

**NEHEMIAH 4:1-23<sup>1</sup>**  
***OPPOSED BUT NOT HINDERED***

**Introduction**

Many times in our faith life, we swing from a spiritual high one moment to a spiritual low the other moment. We are up at one time and then down at another—on the mountain top one moment, then in the valley the next.

The Jews in Nehemiah's time had the same experience. In Chapter 3, we saw how the people positioned themselves shoulder to shoulder as they worked on the sections of the wall assigned to them. Chapter 3 is a great chapter about God's people working together.

However, we will read how the people were struggling in Chapter 4 today. From a high in Chapter 3, the Jews fell to a low in Chapter 4. Life was like riding on a roller coaster. From determined cooperation in Chapter 3, the Jews had to deal with discouraging opposition in Chapter 4.

This opposition came primarily from a man named Sanballat and his friends. They wanted to keep the Jews weak. A strong Jerusalem would endanger the balance of power in the region, and it would rob Sanballat and his friends of influence and wealth.

When things are going well, get ready for trouble because the enemy doesn't want to see God's people rising up to put things right. As long as the people in Jerusalem were content with their sad lot, the enemy left them alone. But when the Jews arose to serve the Lord and bring glory to His name, the enemy became active.

This is for sure—if you start building to put things right in God's sight, you will soon be battling opposition that tries to discourage you. So, be prepared!

**I. First, be prepared to battle the greatest weapon that discourages.**

Notice how the enemy ridiculed the Jews in vv. 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

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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” (Neh 4:1-3).

Sanballat ridiculed the workers by calling them “feeble Jews” (4:2). Imagine someone saying to you this, “What are you weakling good for? Can we expect any great thing to come from you?”

None likes to be belittled as a weakling. We want to prove that we are not. And that’s exactly how the world tempts us—it teases us as weakling not to dare us to obey God, but to disobey Him.

ILLUSTRATION: I remember my Primary 5 class as a very special one—every other day, two guys would fight in class. And when it happened, it was like carnival time. The rest of the class would push away the chairs and desks so as to allow the combatants enough room to entertain with their fisticuffs. As the fighters rained blows on each other, there would be lots of cheering from the rest.

One day, a classmate looked at me and said, “You are so sissy. I never see you fight anyone.” I didn’t take that as a compliment. Rather I felt insulted and belittled, as if he was calling me weakling—not man enough to fight. My mind was so disturbed by that thought that unconsciously, I was looking out for a fight.

One day, there was this boy in my class who said something not so nice to my ears. And you know what happened? It became the day John Yuen put on his boxing gloves. It was my moment of glory—to show others that I was not a sissy; I was not a weakling; that I was man enough to fight another person.

I cannot remember how I fought, but I think I won the fight. Partly, because the other poor guy was so unprepared because he didn’t even know why I was so upset with what he said. And this was also what troubled me many days after the fight. Why on earth did I beat up that guy? The answer—I was subconsciously looking out for a fight because someone said that I was too weak and feeble to get into a fight.

By the way, I remember that fight so clearly because it was the only time I fought in class as a schoolboy. I could have made it a clean

record, but I fell to the teasing and taunting of the world.

We the people of God today are like the Jews in Nehemiah's time—the world often teases, ridicules and taunts us as weaklings so as to tempt us to disobey the Lord.

Sanballat and his friends belittled the Jews as weak, useless, good for nothing, scum of the earth. They tried to destroy whatever self respect that they might have so that they would quit putting their lives together as God's people.

ILLUSTRATION: I remember when I was a lecturer at the Singapore Bible College, there was this lady lecturer who always dressed up prim and proper—just like a school principal. In fact, she was actually the principal of a high school before she joined her husband in answering God's call to the fulltime ministry.

She used to visit a wet market to get her stuff. And one of the stall owners there never failed to give her a big smile. It was as if he was very impressed with this aura of poise and dignity that she seemed to exude.

At one chapel time, this lady shared of a morning when she was again visiting the wet market. Again this stall owner greeted her with a warm and respectful smile. Then he ventured to ask, "From the way you dress, I am sure you are a teacher."

The lady replied, "Yes, I am a teacher indeed."

The stall owner asked, "Which school do you teach in?"

She replied, "I teach in the Bible college nearby."

Immediately, the man's countenance turned from one of warmth and respect to one of disdain and contempt. He then said rudely, "Why do you do that kind of superstitious thing? Are there no better things to do?"

I remember that lady shared how she was made to feel like someone who's doing good-for-nothing stuff. And she had to remind herself that she was a child of God, loved by Him, and called to serve Him in what she was doing.

The enemy of God often uses the world to deride and destroy whatever self respect that God's people might have so that they would quit putting their lives

together as God's people. So we must always remind ourselves of what the Lord says to us in terms of who we are and what He calls us to do.

There is one thing I want us to notice in the words of Sanballat. Notice that the words of Sanballat were more than words of ridicule. We are told in v. 1 that "when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews ..." His words of ridicule were actually his words of anger.

Indeed, when we are angry we use words to cut down, not to build up. When we speak in anger, we become a tool of the evil one. Sanballat was not only an enemy of the Jews. When he so spoke those words, he became a tool of the evil one; he became an enemy of God Himself. He gave the devil a foothold in his life. He became an abuser of God's people and God's work.

Even Christians can be angry themselves. The Bible does teach about godly anger. But I want to give this caution—because we are not God, we must be very careful whenever we claim to have godly anger.

Often times, the work of putting things right before God is hindered not because the world is angry with us. It is because the people of God are angry with each other.

Let's be very careful about claiming godly anger. But let's be more concerned with handling our anger (without justifying it as godly or otherwise) in a godly manner. Three suggestions for us:

- **CONFESS IT.** The first step is to realize you have a problem and you want to get rid of it! No more excuses, like "Well, it runs in my family" or "That's just the way I am" or "My temper only lasts a little while." Admit it and confess it to the Lord.
- **CONTROL IT.** The Bible says in Psalms 37:8 – "Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil." The Bible commands us to "refrain" from anger. Simply put, when you become angry, STOP! As mere human mortals, even our so-called godly anger will not lead us to more godliness if we continue to be angry. The Bible warns us that it will lead us to evil. So, we need to refrain, to control and stop it altogether.
- **COUNTERACT ANGER WITH KINDNESS.** Notice what Ephesians 4:31-32 says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." Now why does the Lord put that instruction here? He knows that the quickest way to dispel anger and hard feelings is to respond with an

act of kindness.

**ILLUSTRATION:** An immigrant who arrived in the US and knew very little English visited a church one Sunday morning to worship with other believers. The church was packed and he was ushered to a seat in the front pew next to a tall man and his family.

The immigrant decided to do whatever the tall man did. When the tall man stood up, he would stand up. When the tall man sat down, he would sit down. When the tall man bowed his head, he would bow his head. While he did not understand much of what was happening, the immigrant was enjoying the spirit of the service.

Suddenly the church became quiet. After the pastor had spoken for some time, the tall man rose to his feet. The immigrant followed suit and stood up. The tall man immediately became upset and pushed the immigrant back down. The immigrant was hurt and did not understand this rude action.

After the service had concluded, the tall man tried to apologize to the immigrant for his sudden rudeness. He was finally able to explain in simple English that the pastor had dedicated his baby and had asked, "Will the father of this child please stand up?"

Why are we angry with each other? It is not because we don't want to stand and do things together. It is exactly because we want to do things together and stand as one that we can misunderstand and become angry with one another.

This is for sure—if we start building together to put things right in God's sight, we will soon be battling opposition that tries to discourage us. So, be prepared! Be prepared to battle the greatest weapon that discourages. I am not talking about swords and guns. I am talking about the tongue that speaks words of anger that displeases God. God's people can also be guilty of that if they don't control their words of anger even as they work to put things together.

There's a second thing to battle when you start to build.

## **II. Be prepared to battle against the saddest ending.**

A common enemy and a common cause brought four different groups together to stop the work on the walls of Jerusalem. The city was now completely surrounded by enemies!

- To the north were Sanballat and the Samaritans.

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- To the east, Tobiah and the Ammonites.
- To the south, Geshem and the Arabs.
- To the west, the Ashdodites.

As the enemy saw the work progressing, they became angry and decided to plan a secret attack against Jerusalem.

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 (vv. 7-8).

But then, there were already good news for the Jews.

So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart (v. 6).

Good for the Jews—they had the job half done and half of the work to go. Again, the Christian life is such that when you are on the up side, you become very vulnerable to the down slide.

It isn't easy to carry on your work when you are surrounded by danger and daily face the demands of a task that seems impossible. If the Jews became discouraged, they would defeat themselves. Sanballat and his allies would have won without even raising a finger to fight.

"We are not able!" is the cry of all who take their eyes off the Lord and start looking at themselves and their problems. Instead of rejoicing, "We are half done," they would lament, "How could it be all done!"

The wall had been completed to half its height, yet the Jews were beginning to agree with the enemy who said that they were feeble.

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" (v. 10).

Also the Jews who lived in the outlying villages kept reporting that the enemy was planning a surprise attack.

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."

Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, “Wherever you turn, they will attack us” (vv. 11-12).

This is the weakness of human enthusiasm. It often spurs you to run only the first half but not the second. It leaves you letting things half done because you are already empty with nothing to take on the second half. You start well but finish badly.

Pure human enthusiasm leads to tiredness of the whole being. When that happens, we lost perspective—we see all the ugly rubble rather than the beautiful wall already half raised. Worse still, we hear and repeat the negatives in our minds ten times over.

How do we finish well? Nehemiah’s response is very deliberate, enlightening, and helpful:

- First, he carefully looks over the situation.

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. After I looked things over ... (vv. 13-14a)

He carefully assesses the situation and evaluates what is needed. This approach is necessary if we are going to improve our own lives.

We must observe exactly where we are under attack; where our vulnerable points are. Is it a wrong habit? Is it an attitude of the mind? Is it a bitterness of spirit? When we have identified where we are attacked, we must guard that point. This is what Nehemiah does.

Don’t keep working, but watch as well lest you fall. We often tend to work with all our heart. Though this is good, we must also take time to watch our heart.

In looking over our situation, we learn to personally guard our heart. Yes, we work with all our heart, not driven by human might or power, but by the Holy Spirit.

- Second, Nehemiah encourages the people by leading them to remember God. When we face a situation that creates fear in our hearts, we must remind ourselves of the greatness of God. We view the problem in the light of God’s greatness rather than our ability.

Notice how Nehemiah encourages the people by pointing them to God.

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 brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes” (v. 14).

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!” (vv. 19-20)

Nehemiah spoke words of encouragement to the people. He reminded them that they were involved in a great work. After all, they were serving a great God and rebuilding the walls of a great city. He also reminded them that they were not working alone. God was with all of them and would come to their defense.

How do you remember the Lord? It is by remembering that He will always be there for you. We’re to remember that He is great and awesome. God is more than able to deal with our situation.

So, when you’re down, turn your attention from your discouragement to the One who is able to do something about it. God has been faithful to you in the past. He is faithful to you today. And He has promised to be faithful to you in the future. Remember the Lord. Remember His promises. Remember His goodness.

Remember His power. Our God is great and awesome! Remember Him.

“God is with us”—He who starts a good work in us will help us to completion. With Him, we can battle against the saddest ending—i.e. starting well but finishing badly; quit while things are already half done. The second half is often harder than the first. But with God on our side, we can finish well by completing what He has started in and through us.

## **Conclusion**

The Christian life of living and working together is never smooth. After all, the



evil one is in the business of discouraging us all the time. We may be opposed, but need not be hindered. We can overcome discouragement not by taming an army, but by taming words of anger, ridicule, frustration, intimidation, and doom. In short, we learn to control the words of our mouth.

Ask yourself:

- “Do my words edify; do they build the people in my life rather than put them down?”
- “Are these words what they need at this particular time?”
- “Will these words minister grace to them; will they benefit them in some way?”

Proverbs 15:1 tells us, “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”

ILLUSTRATION: Alan McGinnis (a Christian psychologist) relates a study of a second grade class in Wisconsin, USA. The children were getting harder to control, standing up and roaming around the room instead of doing their work. Two psychologists spent several days in the back of the room observing. They found that seven times in every twenty-minute period the teacher said, “Sit down!” But the roaming continued. They suggested that she increased her commands, and she did—to 27.5 times in twenty minutes, and the walking around increased fifty percent. Then they suggested instead that she eliminated the commands entirely and quietly complimented the children who were staying in their seats doing their work. The roaming around decreased thirty-three percent from what it was originally.

Psychologists tell us that, generally speaking, we need at least four positive statements to balance one word of criticism. Most of us are the same way. We enjoy cooperating with those who show us appreciation and we resist those who criticize us. It would make a significant improvement in the way we get along with the people we live with and work with if we looked for the positive things in their lives and expressed our appreciation.

The Jews in Nehemiah 4 experienced a low time of discouragement not caused by an arsenal of deadly weapons, but by a barrage of put-down words both from the enemy and within themselves. However, they were opposed but not hindered—they kept on building because through the words of Nehemiah, the Lord’s encouragement and strength came to them.

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Let me close with some quotations on encouragement:

- “Praise does wonders for our sense of hearing.”
- “One kind word can warm up three winter months.”
- “Our duty is not to use words to see through one another, but to use words to see one another through.”
- “Correction does much, but encouragement does more.”
- “People have a way of becoming what you encourage them to be, not what you nag them to be.”
- “A word of encouragement during a failure is worth more than a whole book of praise after a success.”
- “The deepest principle in the human heart is the craving to be appreciated.”

Are you encouraged by these words? If so, therein is the reason why we need to heed the Word of God seriously and begin to weigh our words. Weed out those that damage people and cause relationships to decay. Replace them with words that build up, meet needs, and minister gracious benefit in people's lives. We will be the beneficiaries in the end as we experience the joy of building up broken walls and relationships.