

Understanding the Opposition

What are you fighting against these days? Is it a financial struggle? Rejection? Relationship? Failure? Fear? And maybe you're finding that as you resist this challenge, the opposition only gets stronger. We've all been there. We've all obsessed over a tense relationship or a deep personal failure until it made us feel powerless and inadequate. We can become so discouraged by tense situations that we no longer wonder if we have what it takes to defeat this enemy ... because we're pretty sure we *don't*. When life takes down our walls, how do we begin to build again so that discouragement doesn't get the last word ... and so that we begin to draw not on our own strength but on the power and promises of the God who loves us?

This is a great lesson of Nehemiah's life. When his brother showed up at the Persian palace to tell him that Jerusalem was a heap and the people were distressed, Nehemiah went to his knees in spiritual and emotional agony. That wall was important because it both defined the people of God and defended the vision of God. So after years of compartmentalizing his feelings ... hearing from his brother that this world he thought would always be there ... was gone ... how hard that must have been for him. In that moment, Nehemiah sees clearly that what *ought* to be in his life ... isn't there. How many of us have been in just that place, where the dreams we thought we had a right to are washed away? Or when we discover to our horror that we're not the person we thought we were? What ought to be ... isn't there.

When Nehemiah is hit with his reality, he grieves and repents for missing the mark. Then he packs up his things and heads for Jerusalem. When he gets there he walks through the rubble and begins to open himself up to the possibilities. He begins to see not what is but what can be. And that's when he begins to catch the vision of God ... to restore hope into a people who have been demoralized and compromised for generations. So Nehemiah's story is a great encouragement for us whose lives may have taken a wrong turn. He challenges us to walk through that rubble and to see not what is but what can be ... so we can get a vision for building again ... and so we can keep faith in the plan of God when we encounter opposition. That's where Nehemiah, chapter 4, begins. After he casts a vision for rebuilding the wall, he begins to get criticism from people who were challenged by the progress. **Some people opposed the work of rebuilding the wall because it challenged their lifestyle and it challenged their pride.**

These guys ... there were just a handful of them ... were the Eeyores of the Middle East. You remember Eeyore, right? The sad donkey in Winnie the Pooh's forest? The most negative thinker in fiction? He once said, "Its snowing. And freezing. But at least we haven't had an earthquake lately." Sanballat and Tobiah were Eeyore types. They were threatened by the prospect of change and saw it as something to be resisted. Chuck Swindoll says, "Like most critics, they looked at the situation from only their human point of view – they didn't take God's ultimate plan into consideration." Here was a genuine vision from God, but they couldn't see it for fear of what they might lose. What if a new wall made Jerusalem more prosperous than Samaria? What if a new wall made the people of Jerusalem too strong? The prospect of that challenged not only their lifestyle but also their pride.

Nehemiah 4:1-2 says -- *When Sanballat heard that we 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?"*

So he's going off on Nehemiah and the Jews. And you can hear it, can't you? No vision, just fear. All this was said in front of his army, because Sanballat was intimidated by the thought of a more powerful Jerusalem. If Jerusalem began to build in strength, it would also build economically, and that challenged their pride. And to be honest, we probably all have a little of this in us ... this tendency to pull others down in order to feel better about ourselves. So it may be ... this is a hard thought ... that the first step toward dealing with the enemies around us is dealing with that enemy within. You know, it takes a lot of courage to examine ourselves honestly and ask, "Am I helping others to see God's vision? Or am I stifling it?" Chuck Swindoll says, "Critics demoralize. Leaders encourage."

He also says that "nothing riles critics more than having their criticism result in further progress." That's what Nehemiah discovered. As work on the wall continued, the opposition increased. The way they did it was through **ridicule and sabotage**. The goal was to demoralize the people of Jerusalem. Discourage them to the point that they'd simply give up. John Yates tells the story of the devil having a yard sale. All his tools were

priced to sell. Tools like hatred, jealousy, deceit, lying, pride. But off to one side was the most expensive tool of the lot. It had obviously been well used. The name of the tool was discouragement. The Devil said, "It's the most useful tool I've got. When I can't get defeat them with any of these other tools, I use discouragement because so few people realize it belongs to me." Sanballat and Tobiah had evidently been to Satan's yard sale, and they were using Satan's power tool.

Discouragement is the enemy's tool. Did you know that the Hebrew and Greek word for Satan means "Destroyer"? Satan's mission is to destroy life and possibility ... God's job is to create life and give it abundantly. Satan is called The Adversary. God is called our Advocate. Satan is an enemy of love. But God *is* love. Satan is called the Father of Lies. But Jesus said, "I am the way, ***the Truth*** and the life." So when we speak in abundant terms to others and advocate for them and speak the truth in love ... we get to participate in God's vision even as we battle against that demon of discouragement.

I heard about a place I'd love to work. It's a public relations firm in Chicago (I think) called Empower. The owner, a guy who used to work in a very competitive environment, decided when he started his own company to have a zero tolerance policy for gossip. One of his primary rules is that if you have something to say to or about a colleague, you must say it to their face. If you can't live with that, you get fired. They have a phrase around the office that I like: "Save the drama for your mama." Instead of a lot of office drama, they just work at appreciating each other. In fact, they've claimed it as a business model: profit by appreciation.

Don't you love that idea? Instead of doom and gloom by Eeyore ... profit by appreciation. And you're saying, "But Carolyn, you don't know my situation! It's tough in my office, in my marriage, in my world. I'm having a hard time appreciating anything about it." I understand. But who is to say but that a little appreciation might begin to turn a profit in your situation, where criticism has not? Do you realize what a powerful thing that could be? By Paul's definition the most valuable spiritual gift is prophecy and the heart of prophecy is encouragement ... learning to see the good in that which may not even be there yet. Encouragement is maybe the best defense against one of the enemy's biggest guns.

Sanballat and Tobiah didn't get that. They opposed the work of God's people through ridicule and sabotage, and also through **subversion and disrespect**. When criticism didn't get the job done, they intimidated the Jews with physical force, which scared some of them enough to make them scare others who were working on the

wall. That's what subversion is ... creating distrust within the walls. Again, we can relate ... because big visions can be scary. Even a vision for personal change can scare the people around us. Personal growth can scare a spouse or a friend who may feel threatened by that kind of change. This seems to happen especially with new believers, as they lay down bad habits and take up new ideas. That kind of spiritual growth can be a real threat. Just as Sanballat tried to use even the temple to subvert Nehemiah's work, so the people around us will sometimes use even our spiritual progress to discourage us. So how do we respond to that kind of opposition? I want to show you four ways Nehemiah responded to his opposition.

First, he prayed (both honestly and strategically). He said (Neh. 4:4-5) -- *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 have thrown insults in the face of the builders.* Now, that's a pretty raw prayer, but it comes honestly from the heart of a man who was simply unwilling to be pushed around. The spiritual principle is this: It is okay to be honest with God in your prayers. Because the things that matter to us matter to God. So it is okay to be honest with our heavenly Father. And it is healthier to weigh our words with God before letting them fly with someone who has made us angry. Andy Stanley says, "Prayer enables us to evaluate criticism from God's perspective ... Having vented to the One who knows your heart, you will find it easier to address your critics with grace." It is okay to be honest with God in prayer.

So Nehemiah began with prayer, and he prayed honestly but he also prayed strategically. Throughout the story, Nehemiah drops in all these one-line prayers, asking for strength, asking for strategy. He saw prayer as another tool in his belt. Nehemiah prayed and **he stayed**. He stayed with the vision and the work. He didn't allow the opposition to slow them down or throw them off. Do you remember when you were a kid, the teacher would say, "Keep your eyes on your own paper." That's what Nehemiah did. He didn't allow the critics to pull him off task. He kept his eyes on his work. Stayed with the task.

He prayed, he stayed and **he shared**. Nehemiah 4:14 says - *After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your people, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes."* He kept the vision out in front. Remember the Lord, Nehemiah said, and fight for what matters. What a great principle of leadership!

So how do we strike back at discouragement and defend ourselves against opposition? Pray honestly and strategically. Stay on the wall ... stick with your work. Keep the vision in front of you. And ... **be prepared.** Nehemiah took his opposition seriously. He didn't just stick with the work and hope for the best. He placed guards at all the low points on the wall ... and he developed a sophisticated system of defense. Folks worked with a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other. Half stood guard while the other half worked. Just hearing about it put enough fear into the enemy to keep them at bay.

God's people understand that the enemy will attack any weak point. That's why Paul warned the Ephesians: "Put on all of God's armor, so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies and tricks of the devil. For we are not fighting against people made of flesh and blood, but against the evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world ... so stay alert and be persistent."

That's how the people responded. Having a strong leader with a strong plan for their safety, **they were able to be passionate** about the work. Nehemiah 4:6 says they worked with all their heart. Like Nehemiah, **they prayed, but they also posted guards.** Nehemiah 4:9 says, "*We prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.*" They knew that prayer is not a way to avoid responsibility. It is not a shortcut to success without effort. But that's where any strong leader begins. Have you prayed about it?

Two final thoughts: **They stayed together. And they stayed armed.** Nehemiah did something pretty cool with his people. He told them (4:19-20 -- "*The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!*") He taught his people how to depend on and support each other through a crisis. Our natural instinct is to save ourselves, but Nehemiah challenged his people to think as a community. He said, "Keep your sword with you, and whenever you hear that someone else is being threatened ... that some other place on the wall is being attacked ... join us there. And when we bond together like that, God is moved to fight for us."

Steve told me last night about the woman who coordinates the hospitality for mission teams coming to Biloxi. When Katrina hit, her house lost one whole wall. Water and mud flooded the house, and they lost everything.

The next Sunday, she stood up in church and asked if a couple of guys might be willing to help them muck the house out. The following Saturday, twenty-seven people showed up. And she said, “That’s when I got my hope back.”

Folks, most of us are not fighting against flesh and blood. And most of us are not fighting battles we can win alone. We need the encouragement of the community. We need the prayers of the people. We need each other. When we bond together like that, God is moved to fight for us. That’s what “Jesus in the Streets” is all about. It is a call to go where the wall is being attacked ... where our brothers and sisters need our help. When we bond together like that, God is moved to fight for us. Maybe your choice today is to commit in a stronger way to the people around you ... to fight wherever the wall is being attacked.