

All right. Let's open our Bibles this morning to the book of Nehemiah 2:10.

A couple of weeks ago, we came to this book and met a man who was born in captivity in Babylon, whose heart God began to stir by His Spirit. It was 446 B.C. Nehemiah had never seen Jerusalem, but God began to do a work in his heart that he began to be concerned for that city - the place where God had put His name, the place that the Jews had called home, that really represented their relationship with God. Jerusalem was 700 miles away. It had not been protected with a wall or any kind of security since 586 B.C, 140 years earlier, when it had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar.

And so we looked, in chapter 1, as to how we could determine God's calling upon our lives, and we gave you a few things to think about. I hope you'll go back and listen to it if you didn't or weren't here. For four months Nehemiah prayed, without any answers, though he wanted to be the one that God would use. And in chapter 2, the first ten verses, we saw how, after four months, the LORD opened a door, and Nehemiah was able to communicate to the king that he worked for what he wanted. And we found out that waiting is often a time of planning, and you just don't pray and then do nothing. And Nehemiah had planned, and he had good answers for the king, and the king would allow him to travel that distance to do that work, to get the materials and the visas and the time off and to support him in this work. And then last week, in verses 11 through 20, we saw that, as Nehemiah arrived after seven months now of prayer and travel, God gave him a vision. In fact, our outline last week was pretty easy - get a vision and then share that vision with others and expect some opposition.

Paul wrote to Timothy in chapter 2:3 of the last letter that Paul ever wrote, and he said to him, "Timothy, if you're going to live a godly life, if you desire to do that, you're going to also have to suffer some persecution." And one of the themes that you find, at least early on in this book (and we thought we'd kind of stop in our journey through verse-by-verse; we'll pick up in chapter 3 next time) is this constant badgering by the enemy when it came to accomplishing or seeking to accomplish God's work. And there are always three enemies against you and me as we set out to serve the LORD. There is the world, the world system, everything

that it entails, everything that opposes, if you will, and the culture. And it doesn't matter what time or what generation you live in, there is that worldly system. There's always the flesh that wants to stand in the way of God's work through your life. And there's always the devil. And if it isn't he personally, it's one of his little henchmen that he's sent in your direction. But they always tend to work in concert together to stop the progress of a person that would serve the LORD.

So we wanted to look, for a couple of minutes this morning, at this title, "Expecting Opposition." If you're going to serve the LORD, you can expect to have some kind of difficulty as you step out. And you find it with increasing ferocity in Nehemiah's time, but there're some principles, I think, that we can learn from this book because it's inevitable that you're going to be resisted. And then what do you do? How do you get the LORD's work done in the midst of the resistance? For Nehemiah, it was first and primarily the issue of security. "Put the wall up." Now he would be there to build the streets and all, and some of the roads and the homes, but his concern was the safety of God's people and the name of God's city that had been, for so long, associated with Him. And it is the enemy that wants to hinder that progress. It's kind of the same thing for you and me. We are called to go out and reach the lost. I mean, ultimately God's interest is that lives of people that have been destroyed by sin would be erected again, that there would be a real rebuilding going on, that the walls would go back up in their lives, if you will. And so that's where the opposition comes.

And, at least in Nehemiah's book, there are four different examples of opposition that I want to point out to you this morning. It starts by nature. There is an opposition against you as a believer by the very nature of the work, spiritual work. There is opposition that we find (in here) by mockery - words and sticks-and-stones, if you will. And I don't care what you say, they hurt. There is opposition by threats and intimidation. There is, ultimately, opposition by discouragement and fear. And all of those are put out here, and God gives us solutions for all of them as well. So, I'm just going to bounce you around a couple of verses this morning and take a look at them.

Beginning here in chapter 2:10, where we've already been, remember that it said, "When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard of it," (that Nehemiah was coming) "they were deeply disturbed that a man had come to seek the well-being of the children of Israel." Now, opposition by nature. Nehemiah is headed for Jerusalem. He has the full support of King Artaxerxes (the king). The

news of his planning, at least what he was going to do, had preceded him, and two men in particular (I grant you, a small number) did not welcome the news, but they were "deeply disturbed." And I want you to notice those words. It means that they were agitated, or they were very saddened by what they heard. Imagine that someone would be so upset hearing that someone was going to go to another city and help people get on their feet. "Oh, no. Not that." I mean, it is the craziest response. But you see, the single most important work that you and I can do is to bring the news of God's grace to people that are sitting in darkness. But if you do that, or if you seek to do that, you are going to run into the natural man who is not going to take too kindly to your sharing. The person who sits in darkness, who is lost in sin, who naturally is resistant to the Word of God - that's the battle that you face. And before anything gets done, just because you want to say something, there is already an antagonism against you. And it was against Nehemiah as well. It's a spiritual battle. When Paul stood before Agrippa (Acts 26) to explain his calling, he said to him, "King Agrippa, God sent me to the Jewish people as well as to the Gentiles to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light, to turn them from the power of Satan to the power of God, that they might receive forgiveness for their sins, an inheritance among all those sanctified by faith in Me." Paul saw, "This is the battle that I'm fighting."

Well, here, two men had only heard about Nehemiah, and they were already up in arms. And you read it, and you say, "Why is there such a prejudiced attitude, early on, like that? What had he done?" And the answer is very clear. He hadn't done anything. But it's a spiritual battle. You're stepping into a battle for the souls of men. Paul said to the Corinthians (in 2 Corinthians 4:3), "But if our gospel is being hidden, it is veiled from those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this world has blinded, who don't believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine upon them." That's the battle. So even when you set out, before you've done a thing, there's already an enemy and a natural man that is constantly going to be disturbed at your plans. It's a warfare. Jesus said, in John 15, about, "Love one another. If the world hates you, it hated Me before it hated you. If it persecuted Me, it's going to persecute you. If they keep My word, they're going to keep yours. I'm just telling you this ahead of time." It's a battle. And Nehemiah, without really even being aware of the animosity, was heading out to serve the LORD. But already a battle was brewing. "We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, we wrestle against principalities and powers and the rulers of the darkness of this age, and spiritual wickedness in heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12). This is what takes place the minute you step out to begin to serve. Whenever you

want to put the LORD first, lay your hand to a task, expect some opposition. And these guys are not going away. You may say to yourself, "What have I done?" And the answer is - you've done nothing wrong, but you're busy trying to serve the LORD. And when you enter into the fray of the souls of men, here's the problem - the cause is sin, the fallen nature of man is at the root of the opposition. It isn't you. It's the work of God in you and through you that is bringing this pushback and eventual persecution. It happens throughout the Bible. It'll happen in your life as well. Expect it. Expect some opposition.

At the end of chapter 2 (just jump ahead maybe ten verses or so), we read in verse 19, "But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and" (now, this third guy) "Geshem the Arab heard of it, they laughed at us and despised us, and said, 'What is this thing that you are doing? Will you rebel against the king?' " In chapter 4, just kind of move ahead to chapter 4:1 where we read, "But it so happened, when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, that he was furious and very indignant, and mocked the Jews. And he spoke before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, 'What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they complete it in a day? Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish - stones that are burned?' Now Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, 'Whatever they build, if even a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall.' "

If we understand that our first opposition is because of the nature of the work, often that opposition will take the form of mockery. Notice that, by the time you get to the end of chapter 2, Nehemiah has gotten a vision from the LORD as to how to proceed. He has gathered the community together and shared with them what God has done to bring them to this point. The response from them (as we saw last week) was excitement, "Let's go do this work!" and they began with great enthusiasm, earnestly to begin the work. And it is then that we enter into verse 19, and we're introduced to, now, three guys. I know it's a little growth but not much yet. But notice that they are now "deeply disturbed" (verse 19), and they came to laugh and to despise the work. They intimated that Nehemiah was building in direct rebellion against the king, which he was not. They ascribed some false motive to his work, in the sense of, "You're going to build your own kingdom here and try to stand against what the king would want." They lied. There was slander. And, to Nehemiah's credit, he doesn't entertain their complaints; he doesn't really much answer their accusations; he doesn't produce any letters of authority where he might have shut them up. He doesn't give them the time of day. He just said,

"Hey, we're serving the LORD. That's what we're doing. You're really not a part of this. We don't really answer to you. We're going to trust the LORD."

By the time you get to chapter 4 of Nehemiah, the opposition has grown tremendously. But so has the work. And here's the deal - the minute you begin to make some progress, the enemy just kind of kicks it in high gear. This time it isn't two guys or three guys. Now Sanballat has gotten his whole family out there, everyone he knows, and he's talked the whole army of Samaria into joining him as well. Now they've got boldness and power and opposition. There're reinforcements. There are a growing group of voices that are louder, and the attacks are stepping up in rhetoric, and the emotion is still hateful and furious. But they haven't stopped the work. But they haven't gone away, either. They continue to attack and to oppose. Notice, in verse 1 of chapter 4, the words "furious" and "indignant." They came to mock the Jews. This was a war of words. They mocked what they had only heard about. In fact, it would seem like they hadn't showed their face very much - which is often the case when it comes to criticism. Critics usually live in the shadows. They like to hide behind things. They really don't like to make themselves known. They would rather be behind the scenes mumbling amongst themselves, an undercurrent of slander and bitterness. It's the way the enemy works. But notice the accusations in verse 2, and they're very personal. "What are these feeble Jews doing? Weak Jews. What in the world are these weak guys doing? Are they really trying to strengthen themselves or fortify themselves? Are they?" Ridicule, mocking. It's the way it works. Name-calling, belittling. It's just a diatribe of sticks-and-stones, which isn't a truism at all. Nobody likes to be criticized. "Are they going to fortify themselves? Do you think the wall is going to keep you safe?" Then notice, in verse 2, "What are they going to do next? Start sacrificing? Are they going to turn to religion now? Is that going to help them? Their God is going to bail them out after 140 years of just being overrun? With this much activity, are they going to try to get done in a day? Are they going to bring life to this rubble and burned heaps?" And then, if that wasn't enough (they not only mock their efforts), Tobiah says, "Yeah, and what they're doing is terrible! The wall isn't strong enough to handle a little fox."

Look, Satan often uses criticism to discourage you from serving the LORD. He will portray you to you as weak, unproductive, having no influence, not able to have any impact. "Let me just try to put him back to the sidelines where he belongs." He'll laugh at your hope in God. He'll make fun of your diligence as much as your giving in to the things that God has given you. He'll mock your determination to please the

LORD. Christians are often portrayed in the media as unstable, and we're behind the times, and we're bigots, and we're against women's rights, and we're prejudiced against homosexuals, and we're holier than thou about premarital sex or drinking. And the list goes on. You're fodder for the world. But why is that? It is because the enemy doesn't want you to accomplish the will of God in reaching out to the lost. Satan will mock your ideas, he will question your motives, he will point out your weaknesses and inability. He will laugh at your zeal and tell you that it is misdirected, that you're out of touch with reality. That's just what he does. And if he can get you to stop sharing, he'll do it. Tobiah, pointing to the fence, shakes his head, a smirk on his face. So the enemy seeks to lessen the value of our labors through ridicule. You want to be a teacher of God's Word, and yet only three people are showing up to your Bible study, and the enemy says to you, "You're worthless. Lookit. Nobody comes. Nobody cares about you!" You want to witness, but no one ever gets saved. You pray, and God doesn't seem to answer. You don't feel like you're making a difference. No one seems to care but you. And so it goes. And the unfortunate truth is - that usually works because we don't like, in our flesh, to be criticized, and we don't like to feel like we're not successful. And so it plays to our fleshly needs. We don't want to cause a stir, we don't want to stick out, we don't want to be tagged as some fanatic. And the enemy knows that about us. And if he can get you to slow down serving, he'll do it because it's an important work that you're involved in. You're a Christian. You're working in spiritual things, in eternal things. You may very well have been ridiculed for taking a stand for Jesus. I wonder how many people aren't saved today because Christians won't speak up. They're so worried about what people will think - lest the opposition would come. So, it is opposition by nature because of the work that you are involved in. It is often the first step, through mockery, to question and threaten and wonder about your allegiance. He'll come after you personally.

Verse 7 of chapter 4, we read these words, "Now it happened, when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites heard that the walls of Jerusalem were being restored and the gaps were beginning to be closed, that they became very angry, and all of them conspired together to come and attack Jerusalem and create confusion."

If mockery doesn't work, maybe threats and intimidation will. Now this happened, verse 6 (you might just look back one verse) where we read, "So we built the wall, and the entire wall was joined together up to half its height, for the people had a mind to work." This attack comes when the work's halfway done. Interesting. The

work is halfway done. Now they are angry. The cutting remarks have done little to stop the forward progress and so the enemy now, with many people gathered together to plot their next move. And this is more serious, "We're going to threaten them, we're going to intimidate them, we're going to see to get them off their game." And notice, in verse 7, that the haters have increased. They've brought a full bandwagon now. In fact, at this pace, the critics will certainly soon outnumber the laborers. But here's God's work going forward, and it is going forward well.

There is much benefit, I think, to staying small and obscure in many things, as far as ministry. The more in the limelight you get, the more cost there is to pay. If no one knows about you, you seem to be quiet.....we're on the radio in 500 markets across the country. We get some weird letters. I mean ..... weird telephone calls. And we're not political. You've never heard me talking about politics or money. I don't do it. I don't figure it has any solution for you. Jesus is the solution, and that's why we preach Him. But it's amazing. The more you expose yourself, the more you're subject to the weirdness of the enemy.

And notice, now the wall is being built, and now it's sticking out like a sore thumb. He can't hide this work anymore. It's a big work, and the danger now becomes more personal. Now it could cost the life of the worker. The threat of the attacks was imminent and foreboding. If nothing else, it should convince you that Satan does not like fair fights. The cost of serving the LORD - if he can make it so costly that you turn away, I think that he'll try to do that.

Now I suspect that most of us will never be asked by the LORD to risk our lives for the cause of Christ. We have some missionaries that are certainly doing that around the world. But unless you're called to that, I think that isn't a place most of us will find ourselves. I guess you could practice how well you would do by seeing how you handle some old-fashioned criticism or cynicism from others, kind of like low-level intimidation.

But this isn't there anymore. Here come threats that are costly. And sometimes when you serve the LORD, and you put Him first, it costs you something. If your work knows that you're a Christian, it could cost you your career hopes. If you're walking with the LORD, it could cost you the next sale or the friendship that you have or a romance that you're hoping for or an advancement or a promotion. There's a lot of cost involved if you keep Jesus first.

Well there's a cost involved here as well. And notice that the enemy will do whatever it takes to stifle the work, to halt the process, to turn you around. He'll go after your health and after your family and after your reputation and after your commitment. He'll rattle every nerve along the way. Whatever it takes! And it does seem like halfway finished is kind of a problem. We'll spend an hour, I think, talking about halfway finished when we get here. But halfway finished is tough because that means you've still got half as much to do as you've done or 100% to do; we're only halfway there. There's a halfway-finished mentality that is not very good. But look what it does to the enemy. "They're halfway done!" And it frightens them. It comes by nature, it comes by mockery, it comes by threat and intimidation.

Finally, it comes by discouragement or fear. "Then Judah said," verse 10, " 'The strength of the laborers is failing, and there is so much rubbish that we are not able to build the wall.' And our adversaries said, 'They will neither know nor see anything, till we come into their midst and kill them and cause the work to cease.' So it was, when the Jews who dwelt near them came, that they told us ten times, 'From whatever place you turn, they will be upon us.' " The length of the work, the relentless onslaught of the enemy, and time have started to wear out these laborers that were so excited in chapter 2. And discouragement gets planted in their hearts as they begin, notice, not only to hear the threats of the enemy but to repeat them to one another. The Jews who lived near them said ten times to us, "Yeah, they told us. They're going to sneak up on us. They're going to catch us unaware. We're going to be cooked!" And rather than speaking the promises of God, they now begin to voice or repeat the words of the enemy. "We don't have enough strength. There's too much rubble. The work is still too long. And then the enemy has threatened to kill us anyplace we might find ourselves." And so, bad news always travels faster than good news. I guess the first question I would ask, reading verse 12, was, "What are you doing living with people like that? Why are you such friends with people that would pass along those kinds of messages when they aren't from the LORD at all?"

So you add to mockery and threats and intimidation, discouragement and fear. They're great, powerful tools of the enemy especially when the work of God is halfway finished. You will always find those who will have little faith and can give you ten reasons to not do what God has told them to do, the naysayers. "I told them it would never work. It's too expensive. It's too ambitious. It's too unrealistic. I don't have the time. We don't have the energy. We haven't got the

capability. We haven't got the knowhow." And the tenth excuse is always the same, "We tried it. It just doesn't work." And people begin to get discouraged. One theme that you find throughout this book is the whole idea of building under pressure while the enemy lurks about and then sticking with it no matter what. But here, fear. "We're gonna kill you. You go tell everybody we're comin' to kill them" was being passed along.

Before we stop this morning, I want to go back over these four and look at them one more time to see what the LORD's solution was for these four particular attacks.

What should we do (back to chapter 2:10) when we are opposed, knowing there is opposition by nature? And I should say to you, if you're reading through the book of Nehemiah, that verse 10 is a verse of pure information for you. Nehemiah's not aware of this. He's just happy to be going and having all that he had been given by the king. He is unaware that these men even existed, let alone the types of problems they would cause him down the road. God shows us the nature of man before anything was done to say to us we're in a spiritual warfare. It is good for us to just know that. So know that! Expect some opposition. If you're going to get busy serving the LORD, expect some opposition. Hey, you make a commitment to go to church during the week, and watch the kinds of things that'll come into your life. And the phones that will ring, and the work that wants you to stay overtime, and the traffic that you've never seen before, and the car problems, and the flat tire. "I tried to go," and here comes the enemy with all sorts of manner of keeping you from it. So, by nature the opposition - the only thing we can learn from verse 10 is that it exists; even if we're not aware of it like Nehemiah, that we should expect to be opposed when we get out to serve the LORD.

At the end of chapter 2 and at the beginning of chapter 4, there are those two examples of mockery, where the words seek to discourage and dissuade. Nehemiah's response to mockery first was simply to separate himself from the people that were mocking him. He proclaimed his confidence in the LORD, and he turned away from them and said, "This work doesn't belong to you. We're serving God, and He's going to prosper us. And so we're not going to answer to you, we're not going to deal with you, we're not going to respond to you." Good advice. In chapter 4, when those threats were made (in verses 1, 2 and 3), when those comments were made, the mockery was made over their work, verse 4, Nehemiah prays, "O our God, for we are despised; turn their reproach on their own heads,

and give them as plunder to a land of captivity! Do not cover their iniquity, and do not let their sin be blotted out from before You; for they have provoked You to anger before the builders." I like this prayer. It isn't a prayer of safety or deliverance. It's a prayer of, "LORD, why don't You just deal with them? And don't let them slip away. Don't let them get out from under this." Pretty harsh prayer, for sure. But they're mocking God, and they're mocking God's people. Now you might say, "Well, what about turning the other cheek? What about, 'Father, forgive them, they don't know what they're doing?'" All right. What about Jesus twice cleaning out the Temple with a whip? I can find verses. Or Jesus' words to the Pharisees, there in Matthew 23, "Woe to you scribes, you hypocrites!" Look, Nehemiah's not seeking vengeance. He's not trying to get even on his own. He's asking God to deal with those who oppose His work. That's all right. "Move them out of the way. Deal with them, LORD. Don't let them get away with this." He hands it over to the LORD, and it does seem he's angry about it. "But here, God, You deal with this. We're not supposed to. You handle this." And the response to mockery was to pray, "God, You deal with them. They're opposing You and Your work. They're making fun of Your people." So that's not personal; that's very much biblical. "God, we're Yours. We're doing Your work, and they're mocking You and Your work in us."

Down in verses 7 and 8 of chapter 4, when the threats and the intimidation are given, verse 9 says, "Nevertheless we made our prayer to our God, and because of them we set a watch against them day and night." So they prayed again to the LORD for this situation. But this was different. This was threats of potential attacks. So, here're some smart moves. Prayer is not designed to take the place of being practical or responsible. So pray and then make sure you put some guards outside. You know, you can turn to the LORD and pray, but you should take precautions, and then if you are still in that position of difficulty, then be willing to, I guess, risk your life. But you don't start there. If you don't lock your door at night and then wonder how come the LORD let the guy in, maybe you should have just locked the door. "I don't know. They broke in." "How'd they do that?" "The door was open." "Yeah. Brilliant on your part." So, prayer is vital, but it isn't a substitute for responsible behavior. Don't lose sight of the work, count the cost, pay the cost, keep at the work, be faithful. So, "We prayed, we set a watch. We turned to the LORD, we set a watch. We watched out, and we looked up."

Verses 10, 11 and 12, when the body itself - the workers themselves - began to repeat what had been said to them by the enemy ten times over (verse 12), verse

13 we read this, "I positioned men behind the lower parts of the wall, at the openings; and I set the people according to their families, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. And I looked, and arose and said to the nobles, to the leaders, and to the rest of the people, 'Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses.' " And verse 15 says it worked. In response to the fear and the discouragement amongst the people, Nehemiah rearranged the workload. He put people to work near their houses, not far away in the city around somewhere else. He told them to fight for their families. He gave them the reason for them to risk their necks - they have children, they have wives, and they have homes. "Put yourself there. Go fight in that place that matters the most to you, that is the most encouraging to you. Don't get your eyes off the LORD." And notice he met with all of them and said, "Look, don't forget the LORD." "Greater is He who is in you ....." (1 John 4:4). Yeah, there's a battle, but God is greater. And he turned their eyes back to Him. And when the crisis was averted (verses 15-18), everyone went back to work with great encouragement. But, by then, everybody was also protected. He had half the people working on the wall, half the people marching with weapons. Now they were only moving half as fast, but they were safe. He took some great, practical measures of faith and planning, but he kept the work going.

We have a commission from the LORD to go out and to build the walls of faith and hope in the lives of people whose lives the enemy has ruined, destroyed. In the process, you're going to be opposed. Just by the very nature of the work. They're going to turn on you and mock you and ridicule you. They may very well seek to intimidate you, discourage you. But, look, God is at work. And if we rely upon Him, great things can take place through our lives. But you should be aware of the fact you have an enemy, and he's not going to lay down because you do. However, you stand up, you walk with God, he can't win no matter what he does. He'll be barkin' without any teeth, because "Greater is He who is in us" (1 John 4:4). And we read it in chapter 2:12 of Psalms this morning. You can raise against the LORD, but you better kiss Him before you die, or He'll have the last word.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson  
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