

## **OPPORTUNITY AND OPPOSITION** ***SERIES: THE MESSAGE OF NEHEMIAH***

**by Steve Zeisler**

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We are working our way through the adventurous book of Nehemiah. It's filled with moments of crisis, swords, horses, kings, enemies, and heroes. But it's also marvelously instructive about the life of faith.

Chapter 2, which we finished in the last message, is about three difficult situations in which Nehemiah found himself having to speak boldly. We recalled Jesus' words: "Do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you." (Matthew 10:19-20.) We saw Nehemiah in King Artaxerxes' presence, later with the officials of the Jews of Jerusalem, and then before the enemies who had gathered there against them.

But most of life doesn't consist of crisis moments, does it? Most of the time we are not in the presence of the king, fearing for our lives, trusting God for the words that will make or break our future. Most of the time we are beset with familiar problems, routine concerns, struggles that go on for a long time. We find ourselves needing to do battle against voices of unbelief that would attack our faith, but not loud and dramatic voices.

Chapter 2 ended with two great statements. The first is this: "I also told them [my countrymen] about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me. They replied, 'Let us start rebuilding.' So they began this good work." (Nehemiah 2:18.) The people heard God's voice in Nehemiah's words, and they said, "Let's go for it!" But verse 19 is equally important. This was the other side of the tension: "But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. 'What is this you are doing?' they asked. 'Are you rebelling against the king?'" So on the one hand there were the people who were willing to follow God and do the work, and on the other hand there were the persistent harassing and pressuring voices of the enemy.

We're going to look at parts of chapters 3 and 4 in this message, and both of these viewpoints will be evident. We'll see the people of God act in faith, and we'll hear the voices of the enemies who would undo them.

### **COMMUNITY LIFE**

Chapter 3 is a long list of names and descriptions of wall-building, and we won't take the time to read all of it. I'll just highlight a couple of things. The more I've read this chapter, the more I've found it a very helpful description of life in a community. It's a great picture of what life in the church ought to be. What we find in this chapter are more than thirty households mentioned by their family names, and a number of places that people came from. Some lived in the city of Jerusalem, but some were from Jericho (verse 2), and some from Tekoa (verse 5). The regions of Gibeon and Meronoth are both mentioned (verse 7). Folks came from different places and joined together to be part of this work.

That's true of us at PBC. I don't know how many nations of origin are represented in this congregation, but it's not just a few. We have different kinds of last names, different ethnicities, and yet the Lord has called us to be a family and work together, to listen to him together, to respond as a common people. The description of those things in Nehemiah 3 can be encouraging to us.

There are also various occupations highlighted in this chapter, as there are among us. Some people work in high-status, well-paid occupations in Silicon Valley. Some of us work in more ordinary walks of life. There were different social strata represented - as there are here. In verse 1, Eliashib the high priest and his fellow priests

worked on the wall. In verse 8, we're told of goldsmiths and perfume-makers who worked on the wall. Throughout the chapter, there are references to farmers and soldiers and nobles and merchants, people from all kinds of walks of life joined together to do the work that needed to be done.

Let's observe a couple of verses. Verse 5:

**The next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa, but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors.**

The word "repair" is used over and over again in this chapter. Nehemiah works his way around the wall, telling us which group worked on each section. What we find is that the men of Tekoa were given a place along the wall to work, and they did with a willing heart except for their nobles, who were too impressed with themselves to sweat and labor alongside the common folk. They are noted, but they are rare in this book. These nobles of Tekoa had their failure to respond forever recorded in Scripture.

On the other hand, in verse 20 we meet a man named Baruch who is at the opposite end of the spectrum:

**Next to him, Baruch son of Zabbai zealously repaired another section, from the angle to the entrance of the house of Eliashib the high priest.**

Here is a man who also would be remembered forever, who was commended for the zeal with which he did his work. Some were lazy, some were zealous. Again, it's a lot like communities we're familiar with. Not all of us have the same response, but all of us are in it together.

We might note verse 12. Throughout this chapter, family names are, as is common in ancient literature, identified by a father. People are the son of someone else. But in verse 12 we read,

**Shallum son of Hallohesh, ruler of a half-district of Jerusalem, repaired the next section with the help of his daughters.**

So again we find that the experience of community is not limited but expansive and inclusive, and everybody is important. The daughters of Shallum are highlighted, their place respected and honored.

The community working together experienced what they couldn't do alone. This was a hard job. The city's ruin was great, and the only possible way of seeing the walls rise again was for a great number of people to join together and move forward together. That remains the case today. We can't succeed in anything by ourselves, and we've been called together to care about the things of God, to serve one another and serve God together.

We received an anonymous letter this week from a couple announcing that they were leaving the church. I've received other angry, anonymous letters, and this was not the worst version of that. But this couple was expressing hurt and frustration. The heart of the letter was a complaint that this church is filled with cliques, in-crowds, small circles of people who know and approve each other, but it is not welcoming to others. We discussed the letter at our staff meeting and asked the Lord to indicate what lessons we should be learning. It is easy for any group of people to fall into patterns that they don't see, to be unwelcoming, to be less loving than they ought to be. If and where it is true of us, our prayer is that God would make it clear and that we would stop cutting people off and rather open our arms and invite everybody to join in the life of this church. Finally, there is a word of advice and encouragement from verse 23:

**Beyond them, Benjamin and Hasshub made repairs in front of their house; and next to them, Azariah son of Maaseiah, the son of Ananiah, made repairs beside his house.**

Frequently in these verses those who lived in Jerusalem were told to repair the section of the wall that was opposite where they lived. A helpful observation we can make from those statements: If you're looking for your place in the body of Christ, if you're wondering how it is that you can be part of something, join together with other people, use your gifts, serve or be known or make friends, rather than doing extensive research about all the

possibilities, about what's going on at the farthest edge of things in the life of the church, probably the best thing to do is to "repair the wall in front of your house." That is, find the place that's nearest and most obvious, and begin to serve the people God has already put in your life: in your home, in your work place, with the folks you regularly sit beside in church. Begin by doing what is already clear. Go through the door that is open already. I'm convinced that if we want to serve and we set our hand to do what's there to do, the Lord will open other doors and move us where he wants us to be and give us opportunity to do things that suit us exactly. But you are where you are for a reason.

## DISCOURAGED BY OPPOSITION

Let's turn now to chapter 4. All of this great wall-building, as we might expect, was met with hostility on the part of those who rejected the God of Israel and his people. Verses 1-3:

**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?"**

**Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, "What they are building-if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!"**

Such statements are often persuasive: ridicule, opposition, and discouragement. Why should people like us attempt positive change in life? Why should we move toward the place of honor, wholeness, and security that comes from faith?

The reason that the walls of Jerusalem were broken down was that the hearts of the people were desolate. Listen again to Sanballat's stinging word of opposition: "What are those feeble Jews doing?" We hear, "What are those feeble believers attempting? Who do they think they are?" The Jews, some of whom had been back from exile for more than two generations, believed that they were the feeble people of God, that their enemies were too strong, that the work was too great.

They had internalized all the words of the enemy. So they had not attempted to rebuild for decades.

Part of the ridicule was ridicule of God. "Will they offer sacrifices?" said Sanballat. "What are they going to do, get God involved?" (They had rebuilt the temple, and the new temple was small and rather inferior.) "Would God do something for them? Be serious! Their God is feeble. They won't accomplish anything."

Over and over again, the voices challenged, frustrated, and belittled the Jews. Why would it be different this time? The walls were broken because their hearts were broken. That remains one of the points of application for us. Most of us live with restrictions we don't need to live with. Most of us have stopped trying in some area of our life because we've grown so weary of failure. Most of us have things about us that we don't believe God can do. We've stopped talking to him about them. What's the point? And even if we did start, opponents would jump in and ridicule us: "If even a fox were to jump on that sad, ridiculous effort you're making, it would topple in a minute. It's not good for anything."

We meet the opponents again in verses 7-8:

**But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the men of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone 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.**

The references in verse 7 are to the four points of the compass: Samaria on the north, Ashdod on the west, Ammon on the east, Arabia to the south. Ringing the Jews on every side were enemies joined together, threatening ambush. The Jews must have been thinking, "What's the use under circumstances like this?"

Similarly, there are some among us who have lived shallow Christian lives for so long they're afraid to try anything else. "I make periodic stabs at coming back to church and getting right with God and trying to find this vital Christianity that other people seem to have. And I wish I could be someone in whom passion for Jesus would begin to well up. But every time I try it, all of the siren song of the world comes back again, and I find myself petering out. I've gone back to the old ways so many times, what's the use of attempting an honorable, Jesus-filled Christian life? There are too many people laughing at me. Too many people know my history. My febleness is obvious to too many."

Some live with the rubble of a terrible past, raised in chaotic circumstances, perhaps. Some are experiencing tyranny in their life now, and the hopelessness that goes with it. "I've tried to forget the past. I've done my best to ask God to make things different. Why do I think it will be different this time?" There are people who are lonely, who have been afraid of being known for so long, who have learned to be isolated for so long, that they have given up on the question of ever being anything but lonely. For some, once there was a good path; once they had a loving family and a home and a community, but they have trashed it so badly or it's so far gone, they don't know where to go to find it again. And the ridiculing voices seem to grow stronger and stronger:

"Feeble...foolish...chaotic!" The enemies who are amassing to destroy their best efforts seem too strong.

But the walls were broken down not because the enemies were so strong but because the faith was so shattered. The thing Nehemiah had to speak to was not the impossibility of the task or the awesomeness of the foes. He had to talk about the invisible realities of the love and power of God, because until they changed inwardly, they would never succeed.

Verse 10 is an example of how they had taken in the thinking of their foes:

**Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall."**

That's written actually in a poetic structure in Hebrew. It had become a jingle, a little poem that they all said to one another (aiding their foes).

Verse 11 says,

**Also our enemies said, "Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work."**

Now listen to what happened to the words of the enemies in verse 12:

**Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us."**

It wasn't the enemies' voices that were the most persuasive; it was the voices of the Jews who came and said time after time, "They're too strong. We can't win. It will never work. They will kill us. We're hopeless losers." The voices of opposition had destroyed the hearts of the people. There wasn't faith or hope.

In the midst of all that, the ministry of Nehemiah was a breath of fresh air. He needed to speak the words of God at the right moment, and that's what he did. Again, it's one of the things that makes him a fine model of spiritual leadership.

There are two things that Nehemiah did that I want to commend to us, and I encourage you to think about Christian leadership along these lines. What kind of men and women should we follow?

## THE LEADER WHO PRAYS

When the words of ridicule first started, what Nehemiah did first was pray. Verses 4-6:

**Hear us, O 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.**

**So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart.**

We see the same thing in verse 9:

**But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.**

Nehemiah began not by giving lectures to the workers, organizing raiding parties against the enemies, or creating propaganda campaigns to put a different spin on the words that they were saying. He didn't begin with any kind of human response to the problem. The first thing he did was go to God and say, "Fight for us, Lord." He prayed for God to do battle with their enemies (even to the point of not forgiving them). As New Testament believers, we know that we can love our enemies at the same time that we can resist falsehood. God has punished his own Son in their place and ours. But Nehemiah didn't have as clear an understanding of that in his time. What he did know was that somebody needed to stop these voices, to say "no" to these words of opposition, terror, lies, and ridicule. "Lord, you fight for us." His first instinct was to go to God.

Leaders need to do that. They need to be those who speak to God about problems, those for whom God has a big place at the center of things.

Not only do leaders need to speak to God about us in prayer, but they need to speak to us about God.

## THE LEADER WHO TEACHES GOD'S PEOPLE TO FIGHT

Look at verse 14:

**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.**

The reason he called on them to fight back was that the Lord was great and awesome. Remember verse 9: "We prayed to our God, and we posted a guard." The first response was to turn to God, and then out of that grew a response that had the possibility of making changes.

The second thing Nehemiah did was teach the people to fight. He spoke personally about the possibility of standing firm. He encouraged the people that the Lord would use them, and their circumstances were not hopeless. It was what we might call discipleship in the New Testament, which is to stand people in place, speak to them of their world, remind them of the presence of God; to present men and women mature in Christ. James says, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (4:7b). You don't have to be a victim forever. You're the beloved of God. Discipleship is to train, encourage, build up, and strengthen people so that in their own part of the "wall," instead of giving way to fear, they are filled with hope and confidence and they move forward.

What leaders ought to avoid is creating dependence on themselves. Nehemiah didn't say he was the critical person. What he did say was, "Every one of you can hold a tool and a sword and can stand your ground." Paul uses very similar language in Ephesians 6:13: "Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the evil day comes, you may be able to stand your ground...." God can and will strengthen every one of us to have the faith we need to

move forward.

## LOOKING OUT FOR ONE ANOTHER, CHOOSING GODLY LEADERS

Let's read the closing description of the efforts Nehemiah made to help the people rebuild the wall. Verses 17b-23:

**Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. But the man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me.**

**Then I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "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!"**

**So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out. At that time I also said to the people, "Have every man and his helper stay inside Jerusalem at night, so they can serve us as guards by night and workmen by day." Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water.**

You can imagine this scene: tools in one hand, spears in the other. Some were working, some were guarding. But everyone was being taught to fight. Everyone was being strengthened to say, "Lord, put me to the task you've called me to. The changes we're attempting to make are the right ones to make." Each person was given the possibility of making a contribution.

Let me conclude with a couple words of application. The community had to succeed together. Someone would stand guard while the others worked, and then they would reverse their roles. That meant that there had to be cooperation, awareness, sensitivity, insight into what was going on in another person's life. We're meant to be people who can carry both a sword and a tool. But we also need to be part of a community, and there are times when we need to rest and someone else needs to stand guard for us. We need to have people who know us well enough that they can speak to us of the things in our lives where we need help, who can either challenge or strengthen us.

Are we building the kind of relationships in which somebody will come if we blow a trumpet? If we fall, will there be people there to help us up again? It may be true that this church restricts those kinds of relationships by the way we treat each other, but I don't think so. Over and over again, I've seen that those who are willing to have their hearts knit to another, who are willing to open up, who are willing to know and be known, will have found a community of people available for such relationships. It may take a while. I'm not saying it's easy. But the only way to defeat the enemy finally, to stand firm finally, is to do so together. The voices of our enemies are too persuasive. We've heard them too long. They know our weaknesses too well. We can't stand firm if we do it by ourselves.

The second word of application is that I would encourage you to believe in and support those who lead in whatever setting you're aware of, whether it's national Christian leadership, local church leadership, your home fellowship, or wherever. And the kind of leaders we ought to listen to are those who have made a big place in their lives for God, who speak to him first, who speak of him often, for whom God is first before any worldly skill, riches, degrees, or slick patter—all the other things that we often turn to for leadership in the church. The kind of leaders we ought to listen to will strengthen us. They will teach us to strap on a sword and pick up a tool and make progress.

We're going to run into threats again in the next chapters. But the enemies never do mount a charge or come in force. That is because as the feeble believers become strong inwardly, the enemies realize they are no match for them. They succeed only as long as the believers destroy themselves. These enemies threaten to go to the king; they threaten warfare, ambush, killing; they threaten everything. But they never do any of it. The only thing they do is infiltrate and deceive. And most often what we fear and are overwhelmed by is a thousand times worse in

our mind's eye than it is in reality. The thing that's hanging us up is our lack of belief that God will fight for us, that he is present, that he keeps his promises.

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