

Opposition to Rebuilding

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[0:00] Welcome to Built on God's Word, the preaching and teaching ministry of Highland Park Baptist Church in Bartlesville, Oklahoma.! Evan George teaches on Nehemiah 4.!

We will begin reading of the reactions and responses to the rebuilding of the wall in chapter 4. And what we'll find is that there is opposition to the rebuilding. When Nehemiah first arrived, not everyone was happy that he was there. Some were opposed.

And we're told in Nehemiah 2, verse 10, that when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite's servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.

And later in chapter 2, verse 19, it says, But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite's servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, What is this thing that you're doing? Are you rebelling against the king?

Now, Sanballat was the governor of Samaria to the north of Jerusalem. And Tobiah had local influence and was likely an official in the province to the east. And Geshem the Arab would have been a leader into the south.

[1:27] And so you can start to see that these are leaders in the Persian government that are around Jerusalem. And they want to continue exploiting the weakness and the vulnerability of the Jews. Here in chapter 4, Nehemiah is going to expound upon their oppositional efforts to the rebuilding that we first read about in chapter 2.

If you want to take the handout on your table, you'll see that our main emphasis this morning is this. God fights for His people as He fulfills His covenant promises.

Therefore, we as God's people stand firm when opposed. So God fights for His people as He fulfills His covenant promises. Therefore, we as God's people stand firm when opposed.

The scriptures holistically declare that God has chosen a people for His own possession. A people that He loves and redeems for His glory and for their good as He fulfills His covenant promises.

1 Peter chapter 2 tells us that you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession. That you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

[2:37] Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Paul also tells us in Romans chapter 8 that, What then shall we say to these things?

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things? A few verses later he says, No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Therefore we as God's people stand firm when opposed. Meaning when, not if, but when we meet opposition, we trust and depend upon the Lord in faith, which then is shown in obedience to God. So when I say stand firm, it's trusting and depending upon the Lord in faith, which is then demonstrated and shown by obedience to Him. Now when we consider Nehemiah 4, and really all that is happening in the book of Nehemiah, we're reminded of the overarching storyline of God returning His covenant people from exile to Jerusalem as He had promised.

[3:56] If we go all the way back to Deuteronomy chapter 30, we're reminded of this. The Lord says, And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, so

when He sends them to exile for their disobedience, verse 2, And return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey His voice in all that I command to you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and He will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you.

If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather, and from there He will take you. And the Lord your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it, and He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers.

And so big picture, we see in Nehemiah, God faithfully fulfilling His promises to His covenant people to bring them back. Now, I think we're going to see really four different types of opposition, but we'll start with that first one on your handout.

So, we stand firm when verbally opposed. We stand firm when verbally opposed. I know normally we might take the whole section and have somebody read it. Today I think we're going to break it section by section.

So if you want to look there in verse 1 of chapter 4 and follow along as I read. Now, when Samballot heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. [5 : 28] And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, what are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day?

Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish and burned ones at that? Samballot is clearly angrily making fun of God's people. He's taunting them.

If we continue there in verse 3, Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him and he said, Yes, what they are building, if a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall. Here we see these bullies lofting taunts and jeers at God's people.

Now, at your tables, what I'd like you to do is answer that first discussion question, which will be on the back of your handout. Take two minutes and answer that question. In verses 1-3, what do you notice about Samballot and Tobiah's verbal assault?

What specifically do they say in order to demoralize God's people? What are they seeking to communicate? So in those first three verses, what do you notice about this verbal assault?

[6 : 31] What are they intending to communicate to the Jewish people in Jerusalem? Yeah, incompetent. Wow, your wall is so poorly built that a fox on top of it, a very light animal, would knock it all down.

Completely. You're incompetent. You're incapable. Yeah. What else? Thank you for that, Sierra. You're relying on yourself as a God. Yeah. So I'm going to keep off that, but I think that's what it said.

Verse 2, and he said in the presence of his brothers in the army of Samaria, what are these feeble Jews doing? So yeah, you guys are weak. You can't do this. Or like when it gets to, will they finish up in a day?

Like, are you overly ambitious? You're not going to be able to do this in any meaningful time frame. Okay. Any other thoughts? I think they're relevant, but that's kind of what you want to see.

Thank you for that, Cedric. I'll just come on a few things. Yeah, so when they mention, remember, the state of Jerusalem would have been tied to kind of the state of God's people, in the sense of in the state of God's people's relationship to him.

[7 : 37] Right? So it's been conquered. It's been burned. It's been destroyed. They've been taken in exile. And so as a people, they're shown to be in shame. And the state of Jerusalem is really a reflection to the neighboring nations of who God is to some degree.

Right? So as Jerusalem is prosperous and built and things like that, it's going to communicate one thing about the Lord. When it's in rubble and destruction, it's going to communicate another thing about the Lord. And Cedric helpfully made some links there to the book of Isaiah.

As the enemies here, certainly being used by God, are getting at the, will they sacrifice? Will they be able to revive these stones out of the heaps of rubbish or the burns one at that? They're getting at, do they have the resources?

Do they have the manpower? Do they have any hope in and of themselves or in of the Lord? And they're getting at to try and make them feel hopeless and that they are insufficient to get to do the work.

And one thing I'd say, in our efforts to follow Jesus today, we should expect no less taunting or verbal assault. Yet we rejoice because we know that any meaningful strength, capability, hope, ambition, sufficient resources, any of this, are not found in us, but in our God who meets our every need to follow him and walk in the works that he's prepared.

[8:50] So then if we continue in verse 4, we'll see how Nehemiah responds to this verbal opposition. Look there at verse 4. So hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives.

Do not cover their guilt and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders. So we built the wall and all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

How do Nehemiah and God's people stand firm here? Well, they pray to the Lord and they continue building. They continue completing the work the Lord has set before them. We see prayer and action, demonstrating faith in their God.

Now, how do we understand this prayer? This is an imprecatory prayer. It might sound different than some of the prayers we personally may pray, but we'll see this imprecatory prayer, this style is in multiple places in the Psalms, and we see it in other places in Scripture.

And it is a petition asking God to uphold justice and enact right judgment. Note that Nehemiah doesn't take personal vengeance into his own hands with these enemies, but he brings the matter before God and asks God as the righteous judge to deal with those who oppose God and oppose His people.

[10:05] And we too should pray for God's justice to go forth, for His kingdom to advance, and for those who oppose God to repent as they encounter His justice. And that would not be in conflict with what we see Jesus tell us, say in Luke 6, when He says, But I say to you who hear, love your enemies and do good to those who hate you.

Bless those who curse you and pray for those who abuse you. So I don't think those are in conflict. But here we see that God fights for His people as He fulfills His covenant promises, and therefore we as God's people stand firm when verbally opposed.

So the first one verbally opposed, the second when physically opposed. So the number two will be when physically opposed. If we look there in verse 7, it says this, But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward, and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry.

So now we have Sanballat and Tobiah, and Geshem's not mentioned here, but he would have been with the Arabs. So we had a few people groups mentioned first. Now we have some additional ones. And what Nehemiah is drawing out is that these are people groups all around Jerusalem. So Jerusalem is encircled by enemies. So the Arabs, Ammonites, and Ashdodites, they're all encircling Jerusalem and effectively isolating Jerusalem. And for any secular mind, for them at that time, the enemies at least, that would have been no small practical problem.

[11:35] Because a place and a location that is isolated and encircled with only minimal walls for defense, the enemy may think, I mean, what hope do they have?

But we would also say that they have the Lord. And with Him and the hope that they have in the Lord, what else do they need? If we continue there in verse 8, And they, so speaking of the enemies, they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night. So now we see these opponents escalate from merely verbal assaults in the beginning to now planning a physical assault.

They want to come and fight against Jerusalem and cause confusion in it. How do we see Nehemiah and God's people respond? Well, they stand firm. They pray and they act. Prayer and action yet again. And they wisely set people to guard the city day and night. Here we see that God fights for them by making the enemy's plots known to them and stirring up courage within them to stand firm and set a guard to protect the people.

[12:42] If you have some time on your own, you can go read Psalm 2, the first few verses of Psalm 2, and how you'll see the enemies of God plotting against the Lord and His anointed. And you'll even see some of the exact same language used in how they're despising God's people and plotting, and the jeering and laughing.

So if you go read Psalm 2, you'll see that it's the Lord who really jeers at the enemy, even though here we see the enemy jeering at God's people. Now, we don't have time for that today, but if you're curious, go compare and read Psalm 2.

So here we see them stand firm when physically opposed. The third way, so number three, is we stand firm when internally opposed.

So still in Nehemiah 4, verse 10, In Judah, it was said, The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There's too much rubble. By ourselves, we will not be able to rebuild the wall.

Now notice this is mentioned in Judah, so it's not just those in Jerusalem saying this, but now the broader Judah. And then there in verse 11, And our enemy said, They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.

[13:55] So the enemies are pursuing a way to kill them now and stop the work. So you see this escalation verbal, a physical plan, and now we see the extent of a desire to kill God's people to prevent this work from continuing.

Verse 12, At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, You must return to us. So now you have Jewish people who live around Jerusalem in the neighboring area, and they're coming to those who are in Jerusalem saying, Hey, between the difficulties of the task, the burdens that are there, that there's so much rubble, and this threat that we see there in verse 11, that they're going to come and kill and stop the work.

You see these neighboring Jewish people are now trying to convince those in Jerusalem to stop the rebuilding effort and return and leave Jerusalem to come back, to disperse out of fear of the enemy. Therefore, they would be stopping the rebuilding effort, which is what God had called them to do. But we see here in verse 13 how Nehemiah responds. So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords, their spears, and their bows.

And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.

[15:14] Yet again we see Nehemiah respond with faithful action and hear an exhortation, an encouragement to the people. He rallies the workers by stationing them around their families.

He equips them with weapons, so what they'll need, and he exhorts them. And notice, what does Nehemiah set as their hope in this situation? Is it in the strength of their weapons?

Or in the potential strength of their own efforts that they might do? No. He says, I looked and around and I rose, and I said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, Do not be afraid of them.

Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes. He sets their hope. He anchors their hope in this situation in that the Lord is great, that the Lord is awesome.

And that word that your translation may render as awesome, it may also be translated fearsome in your text, awe-inspiring or fearsome. It's the same Hebrew root word that was used to describe the Hebrew midwives in Exodus chapter 1, whenever Pharaoh commanded them to kill the Hebrew boys.

[16:19] And it says that the Hebrew midwives feared God and they disobeyed Pharaoh. And so here we see effectively that Nehemiah says, Don't fear these adversaries. They're nothing compared to our great God.

Fear Him instead. The enemies are not ultimate. God is. Be moved to action to defend your family and this place as you trust and obey God. He rallies them to neither succumb to the fear of the adversary nor to abandon the work as they were encouraged by other Jewish people.

Sometimes opposition comes not only from external, outside enemies, but through fear and discouragement among God's own people. Yet here we see that God encourages and emboldens His people to stand firm despite this internal opposition as the Lord really encourages them and brings about courage in them to continue.

This text as Nehemiah goes through it, he reminds them that the Lord's cause is worth more than your own lives. Okay, so that was when we stand firm when internally opposed.

Fourth, and we'll finish out the text here, we stand firm when continually opposed. So we stand firm when continually opposed. Based on what had happened, Nehemiah implements countermeasures for future opposition.

[17:40] They prepare for the likelihood of being continually opposed, not merely for a moment, but for a longer duration. So follow along there in verse 15. When our enemies heard that it was known to us that God had frustrated their plan, we all returned to the wall, each to His work.

Now how did God frustrate their plan? Well, one, He makes it known to the people so that they can set a guard, so that they can act. He frustrates their plan by enabling and empowering them to act, to set a guard, to act wisely.

Those are a few of the ways that He starts to frustrate their plan. If we continue there in verse 16, From that day on, half my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail.

And the leaders stood behind the whole house of Judah, who were in the building on the wall.

Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand, and held his weapon with the other.

So Nehemiah here, he's strategically ensuring that they're ready for any combative effort that the enemy may try and come with as they continue to rebuild. Verse 18, Verse 20, Verse 21, So here we see these countermeasures that Nehemiah is establishing.

[19:33] You'll notice really a continuation of the themes that we saw in chapter 3, where it's not just one person doing the work, but everyone's contributing to the effort. Everyone's contributing to the effort.

When we see that people are equipped to do the work that they need to do, we see that Nehemiah is in the midst of it, doing it with them. So he said there in verse 18, The man who sounds the trumpet is beside me.

And then he says, In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. That's where the fighting's happening. So we see that Nehemiah himself expects to be there in the battle with them. Not far off somewhere else, but in the midst of it.

So we see him leading by example and serving alongside them. As we think about all of chapter 4, I think we see clearly that God fights for his people as he fulfills his covenant promises.

And therefore we as God's people stand firm when opposed. So we can and must trust him, which leads us to stand firm all the more. To continue in obedience all the more. To love and delight in him all the more.

[20:35] Now, a few caveats. Remember that when we say God fights for us, that does not mean or not guarantee that if we're doing God's work, God guarantees that everything will go well.

You'll notice here that God's fighting for them while they're threatened, while they're exhausted, while they're afraid, while they're armed, while they're sleeping in their clothes, while they're working under pressure, while they're in suffering and difficulty and levels of persecution.

We can think of Stephen in Acts who was acting faithfully, and we would say that God fights for him. And yet he gave his life. So the takeaway should not be that as one of God's people, I will enjoy every comfort of this life, or that I can have whatever I want.

No, we are not immune to disease, discomfort, or death. But what we can take away is that God is sovereign over opposition, which is emphatically clear here.

We can take away that God hears the prayers of his people. We can take away that God protects and preserves his covenant people as a whole. We know that God gives courage to his people, as we see demonstrated here.

[21:48] That God accomplishes his purpose through the faithful actions of his people. The means by which God protects his people here is through their faithful action. That's the way he chooses to provide for them here.

We can see that God uses this opposition to deepen their faith. I think Cedric was hitting on that earlier, that it's in the midst of the difficulty, in the suffering, in this opposition.

That's the means by which he deepens their faith and matures them. So it's not that God works in spite of these things, but these are the ways and the means at which he chooses to work. And therefore, because of all of that, because of who God is, because he's committed and faithful to his people, we can stand firm.

We can walk in faith, trusting him. God ultimately fights for us, ultimately, I think, in sending his son Jesus to come and save us from our sins.

We could take each one of these individual types of opposition, and Jesus certainly encountered them. Jesus was mocked. Jesus was beaten. Jesus was crucified. And he was faithful, ultimately

faithful, as he walked throughout it.

[22:56] We can think of 1 Peter 2, verses 21 through 24. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.

He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds, you have been healed. Christ is the ultimate example of faithfulness when opposed, and he's the ultimate display of God fighting for his people by sending a lamb to be slaughtered to save us from our sins, of showing his commitment to his people, of his love for his people.

And we praise God for that. Now, what I'd like you to do is take a few minutes and answer that discussion question, too. Based on what we read and what we discussed this morning, what are practical ways or what are practical areas that we can apply this text in our lives?

What are ways that maybe you're encountering opposition now? How does this text speak to that situation? And then we'll kind of wrap up with a few concluding application thoughts. Would anyone mind sharing what they discussed at their table?

[24:17] Maybe a way we can apply this text. Any thoughts? Yeah, thanks for sharing that, Jude. Prayer and action.

Prayer and action. And what else? Other thoughts? Applications? Yeah.

In whatever the opposition, I think you'll see a continual thread that the enemy tries to make us start to look at ourselves. So in our own capabilities, our own thoughts, our own ways, you know, my own ability to parent, or my own ability to understand the Scriptures, or my own ability to pray, or my own ability to share the Gospel, or whatever the thing, the work that the Lord is calling us to, it seems like the enemy continually, that assault starts to drive us to considering ourselves and take our eyes off of the Lord and trusting Him and knowing that it's, our sufficiency is not in ourselves, but in Him.

And I think you're right. It's easy to have those things leveraged against us and then to become insecure or to know that, yeah, we aren't perfect and to almost hyper-focus on those rather than going back to the Lord.

Thank you for sharing that. Heather? Yeah. Thank you for that, Cedric. Yeah. We see that Nehemiah and the people's responses here are, the way the text is written, are showing us positive examples of faith in action.

[25:39] Right? And so each of these is a demonstration or an outward expression of their faith in God. Another example, we've been praying for Reed's exam. Right? And so part of that is that, you know, he would do the work, but also God would enable and empower him to do that.

And I think it's a similar thing here in Nehemiah is they take up the weapons and they trust in the Lord to enable and empower them to do what they need to do. I think that would be true in all the other ways that we're seeking to follow the Lord, whether that's sharing the gospel with people or faithfully raising children or whatever it is.

Yeah, the continual thread we're all saying, the prayer and then the action as we trust the Lord. Well, it's not just the outward action, it's actually God has made us. Yeah. It's the means by which he helps and he demonstrates that he's for us.

Two other quick notes of application you'll see there on your handout. One, I would encourage you to just consider, like, how have you seen God fight for you, for your family, for his people? Maybe that's in the scriptures or maybe an example of here at our church or a past church that you've been a part of.

I encourage you to praise him for those. Take a moment to praise the Lord for the ways that you've seen him demonstrate his faithfulness and be for you and fight for you. Second, are you encountering opposition right now?

[26:47] Remember God's promises that he's for us and fighting for us. Pray for his help. Share the opposition with another. I would encourage you to bring another person alongside you. You'll notice that all of what we're talking here in Nehemiah, it's a corporate endeavor.

And so God's not calling us to endure opposition alone, but with him and with his people. And then maybe if you want to write it in at the end of that, I don't have it on there, but like we're hitting on the prayer and action, and then walk in obedience or act in a way that he calls you to.

