

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."

NEHEMIAH 4:14 (ESV)

# RENEWAL

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## THROUGH NEW BEGINNINGS

**DATE**  
May 9 & 10

**WEEK**  
2 of 5

**OVERVIEW**  
Nehemiah 3-4

**KEY VERSE**  
Nehemiah 4:14

### SETTING THE STAGE

The Babylonian Empire has conquered the nation of Israel and its capital city, Jerusalem, along with its crowned jewel, the temple. As a result, the Israelites became scattered, exiled people without shelter or protection. Last week, we looked at Nehemiah chapter 1, which introduces Nehemiah, a Jewish man who serves as cupbearer for the King of Persia. One day while working in the king's courts, he learns that a group of Israelites are experiencing great distress and danger in Jerusalem.

Moved deeply by compassion over the grave situation of his people nearly one thousand miles away in Jerusalem, Nehemiah intercedes for his people to God and then makes a plea to the King of Persia on their behalf. As the story unfolds, God softens the king's heart who accepts Nehemiah's appeal with favor, and even sends him to Jerusalem with blessing to begin construction and restoration.

When Nehemiah arrives to Jerusalem with his crew, he first assesses the city's damage, particularly the condition of its gates and walls. He develops a citywide restoration plan, mobilizes his people into varying roles, and encourages them that God will give them success as they rebuild and fortify their city of old. In fact, Nehemiah 3 essentially outlines the Israelites' great 'assembly line structure' with much detail, showing how they organized themselves to work together efficiently and productively.

Nehemiah 3 shows the importance of planning, structure, and preparation. However, Nehemiah 4 takes a turn, revealing obstacles and oppositions the Israelites face *Continued on page 42 >*

#### LESSON OUTLINE

1. The Nature of Opposition
2. The Experience of Opposition
3. The Call to True Faith

#### THINGS TO KNOW

- Nehemiah met opposition with two things: prayer and action.

# RENEWAL

## THROUGH NEW BEGINNINGS

While we might not be rebuilding a city like the Israelites or fending off national enemies, the very experience of opposition, transition, and the battle of faith are relevant to our day-to-day experience as Christians.

*Setting the Stage, continued >*

both externally and internally, foreign and native, as they strive to carry out God's calling and plan. As the leader of the expedition, Nehemiah identifies the nature of the opposition and then encourages his people to continue with faith towards the new beginning God has in store for them.

In our text, we will see three things the Israelites encounter, and how God meets with them through it: 1) the nature of opposition, 2) the experience of opposition, and 3) the call to faith in God's character and plan.

While we might not be rebuilding a city like the Israelites or fending off national enemies, the very experience of opposition, transition, and the battle of faith are relevant to our day-to-day experience as Christians. As we look into the story of Nehemiah 4, we find immense hope and encouragement for our own lives.

### 1. THE NATURE OF OPPOSITION

**NEHEMIAH 4:1-3** *When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, <sup>2</sup> 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?"*

<sup>3</sup> *Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, "What they are building—even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones!" (NIV)*

As soon as Nehemiah and the Israelites assemble and begin the work of rebuilding the gates and walls, they are immediately hit with opposition and trial. The first three verses feature two powerful individuals, Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the Ammonite, both who accompanied Nehemiah and his crew from the Persian palace to Jerusalem.

We are not told much about these two individuals in the text, but history reveals that Sanballat served as a powerful governing official of the Samaritan district inside the Persian Empire. Historians also believe that his title 'the Horonite' likely comes from the small town, Horonaim, which is a constituent of Moab, a historical archenemy to the nation of Israel. <sup>1</sup>

In addition, Tobiah seemed to serve as the governing official of Ammon, underneath Sanballat's jurisdiction. However, scholars pinpoint something very fascinating about Tobiah and his family history. The name 'Tobiah' is actually a Jewish name, not an Ammonite name; and scholars believe



<sup>1</sup> Mervin Breneman, *The New American Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*. (Nashville, B&H Publishing: 2003). iBooks p. 433-434.

that it is likely **this Tobiah** from the family origin of Tobiad that was expelled from the Israel community when they could not prove their family lineage descended from Israel (Ezra 2:60). If so, this would certainly explain Tobiah's enmity towards the Jewish people. <sup>2</sup>

And so, even though Sanballat and Tobiah both knew the king had approved and blessed Nehemiah's mission, they did not like it; they resisted it; and as such, they began to mock and ridicule the Israelites as they worked. They started using psychological warfare first to stifle their morale and target them emotionally.

Sanballat provokes them with the following mockery:

*"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?" (v. 2-3) (NIV)*

Commentators point out that these targeted statements are not just general bullying, but specific and targeted psychological warfare.

When he says "*feeble Jews*," Sanballat targets their insecurity in strength. Not only were the Jews small in stature as individuals, but they also were relatively small as a cooperative group, too. When he says, "*will they restore their wall*" and "*finish in a day*," he targets their inexperience or lack of wisdom in order to complete the project. And he states, "*Will they offer sacrifices*," as a religious jab, mocking the very idea that prayer and sacrifice could make the wall grow. <sup>3</sup>

Mervin Breneman says:

"[Sanballat's] final question, "Can they bring the stones back to life ... burned as they are?" uses wrong information to discourage the builders. Most of the stones were still in good condition. They had not all disintegrated from the fire as he suggested. Psychological warfare can use truths to which people are sensitive or half-truths or falsehoods to intimidate the enemy." <sup>4</sup>

In other words, Sanballat and Tobiah strive to break the spirits of the Israelites first. As soon as they tried to move in a certain direction of obedience, opposition came. Beau Hughes defines this opposition as, "anything or anyone that threatens your perseverance in the faith or in the work of ministry." <sup>5</sup>

It is important to note that the first two chapters of the book are about Nehemiah's prayer and the initial call of Nehemiah (chapters 1-2). Then, there is one chapter on preparing to do the work, (chapter 3). Followed by three-and-a-half chapters on the opposition that the Israelites face (chapters 4-7) <sup>6</sup>. The ratio of text regarding calling and opposition should encourage and sober us to the reality of what it means to trust God and follow His calling. Obedience does not guarantee smoothness, for it is often the path of great inconvenience and sacrifice.

**Obedience does not guarantee smoothness, for it is often the path of great inconvenience and sacrifice.**

What about you? Are you in a place of transition and hopefulness in God? Given your circumstances, does obedience feel difficult, or nearly impossible? It did for the Israelites. Their calling was not easy, and their task was steep.

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<sup>2</sup> Breneman, *The New American Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, iBooks p. 469.

<sup>3</sup> Breneman, *The New American Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, iBooks p. 471.

<sup>4</sup> *The New American Commentary*, p. 471.

<sup>5</sup> Beau Hughes, "Nehemiah: The Reality of Opposition." March 3, 2013. <https://www.tvresources.net>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*.

In our culture today, we face philosophical opposition when it comes to following Christ. Our culture disregards the Christian view on life, salvation, society, gender, sexuality, and money. We often stand in direct contrast to the philosophical convictions of our day. Many times, being a Christian can feel like swimming against the current of modernity's values and beliefs.

But sometimes we face another kind of opposition, and that is circumstantial opposition. The obstacles and trials seem confusing and too difficult given what you can see directly in front of you. For Nehemiah, this could be how big the job was, and how few people he had to staff it. It could have been an issue of supplies and resources.

Perhaps for you, a circumstantial opposition might consist of relationship conflict, a new job opportunity, your limited budget, or an inability; yet, God's call remains constant upon your life in that very area. And so, obstacles hinder you from walking forward in obedience, simply because you cannot see what the future will hold.

Opposition can be philosophical or circumstantial, but regardless it makes obedience more difficult. It could come directly from the mouth of the enemy. Or it could simply come from living by sight and not faith, looking at circumstances more keenly than looking to God.

## 2. THE EXPERIENCE OF OPPOSITION

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**NEHEMIAH 4:4-12** *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. <sup>5</sup> 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.*

<sup>6</sup> *So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart.*

<sup>7</sup> *But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the people of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. <sup>8</sup> They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. <sup>9</sup> But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.*

<sup>10</sup> *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."*

<sup>11</sup> *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."*

<sup>12</sup> *Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us." (NIV)*

In response to Sanballat and Tobiah's mockery and ridicule, Nehemiah prayed for relief and then got back to business (4:4-6). Prayer is an excellent, initial response to opposition because it is the purest act of humble dependence upon God, no matter the circumstance.

However, what happens next is something we might not expect. Instead of Nehemiah and his people receiving 'answered prayer' for an easier situation, the opposite actually happens. Sanballat and Tobiah's mocking and ridiculing in word now turns into plotting against them in deed. In other words, their opposition gets dialed up to a more intense degree. Look at Nehemiah 4:8:

<sup>8</sup> *They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it.*

And so, Sanballat and Tobiah began to plot with their own people about how they could destroy Israel and prevent Jerusalem from gaining power. It is shocking that Sanballat and Tobiah moved

forward with terrorizing the Israelites, likely knowing full well that they would have to stand before the King of Persia for their actions that clearly violated the King's edict of protection over Israel.

Nevertheless, Nehemiah confronts the greater opposition again with both prayer and action in verse 9:

<sup>9</sup> *But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat. (NIV)*

Unfortunately, the opposition does not die down. This time, it does not simply increase amongst their foes, from outside their walls. It also begins to develop in their own community, from inside their walls as we see in verses 10-12:

<sup>10</sup> *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." (NIV)*

<sup>12</sup> *Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us." (NIV)*

Hearing plots from their neighbors, the Jews themselves started spreading disbelief among their people and entertaining the idea of compromise as well.

Here we learn not simply about the nature of opposition, but also, the very experience of it, and how we cope with it ourselves. By looking at the response of the Jews, we can find many similarities to our own experiences.

Opposition came and came and came. But Nehemiah and the Jews kept on praying and praying and praying. And even more than that, they kept on working and working and working. Yet, the opposition would not decrease; it only got worse. And so, it seems the workers and the inhabitants in Jerusalem became worn down by the opposition, and functionally surrendered. Perhaps they started thinking, "Maybe prayer does not work." Or, "Maybe God is not listening. If He really heard our prayers, wouldn't He make the situation easier?" Or, "If we are being obedient, shouldn't the process be easier than it is?" We have all interacted with these thoughts in the midst of trial and opposition.

But God is not cruel, nor is He making it harder on us for the sake of it. Rather, He wants us to dig deep, and so, expose in what our true hope lies. Were the Israelites hoping most in a new set of circumstances, such as a better life, a rebuilt city or a restored political state? Or was their greatest hope God Himself?

When the fire of opposition gets hotter and hotter, the refining becomes stronger and the debris becomes clearer. The Israelites might have been hoping in God for something. And when that 'thing' did not happen as easily or as immediately as they would have liked or thought, they began to compromise under the opposition to secure their livelihood (as far as they could see it).

How many of us do the same thing? We might be hoping in God for something, and that is fine. But the deeper question is, what is our deepest hope in life? A certain circumstance for life and happiness, other than God Himself and His promise of love for us? Sometimes God will lovingly dial up the opposition to help us see in what we are truly trusting.

**When the fire of opposition gets hotter and hotter, the refining becomes stronger and the debris becomes clearer.**

Beau Hughes remarks that some people fall not because they do not expect opposition to come, but because they expect it will come and then go away on their own timeline. It is not actually opposition coming against us that threatens our faith; it is opposition that stays against us that

threatens our faith. Why? This is because it reveals what our faith is truly built upon.<sup>7</sup>

Ironically, the threats and assaults on Jerusalem's walls also serve as a brilliant illustration about the spiritual threats and assaults upon the fortitude and strength of Israel's own faith. What is, truly, their greatest defense against the enemy? Is it their circumstances (or lack thereof), or is it a God who fights for them no matter what their circumstances may suggest? (*Deuteronomy 3:22*).

While the nature of opposition is generally acknowledged in its varying forms, the experience of opposition comes more difficult for most people. It becomes more than just a coping of circumstances, but also a deep dive into our heart behind it.

But there is one place we can find hope in any degree of trial and opposition, and it is not more planning or more striving or more praying necessarily. It is the right kind of faith behind any praying, planning, and action.

### 3. THE CALL TO TRUE FAITH

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Pressed in on every side with opposition from both his enemies and his own people, Nehemiah looks Godward with a heart full of faith, eyes full of anticipation and exhorts his people to do the same.

**NEHEMIAH 4:13-14** *Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows. <sup>14</sup> 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 families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes." (NIV)*

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Nehemiah pointed them toward God, not toward their circumstance. He pointed them primarily not to what they could or could not see, but rather, who they could trust. In other words, Nehemiah shifted the attention of his people away from their circumstances, away from their enemies, and away from their progress and places their attention primarily on who God is.

This is the essence of what it means to walk by faith, and not by sight. Faith means moving forward in obedience regardless of what may stand in the way, precisely because your view of God is bigger than the odds stacked against you, the obstacles riddled before you, and the opposition pressing down upon you.

Successful obedience is always motivated by faith in God's good character and good plan, even when you cannot see it. And so, especially when you cannot see, the call to faith becomes even more important. It becomes a call to preach to yourself who

God is and not to listen to yourself. It becomes a call to believe the goodness and sovereignty of God, not giving more weight to what circumstances might suggest. This is the battle of faith, and Nehemiah leads the charge. True faith is always paired to the truth of who God is.

We also see how true faith is paired with action. In fact, all throughout the Bible, the word used for faith is rarely a noun, but a verb. Faith is not merely something you have; rather, it is something that is evident in your life based on what you do.

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<sup>7</sup> Beau Hughes, "Nehemiah: The Reality of Opposition." March 3, 2013. <https://www.tvresources.net>.

If belief is simply assenting to the notion that a parachute can transport one from an airplane to the ground safely, then faith means actually jumping out of the airplane with a parachute.

All throughout the chapter, there is no dichotomy of faith and action. Nehemiah never simply just prays. He prays and prepares. He prays and guards. He prays and reorganizes. He prays and gets ready to fight. <sup>8</sup>

Likewise, for the many trials and oppositions we face every day, the purest demonstration of faith is not simply believing something in your head, but acting upon it from the heart. Once we reaffirm who God is, only then will we have the peace of mind and strength of heart to move forward in obedience.

## HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

Where are you in life? Are you in the middle of a transition or is a new season unfolding? God is calling you forward in obedience in everyday living; however, sometimes He calls us forward along a path. Perhaps that is you right now. This text teaches us that no matter where we find ourselves on the path of obedience, we should expect opposition, but that we should also find deep confidence knowing that God is with us. And along that path, we should constantly evaluate our own hearts, asking, “Where is my hope?” Is your hope in a certain circumstance coming to fruition, or is it in God Himself? Is it in what God gives to you, or is it in who God is to you? <sup>9</sup>

Opposition, perhaps more than anything else, will reveal the bedrock of your hope. The Israelites were likely confronted with a conflict of hope. Their hope was grounded in a city coming together, and the opposition seemed so overwhelming that it made them despair. Only until they hoped primarily in God’s character and promise did they finally find peace and the strength to persevere. The same will be true of us as well in whatever calling or new beginning we are walking towards.

John Piper has once said, “Stop defining your future in terms of your past, and start defining it in terms of your God.” <sup>10</sup> As we move forward in obedience, may we pray and ask God to give us faith-filled hearts in who He is to us and in what He has in store for us.

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<sup>8</sup> Beau Hughes, *The Reality of Opposition*.

<sup>9</sup> John Piper, [www.desiringgod.com](http://www.desiringgod.com).

<sup>10</sup> John Piper, Desiring God Instagram account, [instagram.com](https://www.instagram.com/desiringgod).