

Building for the Future

Opposition

Nehemiah 2:18–20 (NRSV)

I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, “Let us start building!” So they committed themselves to the common good. 19 But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they mocked and ridiculed us, saying, “What is this that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?” 20 Then I replied to them, “The God of heaven is the one who will give us success, and we his servants are going to start building; but you have no share or claim or historic right in Jerusalem.”

Introduction. When I was in 8th grade, I played on my school's basketball team. As you can see from my height, I was not exactly designed to play the sport. On top of that, I was not a very good shot. As the season unfolded, I felt I was not getting enough playing time and my mom noticed that I was somewhat down. As only a mother can do, she got me to share with her what was wrong and I shared that I was not being treated fairly and getting enough playing time.

Unknown to me at the time, my warrior mom contacted my coach to express her support of me having more playing time. I don't know what she said but I soon was playing more minutes in our games. Maybe you had a mother like me who was willing to fight battles for her children.

Many of us imagine that when we engage in some work of God, **particularly those we have strong leadings to do and great passions about**, things are going to go smoothly. Then in the midst of those adventures it happens - Bam! Opposition comes full force at us. Often we are surprised and taken off our game by those harassing forces that come at us. These adversarial components present real threats to untrack the God-given project we are attempting.

We really should not be surprised by these forces that come against us. Jesus gave warning to his followers.

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He said, "***In the world you will face persecution, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world***" (John 16:33).

Several years ago I had an administrative assistant who had deep faith. When our church would face challenges and opposition she would say, "**Something great must be about to happen.**"

As we launch in the adventure of rebuilding our church post-pandemic and building for the future, we will face challenges, hurdles and opposition. If we are truly doing the work God is calling us to do, we will have enemies who will attempt to untrack our efforts. The reality is those enemies can win the victory and thwart what we are called to do and stop us in our steps. **To be successful, we must face them well.**

Nehemiah's story gives us not only a source of hope that the enemies' efforts can be neutralized but also gives us insight into how this can take place. This can be not only helpful for us as a church but also as individuals who face challenges in our own journey of faith and ministry. Will you join me in exploring Nehemiah's story?

The opposition.

As Nehemiah retold his story, he spent nearly as many words sharing about the opposition he faced as he did about the building of the walls. He faced a lot of opposition! Interestingly, the opposition came from various sources.

There was an alliance of three leaders who had some level of relationship with the Jewish community in Jerusalem. Sanballat was probably the governor of Samaria which was just north of Jerusalem. Tobiah was probably a member of his cabinet who had direct connections with many within Jerusalem because his son married the High Priest's daughter. Tobiah even had a special room in the temple where he stayed when in Jerusalem. Geshem was likely a chieftain of the Edomites who were descendants of Abraham. These three were determined to halt the rebuilding of the walls. As often is the case, the most threatening opposition does not come for sworn enemies but from some who have strong connections.

In reading Nehemiah's account, I have wondered **what motivated these three to ally themselves against Nehemiah and the Jews.** Perhaps they were jealous; perhaps they

felt threatened by the Jews attempt to bring great security to their capitol; perhaps this threatened their power status in the region; perhaps they feared this might disrupt their standing with Persia. Unfortunately, we are not told what motivated them.

This, too, is often the case when we as followers of Jesus face opposition. **It is generally difficult if not impossible to figure out why some oppose us.** I could spend the remainder of my time sharing particular stories of churches I have served encountering people who were opposed to ministry in general, paying off debt, building buildings, starting new ministries, etc. To this day, I have little clue what motivated these persons.

Interestingly, one of the greatest threats to rebuilding the walls did not come from these outside forces but from within in the form of **an “unholy” practice that was took place.** Leading into and during this project, times were rough for the Jews because they were in the midst of a famine. In order to survive, people were needing funds to pay their taxes and to eat. Some of their fellow citizens were lending them money at high rates of interest and people were forced to mortgage their property. Some of the most vulnerable were being taken advantage of. This was causing a huge disruption in their society and civil unrest.

Sometimes the greatest threats faced when attempting to do a work for God is internal matters that are out of alignment with Godly practices. Keeping our lives in harmony with God’s design for us through the regular practice of spiritual disciplines is vital. Caring for one another and treating each other with kindness is critical. When we fail in these areas, the internal fabric of our community begins to tear. To build what God desires, we must do it together.

Oppositional tactics.

In Nehemiah story, it is clear that the trio who were opposed to the project were determined to stop it. When each attempt proved unsuccessful, they tried a new tactic.

- **Initially they tried ridicule.** They said they Jews were rebelling against Persia; later when the walls were going up they said they were so flimsy a fox could tear them down.

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Ridicule can cut deep and can take the wind of enthusiasm out of our sails. Nehemiah remembered who his God was and what he had been called to do.

- **Next the three entered into an alliance to execute a military strike against Jerusalem.** In reality, the Jewish community was rather vulnerable because the walls at that point were incomplete and the people were focused on the building project. Fortunately, their plot was discovered before they executed it leading to a strategic response by Nehemiah. He had all who were working on the walls to carry their swords, those who were off duty in working to be posted as guards and developed a warning system if an attack came. These actions were enough to deter the allies from attacking when they saw it would be a significant fight.

While it is seldom in our setting where we are threatened with physical attack, opposition forces may choose tactics designed to harm the church’s standing. Years ago a small church was growing and the decision had been made to move forward with a building program to expand the facilities. Much of the work was being done by the people. The day ground was broken, a disgruntled opponent from the church went to the District Superintendent claiming things had not been done properly. The pastor had to have conversations and showed clearly that everything had been done properly.

- In Nehemiah's story when ridicule and threat of battle did not work, the allies turned to yet a more diabolical plot - assassinate Nehemiah. If you can get rid of the leader, it can kill the project. "*Strike the shepherd and the sheep will be shattered*" (Zechariah 13:7). Two attempts were made to lure him into a trap but he did not fall prey to it. When the opponents could not do Nehemiah physical harm, they tried to harm the efforts with a false narrative. They claimed that the actions of the Jews were in reality an attempt to rebel against Persia and they were setting up their self rule.

Again, it is unlikely that in our setting that the actual life of leadership will be in jeopardy,

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personal and character assignation attempts do happen. There have been a few times in my ministry when some negative names have been attached to me and my motives and actions maligned. We live in a world today where if a leader's name and motives are tarnished, it can be toxic for that church. This is why it is so important to pray regularly for your church's leadership. We need God's protection from these forces so that we do not fall prey to such attacks which can inflict major damage on the community of faith.

The story of Nehemiah does not provide an exhaustive list of tactics that are used to thwart God-given objectives. I am sure if we explored scripture we could come up with a long list.

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Perhaps the greatest threat we face ahead is the enemy of "distraction." In many ways, Nehemiah faced this as well with the various forms of assault he encountered. But today, we seem to be living in the culture of distraction. There is so much going on in our lives, some much information that is circulated, so many suggestions on what can be done, etc. We will face an endless stream of distraction as we move forward.

But Nehemiah's story let's us know that attempts to divert us from our mission and purpose are likely to come. As we launch into rebuilding and building for the future, we will face challenges, hurdles and probably some attacks from various sources. I expect that some of what will face in this regard will catch most of us by surprise. When they come, we are likely to remember that this message was preached.

Our Sure Defense.

While the various forms of assault against us may call for particular and different responses, Nehemiah's story shows us key ingredients in building a sure defense against the opposition. If we can make these part of how we move forward, I think we can too have a sure defense.

Nehemiah kept his attention focused on God and what God had called him to do. In the initial attack by the unholy trinity, Nehemiah responded, "The God of heaven is the one who will give us success." He realized that it was not in the power of the people of Jerusalem to rebuild the city. He knew that success would only come as a result of God's engagement and blessing in the project.

As we launch forward into rebuilding and building for the future,

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we must remember daily that God is the only one who can give us success. It will not come because you have a super-charismatic pastor, staff, leadership or congregation. While I think you guys are really special, we are normal as well. To succeed God must be with us.

But make no mistake about this, God wants OUMC to be successful in rebuilding what has been lost in the pandemic and building for a new future. He wants this church to be stronger than it was. He wants us to be a community where disciples are formed, lives are changed and people are loved. Our God is able to take us where we need to go and do in and through us what needs to be done regardless of what opposition and obstacles we may face. If we remain focused on him and his calling for us, we can clear the hurdles that we confront.

During this adventure, **Nehemiah was committed to prayer.** After the allies threatened to attack Jerusalem, listen to what he did: *So we prayed to our God, and set a guard as a protection against them day and night* (4:9). Nehemiah and the people prayed. Out of that prayer came their method of defense.

We can never have success or overcome our opposition without prayer. Prayer reminds us of who God is and what God is capable of doing. Through prayer, God is able to guide us into action that makes a difference. Through prayer, we align more fully with what God is doing in and through us.

As we move forward, we face challenges and opposition. Let us remember who God is and commit ourselves to pray and do what He calls us to do.