are locked in spiritual battle. And we look at ourselves and it's really easy, I think, to see our own personal weakness, to feel our shared weakness.

[26 : 08] But for God's kingdom and for God's glory, we must not give up. Rather, we must do what Nehemiah and the people in his day did.

We must pray always. Pray for the glory of God. Pray for his kingdom and for his will in our life, in our community, and in our nation.

Pray for his help and his strength to live for his glory. Pray for wisdom and for our witnessing. Pray that he would rebuild and he would revive and he would start with us.

Pray for the work of this church and for gospel churches in Edinburgh and Scotland. Pray for your brothers and sisters. Pray for the south side community in which we're a part. We need to pray always.

Pray together. We also need to prepare. If you have time, at some point today, perhaps you can remind yourself of Ephesians 6 and the armor of God.

[27 : 08] And why does Paul talk about, use the image of the armor of God? He says, because our opposition, it's not flesh and blood, it's spiritual. It's the forces of darkness. Therefore, we need to be strong in the Lord and His mighty power.

We need to be serious about our faith, to be seriously in God's word in order to face opposition. Or think about 1 Peter 3. Peter was writing at a time when the church was just beginning to feel the first strains of opposition, and he cautioned the church then, in your hearts, revere Christ as Lord.

Don't live with fear of man, revere Christ as Lord, and then always be prepared to give a reason for the hope that you have. How do we prepare to give a reason for hope?

We dwell on our hope, we think about the gospel, we spend time in worship to strengthen our hearts, and we press on, thirdly. We press on with our eyes fixed on Jesus, our eyes fixed on our eternal reward, our eyes fixed on the one who says, I will build my church, and the powers of darkness will not win in the end.

We set our hearts towards giving him glory, giving glory to our great and awesome God and Savior. And then, thirdly and briefly, how can we face opposition?

[28 : 36] Think about words of Bonhoeffer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was a Christian who was killed by the Nazis and World War II. He understood what it was to be opposed. And he said famously, when Jesus bids someone come follow me, he bids them come and die.

It's back to what Jesus said, if they hated me, they will hate you too. Now, if you're here today and you're not a Christian, this is obviously not a great sales pitch for the Christian faith.

Why don't we just hide this in the small print? Can I emphasize all the good stuff? Because this is what Jesus teaches, really loudly and clearly and honestly.

It is the reality of following Jesus. There is opposition and trial and trouble. But we can say that and still we can proclaim good news because despite that, we know that Jesus is so good, he is so powerful, he is so loving, his saving work is so complete that he still has power to capture our hearts and make us willing even knowing opposition might come.

And so Jesus says, trust and follow me. Even though it will bring opposition, maybe rejection. Why? Why count the cost?

[29 : 58] Why count the cost today? Because the one who calls you is none less than the Son of God. He is worthy of your worship. He is the Savior.

who paid the ultimate price, dying in your place to forgive your sin, to give you eternal life, to bring you into the love of God. Trust him because he is the one who's come to call us into the great project that you and I were made for, to know him, to enjoy him, and to live for him.

And so this call to faith is the same as the call that Nehemiah gave back in chapter 4, verse 14.

Remember the Lord who is great and awesome.

It's because Jesus is great and awesome. The cross and resurrection shows it to us. He's great and awesome in that he loved us and gave himself for us. He rose again so that eternal life and glory would be ours.

Come to him. And for those of us who are Christians, why keep on going? You've tried sharing with your family and you've been shut down. Why keep going?

[31 : 11] You've talked with a friend about Jesus and you've been met with apathy and awkwardness. Why would you do it again? Your workplace is your spiritual war zone.

The values that you face are totally different. Mockery, opposition is your norm. Why persevere? You know the value of the church and you love to come and you invite others.

But they seem so disinterested. Why keep going? Let's let Nehemiah give us two encouragements this morning.

First, we must keep going because the world needs the church. Our denomination, the free church, has that vision of a healthy gospel church for every community in Scotland.

The world, Scotland, needs the church. Nehemiah cared about Jerusalem not just because it was a city, because it was a city, the city of God. The place of God's presence and glory and worship and others would be drawn to the light to see the beauty and goodness of God.

[32 : 14] So, we keep going for the glory of our God because people in darkness need Jesus, God's great light. And because he's called us to be the light of the world to make his love known.

So, we keep going because the world needs the church and we keep going because Jesus is king and head of his church building project. And he's still working.

He's pleased to work in people like us. So, let's let his covenant love and his sacrificial service and his prayerful commitment and his powerful presence help you and me to live by faith, to seek the glory of Jesus, the one who willingly faced opposition to save us.

Let's pray together.