

Session 3

August 5, 2018

PERSIST

Nehemiah 4:1-3, 6-9, 14-18

Anyone in a leadership position has encountered opposition. It seems no new idea can be voiced without being met by the “wet towel” brigade; those eager to downplay, criticize, ridicule, and squelch any idea or activity that might rock the boat called “status quo.” Nehemiah’s opposition came from those who hated the Jews and saw the ruins of Jerusalem as a symbol of Jewish demise and of their own superiority. The rebuilding of the temple was bad enough...but the rebuilding of the city was far too great a threat.

Opposition begins with ridicule (vv. 1-3). We are taught as children to ignore ridicule. The old “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” adage is only partially true. Words *do* hurt us, by stirring up anger and introducing doubt. Sanballat was an official of Samaria, a powerful man among the people who settled in the Jewish province during the seventy years of exile. He was in a tenuous position, however; the rebuilding of the city and resettlement of the Jews meant that his influence would be challenged. But the letters sent by his king gave legitimate permissions and privileges to Nehemiah, the king’s personal cup bearer. Like children on the school playground under the distant but watchful eye of the teacher, the attack began as verbal taunts. The Jews are called pathetic and weak; unable to complete the task; dreamers who were incapable of making the dream come true. Like any schoolyard drama, Sanballat the bully was joined by his buddy Tobiah who poked fun at the work itself. While it all sounds harmless enough, this was only the beginning, and verse 5 admits that the words had their desired effect: the Jewish workers were “provoked.”

Opposition grows into threats (vv. 6-9). Fortunately, the people’s commitment to the task was stronger than the effects of the provocation, “for the people had the will to keep working.” Now that the walls were coming up and the accusations of shoddy work had been proven false, the threat of their success was a reality that the opposition could not face. So now the situation escalates from verbal taunting to the threat of real violence. As in all disputes, disparate factions who rarely get along will join forces against a common foe (see the NT example of Pilate and Herod becoming friends in Luke 23:13). In this case, the Samaritans, represented by Sanballat, and the Ammonites (which included Tobiah), linked up with the Arabs in general and the Ashdodites in particular and “plotted together.” The goal was to attack the workers at various times and places along the wall to throw the work “into confusion.” The Hebrew is “into wandering,” and implies the workers would be too dazed and distracted by the attacks to get any work done.

Opposition leads to doubt and fear (vv. 10-14). Verses 10-13 tell about the growing threat of violence and the people’s response. As the opposition grew, the workers, their families, and the community at large were fearful of being attacked on the one hand and wearied by the work on the other hand. Once the Jews began to doubt their ability to succeed, Nehemiah knew they could easily give up that “will to keep working,” and the opposition would win.

Opposition is countered by prayer and persistence (vv. 15-23). It is in the area of persistence that Nehemiah truly shined. Like Paul in the New Testament, Nehemiah was no doubt “troubled in every way: conflicts on the outside, fears inside” (2 Cor. 7:5). Yet Nehemiah and his faithful countrymen were committed in equal parts to their God in prayer (vv. 4, 9), and to completing their task on the other (vv. 6, 14-21). Since they were following God’s leadership and ultimately working for Him, how could they possibly give up?