

Rebuilding with Opposition

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[0 : 0 0] time. My name is James. It's good to see you this morning. We were on holidays recently, and one of the few days where it wasn't raining, we went to the beach, and one of my favorite things to do with the kids at the beach is to build sandcastles. Now, this is not a photo I took. It is far too pretty, but it's just helpful for us. Now, when it comes to techniques and strategies for building sandcastles, we can have a good argument later, but I think the most important thing to do is to build the wall first. I need a strong defensive wall because I want to build close to the water, but I don't want the waves to destroy my creation. So I build the walls up. I've even started taking a half-sized shovel with a full shovel head, like a proper metal one, not one of these kids' shovels, a proper shovel down to the beach. It just makes life so much easier to build sandcastles. But what always happens when you build a sandcastle? There is always opposition. The waves just do not stop. Just because I've built the walls up doesn't mean the waves don't stop coming. And the walls might stand against the waves for a couple of small waves, but what always happens? There's just this big wave that comes, and it doesn't just go over the walls. It goes around them, and it just swamps everything. And there's squealing and yelling, and there's running, and my kids are upset too.

But everything has become a destroyed, sloppy mess. And so you start again, and then it happens again, and you build again, and it's destroyed. And you just get to this point thinking, should I just give up? Is there ever a chance I'm going to beat this opposition?

Have you ever felt this in life? Trying to make something, trying to build something, trying hard to grow as a disciple following Jesus, trying to make a difference in the world for God, trying to have a family going in the same direction following God, or to make an impact. And there's just wave after wave of opposition that comes, and it does not stop. There is opposition that wants to knock us over, opposition from outside, from work, from family, from culture.

How do we respond to this opposition? Do we respond out of our own strength, or God's strength? Or are we tempted to think that these waves of opposition, well, they're never going to stop, and so we may as well just give up and give in?

We are in the book of Nehemiah, seeing that we have been built to build. God's people had been exiled to Babylon, and they've returned. And they are seeking to rebuild Israel and the temple, and they are rebuilding the walls, and they want to offer sacrifices to God. They want everyone to know how great God is, but there is opposition. And so today, we're going to see how Nehemiah and the Israelites respond to this opposition. And we're going to be challenged and prepared for opposition in our own faith, to be prepared for that day. So to help us, let me pray as we have a look at God's Word.

[3 : 2 8] Heavenly Father, Lord, we thank you for your Word. We thank you that we get to sit under your Word today. Help us be people who are ready and equipped to face opposition, to be trusting in you more each day.

Amen. There are three points for us this morning. The opposition, the response, and lastly, reality. So, opposition. Please have your Bibles open, as Rad's mentioned. You can find the points in the app.

Wendy, was that you or me that time? Was that you clicking that? We'll see. We'll see if the clicker likes to work for me today. We're going to have a look at chapter 4, verse 1. Have a look with me. When Sanballat heard that they were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed.

He ridiculed the Jews, and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, what are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble burned as they are?

Now, Sanballat, he was the governor of Samaria, which was formerly part of Israel. And Sanballat is not just annoyed, he is greatly incensed. Often we can think that people are angry with us in particular, but his anger is not just directed at God's people. It is far deeper. Have a look at these accusations.

[5 : 05] Will they restore the walls? Are they going to offer sacrifices? Are they going to be finished in a day? Are they going to bring stones back to life? The purpose of the building work was that so Israel could once again praise God, worship God, see that God is known to the nations. And so Sanballat is aware of this. Are you going to build so that you can offer sacrifices? Sacrifices so you can praise God, so you can deal with your sins, so you can be right with God. And so while it seems that Sanballat is against the people of God, he is also against God himself. He questions whether they can actually build it. You've got the wrong plan. You've got the wrong materials. You're not even going to finish what you started. And Tobiah the Ammonite, who comes across to me as, you know, in every good movie there's a main villain and then there's also a secondary villain, the little villain.

Tobiah the Ammonite seems like the secondary villain. Wendy, if you can go to the next slide for me. Tobiah the Ammonite chips in. What they are building, even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones. And let's all stand around and mock how stupid Israel is for even trying to do this. It's hard when opposition grows. Opposition is not always a bad thing.

It actually points out where something is going well. Opposition actually reveals a strength. I've been watching a couple of different sports documentaries recently. One about soccer or football as most of the world knows it. And one of the things that happens is that if there is one particularly good player, the opposition targets that player. They're going to put two defenders on that player. And so the opposition comes because of a strength. Imagine if no one was opposing the rebuilding of the walls. Oh, you're rebuilding those walls. Oh, we do not even care.

You want to praise your God? We do not even care about you and against your God. Instead, Sanballat is angry. It's as if he knows how powerful the God of Israel is.

What opposition are we facing? Daniel, in the Old Testament, he prayed and he got the lion's den. Jesus faced opposition from his friends and his enemies. He went to the cross.

[7 : 49] Paul had opposition from those who were like him and unlike him. Merely owning a Bible in some countries is opposed. Christians and the church have always faced opposition.

It used to be strange in Australia to have opposition. Many years ago, the vast majority of Australians were Christian. But these days, we should be expecting opposition.

Just like for Nehemiah, people will oppose the Christian faith. And so the question for us today is, are we seeking to grow following God?

Are we seeking to build something like Nehemiah was building something? Because if we are, there will be opposition. I heard a story of a teenager many years ago who became a Christian through a school ministry.

And it was exciting and wonderful. But her parents opposed her going to church. She faced opposition in her own family. And so she honored them.

- [8 : 59] And she started going to church when she became an adult. There will be opposition for us to not follow Jesus at all. And there will be opposition just to have a softer form of Christianity.
- A form of Christianity that just doesn't look like Jesus. Just change your life a little bit. Stop trying to follow Jesus so much. Just have a bit of peer pressure and look like us.
- We see cancel culture opposition from outside. People saying, you know, that Christian God, that God is dead. Going to church is a complete waste of time.
- Stop doing what you're doing. Don't try to grow following Jesus. Don't try and read your Bible and know Him. And grow intimately following Him. Change your behavior to be more like us.
- Don't honor and please Him. Don't serve Him in the church. Don't sacrificially give to the church. Don't tell others about Him. What would the Sanballats and Tobias of the current world say today?
- [10 : 09] You can't grow to be like Jesus. Why are you even trying to read your Bible? That's a complete waste of time. You want to be pure following Him? Well, I know what you are like.
- I know you're a terrible person. You can't be forgiven by God. You want other people to know about Jesus? Well, we all know that science has defeated God. Yeah, Tobias shouts.
- And you're the very weakest Christian I've ever seen. You don't even look like you're Jesus at all. I wonder if you've faced opposition like this in the past.
- I know I have. And this opposition often hurts because I feel the weight of my own sin and that I don't look like Jesus. And so for the church, for us today, the question is not, will there be opposition?
- It is promised for us. But the question is, how are we going to respond when there is? Nehemiah has been seeking to rebuild the walls, to rebuild the temple, to bring glory to God, to restore the people to their country.
- [11 : 19] And he's been slammed on his plans. He's been slammed on his God and their ability to actually finish it. But it's wonderful how he responds. Wendy, if you can go to verse 4.
- The next one, thank you. This is our second point today, the response. Verse 4. He starts in prayer. Hear us, O God, for we are despised.
- Nehemiah, interestingly, doesn't get defensive. We'll be fine. We can do it. Actually, we're great. He doesn't get that aggressive. We are going to build the very best wall. It's going to be the biggest wall you've ever seen.
- Actually, Stan Ballett, you're going to pay for this wall. He doesn't say that. He prays. Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on them.
- Give them as plunder to a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders. God, hear us, Nehemiah says.
- [12 : 19] Hear our pleas. Turn their insults back on them. And in modern terms, he says, God, send them to hell. Don't blot out their sins.
- Don't forgive them. Pour out your full wrath on them. And there's two wonderful things about this attitude that we can see. First of all, he prays.
- When we are angry and upset by opposition, turn to God in prayer. He knows the opposition.
- He is the one who has power to save. And secondly, focus on obedience. God is the one who acts. Turn to him to see him work.

Wait for him for justice. See, Nehemiah's first response is, God, you are the one who is powerful. But then they focus on him in obedience.

[13 : 18] Verse 6. So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart. This is really important.

Nehemiah doesn't just go off half cocked. We're going to build the greatest wall ever. But the first step is prayer. God, hear our prayer. We are despised. But they also don't just pray and sit passively.

God, we hope you build the wall. And then expect it to be done. They expect God to act. But they also act out of obedience.

And they do this with all of their heart. Jesus is a wonderful example here of prayer and focusing on God in obedience. In 1 Peter, it says, He committed no sin.

No deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate. When he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

[14 : 22] The one who could rightly and justly defend himself, the one who could call down angels on his opposition, knew he would be vindicated by God in the end.

He depends on God and stays focused on obeying God, knowing that God would justify him. More opposition ends up coming for Nehemiah and for Israel, which sends them back to prayer and obedience.

When Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the people of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had go ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry.

They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. Again, Israel has not stopped because of other people's evil plans.

They've continued to obey God despite jeers, despite opposition. And there's an interesting detail here. Jerusalem is surrounded in its opposition.

[15 : 39] God sometimes allows us to be surrounded by opposition. Paul says in 2 Corinthians, we are afflicted in every way but not crushed.

That word afflicted can mean squeezed in. We are pressed in. We are squeezed in on every side, but we are not crushed. God allows the furnace and suffering to be turned up, to be really hot and painful and difficult.

That's what's happening to Nehemiah and to Israel. The enemies have gone from just jeering at them to now plotting their downfall. The heat is being turned up.

How will they respond? We prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat. They prayed trusting in God and they obeyed staying focused.

They take sensible precautions to make sure that they are ready, but they focus on the God who is their strength. Circumstances in our lives can be a mess.

[16 : 50] Our lives can be heated like a furnace. We can feel as if there is opposition on every single side. But God is bigger than our opposition. He's bigger than our struggles.

He is bigger than our past. He is bigger than our pain and our hurt. He's bigger than those who mock and jeer and plot to hurt us. He is bigger than our loss and our sickness.

And so we stay focused on him. There is opposition to going to church. There is the soft opposition of just things like Sunday sport.

Having other oppositions. There is soft opposition. And then there is direct opposition. Don't go to church. Don't waste your time. There is opposition to reading the Bible.

It is easy to compromise our faith or hide away faith. To soften our beliefs so that we look more like those around us.

[17 : 54] So that we don't feel pressured on every side. But that is staying focused on the enemy instead of the one who defeats the enemy. God's plan for Israel through Nehemiah was to build these walls.

They didn't stay focused on their... They didn't change their plans based on criticism because of negativity, because of the plots to attack them.

They stayed focused on the job God had given them. As Taylor Swift sang, haters are going to hate, but I'm going to shake it off and obey God.

At least I'm pretty sure that's how the song went. Now this all seems really straightforward. There is opposition. God's people respond in prayer and action.

No problems. But reality hits in. Our third point today, the reality. Life can often feel like two steps forward and one step back.

[18 : 57] Or maybe even one step forward and three steps back. Because not everything is smooth sailing for Israel. Wendy, if you can go to the next slide for me, please. Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, strength is giving out.

We are weak. We can't do this. Our enemies are saying that they're going to come and kill us. They're going to harm us. The Jews living nearby come and tell them they are coming to attack and kill you.

Reality sets in. The opposition doesn't end. They don't roll over. The reality of life is that it is hard. So Nehemiah gets everyone together.

Verse 14. Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord who is great and awesome. Stand and fight. The Lord is awesome.

He fights for us. And the enemy backs off. Verse 15. The enemies are frustrated because Israel doesn't just roll over. Frustrated because they're not afraid of them because they're trusting in God.

[20 : 01] Verse 16 tells us that the work to rebuild the walls slows down. But it continues. It slows down because half of them are ready to defend the walls with weapons.

And half of them are actually doing the work. But Nehemiah encourages them to keep working and to be ready to fight. Why? Verse 20. Our God will fight for us.

Obey God. Follow him. Follow him even when there is opposition. Because God is on our side. He will fight for us. Brothers and sisters.

God has fought for us in Jesus. Not with spears. Not with weapons of war. But Jesus was armed with the cross. He didn't fight.

He didn't fight earthly battles. But he fought death itself. So that we can follow him. So that we might be built not into a wall or a city. But into the family of God.

[21 : 02] Life. Anywhere in the world right now. But for Christians is not easy. There will be a promise of opposition. But God has fought for us in Jesus.

So that we can follow him. So when there is opposition. Know that opposition is good. It points out something good.

A little while ago. I was helping Steve move the cubby house. In his backyard down to my house. And one of the things we had to do.

Was we had to dig holes. With a fence post digger. And I'd never used one of these before. They're an awful thing. And it's this repeated movement.

Doing this. And the next morning I woke up. And my back was diabolically sore. All across the middle of my back.

[21 : 59] Because it's the repeated movement. Of the middle back muscles. And it turns out I hadn't used those ever. And what did it point out? It's this thing called DOMS. Delayed onset muscle soreness.

It says. Hey. This muscle you've been trying to use. Well what we're going to do. Is we're going to tear. And get bigger.

So that the next time you move a cubby house. And need to dig fence poles. We're going to be ready for it. And that's painful. Pain and opposition is not always a bad thing.

It points out what is good. Biblical scholar William Tyndale. He's the one on the left with the beard. He faced massive opposition.

And he was eventually executed. Because he translated the Bible into English. The man on the right. William Wilberforce. He was born into a wealthy family. Where he could have had a comfortable Christian life.

[23 : 00] Instead he used his influence to fight against the slave trade. Massive opposition. If we are seeking to focus on following God.

Growing like him. Following him. There will be opposition. Opposition. But my concern for us. Is that there is little opposition in our lives.

Because we are not seeking to grow. The late evangelist B.R. Larkin. Said. There are three ways to prevent opposition.

Know nothing. Have nothing. And do nothing. How easy would it have been for Nehemiah. And the Israelites. To have no opposition.

You don't want us to build the wall. No problem. We won't build the wall. No opposition. We'll just stay here. We'll be God's people in the land. Everything's totally fine. But they sought.

[23 : 59] To follow God. To obey him. To build something. If we are seeking. To be built up following God. To grow like him.

There will be opposition. If we are seeking to see. Other people come to know and love him. Sharing our faith. There will be opposition.

Don't have a small view of Christianity. That has no problems. And no opposition. This is not a real faith. Jesus wants you to follow him. Radically.

Even if that means. That there is pressure around you. That the world. Feels like it is against you. Because our God has fought for us.

In Jesus. Let me pray. Heavenly Father. Remind us today. That you are great. That you are awesome.

[24 : 56] And that you have fought for us. In Jesus. Heavenly Father. Heavenly Father. We thank you. That Jesus. That Jesus. Faced down opposition. From his friends.

From family. From his enemies. From spiritual opposition. And that he obeyed you.

To the cross for us. Heavenly Father. Father. As we have. Soft opposition. And hard opposition.

To follow you today. Help us to remember. How big you are. That you have won this battle. Give us courage.

To continue to grow like you. And to be built up. To be like Jesus. We pray all this in his name. Amen.