

Sermon Outline

“Opposition”

Nehemiah series, part 4 – Nehemiah 4:1-23; 6:1-16 – Joshua Harris – February 20, 2011

The Inevitability of Opposition

1. When we engage in serving God, opposition is unavoidable. Our effort to push forward God’s priorities will be met with opposing force and energy. Nehemiah didn’t face opposition because he was doing something wrong. He faced opposition because he was doing what was right—he was serving God.
2. Often, we believe that if we have good intentions and we’re obeying God’s Word then God should give us a smooth road. Nehemiah left everything and traveled to Jerusalem to lead in rebuilding the walls of the city. He was God’s man and was doing God’s work. Doesn’t he qualify for the blessing of a trial-free life? Yet when opposition arose, he didn’t turn back from the work or decide that he must not be in God’s will. He understood that opposition is inevitable.
3. Why is opposition inevitable? Because we live in a fallen world that is in rebellion to God. As believers, we face opposition from the world, the flesh and the devil.
 - a. This world’s systems and values oppose the rule of God. This is what John is describing when he writes, “Do not love the world” (1 John 2:15). He’s talking about organized human pride and self-rule that disregards God.
 - b. Our flesh opposes God—that is, our old sinful desires and habits. Jesus by his death has freed us from being enslaved to sin and subject to sin’s penalty. Still, we find that in our flesh, remaining sin entices us and opposes the Spirit.
 - c. Ultimately, what’s behind all spiritual opposition that Christians face is the devil. Peter tells us that our adversary the devil “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

The real theme of Nehemiah 4-6 is spiritual warfare, and Nehemiah’s real opponent, lurking behind the human opponents, critics and grumblers who occupied his attention directly, was Satan, whose name means ‘adversary’ and who operates as the permanent enemy of God, God’s people, and God’s praise....

We think of Satan as our spiritual enemy, and so he is, but we need to realize that the reason he hates humankind and seeks our ruin is because he hates God, his and our Creator. He is not a creator himself, only a destroyer; he is a fallen angel, the archetypal instance of good gone wrong; and now he seeks only to thwart God’s plans, wreck his work, rob him of glory, and in that sense triumph over him. When God initiates something for his praise, Satan is always there,

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trying to keep pace with him, planning ways of spoiling and frustrating the divine project.” —J.I. Packer

4. Despite opposition from the world, the flesh and the devil, we have confidence in God’s promise that: “...*he who is in you* is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4; emphasis added).

The Forms of Opposition

1. Personal Opposition – Opposition often comes from people very close to us—a family member, friend or co-worker who doesn’t like your beliefs as a follower of Christ. This opposition is often in the form of critical words or relational ostracism.
2. Cultural Opposition – Our culture and its values often oppose the Word of God. For example, we see that sin is celebrated in music and literature, and Christians may be portrayed in negative ways in media.
3. Governmental Opposition – In many parts of the world the policies of governments directly oppose and even seek to destroy the work of the church.
4. Institutional Opposition – At times, religious institutions and churches oppose biblical reform and scriptural faithfulness. For example in the 16th century, Martin Luther faced intense opposition from the Catholic Church when he taught the biblical doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.
5. The Devil’s Tactics
 - a. Scorn – In chapter 4:1-3, we see Sanballat jeering at the people of God and mocking their efforts. The enemy wants us to take our eyes off of who we are in Christ and fix them on our weaknesses and feebleness. The basic lie is: “Do you really think your effort will make any difference? It’s a waste of time; give up!”
 - b. Threaten – In chapter 4:8, we see the enemies of God begin to threaten violence: “And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it.” Some of us may face physical harm for our proclamation of the gospel. But Satan will also threaten in other ways, like a loss of a friendship or the loss of career advancement.
 - c. Distract – In chapter 6:1-7, we read of Sanballat and Tobiah’s attempt to meet with Nehemiah. Their intention was to harm him and to draw him away from the Lord’s work.

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- d. Discredit – In chapter 6:10-14, we read the fascinating story of Shemaiah who tries to trick Nehemiah with a conspiracy theory. He wanted Nehemiah frightened so he would violate the law, hide in the temple, and prove a coward. Shemaiah's purpose was to discredit Nehemiah's character. Satan wants to do the same in our lives. If he can't stop us from the work, he will try to destroy our integrity and credibility so that our ability to lead others is ruined.

The Right Response to Opposition

1. Nehemiah is a compelling example of how Christians should respond to opposition: he keeps his eyes on God and the work God has called him to. The words of Nehemiah to the men of Judah are the Spirit's words to us today: "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome..." (4:9)
2. When we face opposition, the temptation is to fix our attention on ourselves—justifying ourselves, proving ourselves and defending ourselves. The other temptation is to become obsessed with our opponents, allowing their words and their scorn to ring in our ears. Instead, we need our ears ringing with the Word of God. Our eyes need to be fixed on Jesus. Our goal needs to be his glory. When we know the God who is great and awesome, we know that the battle belongs to the Lord. "Our God will fight for us!" (4:20)
3. Here's the test of whether our focus is in the right place—are we praying? If we are remembering the Lord, we will pray. Nehemiah led the people to pray before they prepared for battle. He took the words of his opponents before God, essentially praying: "God, I can't do anything but ask you to hear what they're saying and to ask you to defend your name. Turn back their taunts on their own head."
4. The most important lesson of this passage is this: opposition must not stop the work of the church. Nehemiah and the people of God didn't shut down the project because there were enemies. They strapped on a sword and kept working. That's the right response to opposition—it's to press forward with the mission of God.

Fellowship Starters

1. According to chapter 4, why did Nehemiah face opposition? How did he respond? How do you typically respond when you face opposition for your faith?
2. Josh shared that opposition can come in various forms: personal, cultural, governmental or institutional. In what ways have you faced opposition because you were a Christian?

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3. Josh shared that the devil's tactics of opposition are to scorn, threaten, distract, and/or discredit. What has been your experience? How can you turn to God when the enemy of your soul begins to "roar" (1 Peter 5:8)?
4. Josh shared that Nehemiah's response to opposition was to keep his eyes on God and the work the Lord had given him to do. How can Nehemiah's example inform your future responses to opposition?
5. Why is your practice of prayer an important test that you are responding rightly to opposition? How can you grow in making prayer your "default" response?

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