

## **The Path to Restoration Hindrances and Setbacks Nehemiah 4**

### **Introduction**

*"A kite flies against the wind, not with it."* – Winston Churchill

In Chapter 4, Nehemiah describes how opposition tried to halt the work of restoring the walls of Jerusalem. It also reminds us that there will be hindrances and setbacks whenever you devote yourself to a project's success. Chapter 4 reminds us that you can count on facing strong opposition whenever you try to accomplish anything significant for the Lord.

Satan never bothers with half-hearted people content with mediocrity. They actually help him with his plan. "Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds." - Albert Einstein

The name "Satan" means "adversary." Satan is committed to opposing God and God's people. When you live according to the world's values and goals, Satan won't trouble you. You can go to church and even pray and read your Bible once in a while. But the minute you devote radical obedience to Jesus Christ, you will encounter spiritual opposition!

If we only had chapter 3, we would get the impression that the wall's work went forward without a snag. But Chapters 4-6 reveal the problems workers had to overcome in the process of rebuilding the wall. There was a cycle of progress, opposition, and setbacks throughout the project.

It reminds us that even in our Christian life, we will face conflict. There will always be opposition. And even though God was with them, He did not remove the resistance. God's will is for you to grow strong in faith and experience success, and facing opposition is a part of that process. Struggles and opposition challenge us to be determined and dependent upon the Lord. If we persevere, we will be successful.

To mount a successful defense, you must be aware of the tactics your enemy uses. Nehemiah gives us a firsthand look at opposition and how we should respond to it. The first thing we notice is that every plan that glorifies God will face opposition.

### **I. Every Plan That Glorifies God Will Face Opposition**

You don't need to develop a martyr's complex, but you do need to know that if you know Jesus Christ and attempt to accomplish anything for Him, the enemy will oppose you. Chapter 4 reveals six types of opposition:

#### **(1) THE ANGER OF OTHERS AGAINST YOU.**

The first is the anger your plan stirs up in others because they like things just the way they are and don't want anything to change. They ridicule your ideas and attempt to discourage anyone from supporting them. Sanballat and Tobiah were like that. We met them in Chapter 2. Now in Chapter 4, Sanballat and Tobiah openly ridicule the work of God.

Let's look at verse 1, "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." (Neh 4: 1-3 NKJV)

In Chapter 2, Sanballat and Tobiah were "deeply disturbed" when they learned what Nehemiah wanted to do. By Chapter 4, they are "furious and indignant" and resort to scorn and intimidation to prevent the work from even getting started.

When anger and criticism don't work, Satan tries another tool:

## **(2) MOCKERY AND SARCASM.**

Sanballat organizes a protest rally near the wall shouting a bunch of sarcastic comments. "What are you feeble Jews doing? Are you going to restore the wall yourselves? Do you think you're going to offer sacrifices?" Then Tobiah throws in his sarcastic barb, "if a fox jumped on this poor excuse for a wall, he would break it down." Satan loves to ridicule people who take a stand for the Lord.

As builders, the Jews were feeble. They didn't have the most skilled workers, and they didn't have the best construction materials. Satan's attacks always have some truth in them, but they always leave out the great fact that God's plan promises victory to those who follow Him.

One measure of a leader is to face the impact of criticism and not be overcome by it. Nehemiah and the workers had legal permission to build the walls, so Sanballat and Tobiah had no real authority to stop the work. All they could do was to try to discourage the Jews into stopping.

When that didn't work, they tried to intimidate and threaten them.

## **(3) THREATS AND INTIMIDATION.**

When displays of anger and ridicule don't work, the enemy gets more aggressive. But the enemy had to be careful since Nehemiah was working under King Artaxerxes' permission. They couldn't just rally their troops and march on Jerusalem without being charged with rebellion against the King. But they could

and did use threats of violence (4:8, 11), which they circulated among the Jews living near them (4:12).

This threat of domestic terrorism put the Jews under immense psychological pressure. How many of you know Satan still uses threats and intimidation to oppose Christians. And if that doesn't work, he hopes the discouragement and exhaustion wear them down.

#### **(4) DISCOURAGEMENT AND EXHAUSTION.**

There was a discouraging song that began circulating among the workers in verse 10, "The strength of the burden bearers is failing, yet there is much rubbish, and we are unable to rebuild the wall."

Satan knows that the halfway point in any work project is the most effective time to strike. When a new project begins, there is plenty of enthusiasm. "Let's arise and build! Let's do it!" But when you get to the midway point, discouragement and exhaustion can set in. You lose that initial zeal, and now, all you can see are the piles of rubble, and it makes you feel like quitting. It isn't until you see the completion drawing near that you experience another surge of enthusiasm.

The same thing is true in your walk with God. At first, your times in the Word and in prayer are rich with new discoveries. You just can't get enough of it. But somewhere down the line, the newness wears off. You begin to notice the piles of rubble in your own life and around you, and the problems and sins don't seem to go away. You begin to grow weary, wondering if all your effort is making any difference. It's easy to let your weariness lead you to discouragement. But Satan isn't finished yet. He doesn't give up just because you're discouraged!

Now he begins to paint a very gloomy picture of the project. So he begins to point out all the negatives.

#### **(5) NEGATIVITY**

There is criticism and mockery in verse 2, but in verse 12, the negativity comes with a vengeance. This negativity came from Jews who lived near the enemy, from people not involved in rebuilding the wall. They didn't know firsthand what God was doing in Jerusalem. So they came repeatedly ("ten times" is a Hebrew expression meaning "over and over") to warn Nehemiah and those working on the wall, "They will come up against us from every place where you may turn." Sadly, negativity often comes from believers who live near the enemy and are not involved in the Lord's work. Negativity is a great enemy of faith.

Nehemiah didn't ignore the genuine danger that existed, but he would never have finished the wall if he had listened to these prophets of doom. So, they just kept on building the wall. When negativity didn't stop the work, Satan tried to instill fear in the workers' hearts.

## **(6) FEAR.**

Fear is the cumulative effect of all of these factors. The people saw the enemy's anger and heard their mockery and threats. They were wearing down through exhaustion and repeatedly hearing gloom and doom from their fellow Jews who lived near the enemy. Nehemiah saw their fear and urged them to remain strong.

Satan loves to use fear to paralyze us and keep us from finishing the task. Satan is a master at producing fear, and he uses all of these tactics to undermine your faith and keep you from accomplishing the dream God puts in your heart.

But God is greater than any opposition Satan can throw at you! Through God's strength and help, you will overcome the opposition and complete the goal for the glory of God. So how should we respond to Satan's opposition? Let's take a look at Nehemiah's advice.

Nehemiah responds to the enemy's opposition with prayer, diligent work, vigilance, and a complete focus upon the Lord.

## **II. Every Opposition To God's Plan Can Be Overcome.**

Whenever you encounter opposition, you have several options. You can run from it; you can try to dodge it or go around it; you can try to work out a compromise, or you can meet it head-on and work through it. Nehemiah's approach: They lifted their voices in prayer; they put their hearts into the work; they kept their eyes on the enemy in vigilance, and they kept their minds focused on the Lord in faith.

### **(1) THEY LIFTED THEIR VOICES IN PRAYER.**

Nehemiah prays, "Hear, 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." (Neh 4:4-5 NKJV)

Nehemiah's response is perfect. He didn't debate; he didn't form a committee; he didn't even directly deal with the two enemies. Instead, he goes to God in prayer. Prayer was his greatest resource, not his last resort. When opposition comes, God wants us to rely on Him. In his prayer, Nehemiah asks for God's attention and mercy. He wanted the people to sense God's presence and care for them. He asks God to battle their enemies for them and expresses his dependence upon God to fight the battle. He knew God gave him a job to do, and he would not be distracted from it.

Nehemiah believed this was God's cause, not his. Since these enemies were hindering God's work, it was a prayer that God would judge righteously those who oppose His kingdom and glory. Nehemiah prays to establish God's kingdom above all others.

He also tells the people to put their hearts into the work.

## **(2) THEY PUT THEIR HEARTS INTO THE WORK.**

The work continued with greater and greater strength. Verse 6 says, "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." (Neh 4:6 NKJV)

Satan wanted to destroy them with his attacks – so they wouldn't believe and work together! Satan's goal is to make you feel defeated and discouraged, so you'll give up on the project.

Nehemiah asked God to take care of his enemies, and God answered by taking care of His people. And the entire wall was joined together up to half its height. In other words, the work was half-finished. It was an exciting but dangerous time. A lot had been done, but there was a lot left to do!

Fatigue and discouragement had begun to set in. But Nehemiah wouldn't allow the enemy's threat to distract them or change their focus. They just kept building the wall, and soon the enemy was outside looking up, instead of looking straight across at them over the wall.

When threats didn't work, Sanballat and Tobiah planned an all-out attack on those working on the wall. So the workers kept their eyes on the enemy and maintained their vigilance.

## **(3) THEY KEPT THEIR EYES ON THE ENEMY IN VIGILANCE.**

Verse 7 says, "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. Nevertheless we made our prayer to our God, and because of them we set a watch against them day and night." (Neh 4:7-9 NKJV)

The wall was only half as high as it should be, but it was almost continuous now, making their enemies even more furious. As the work progressed, the enemies became more serious. Now they didn't merely complain or mock; they threatened and planned violence. Satan loves to create confusion because confused people will never move forward and fulfill God's work.

But these workers were determined. Nothing could make them stop. The people delighted God and drew closer to Him with a deeper trust than ever before and stayed on the job until the wall was finished! Prayer doesn't replace action; it makes action effective! Nehemiah prayed first, but then he set up a guard. "Trust God and keep your powder dry!"

The enemy didn't go away; instead, the enemy upped the threats to attack! Prayer isn't a magic cure-all. Prayer doesn't mean that you can ignore the enemy's threats or pretend that they don't exist. Nehemiah was vigilant and armed the workers and posted guards around the clock.

He also put a warning system into place. When they blew the trumpet, the workers would quickly rally to defend their families and the city.

#### **(4) THEY KEPT THEIR MINDS FOCUSED ON THE LORD.**

Verse 13, "Therefore 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." (Neh 4:13-14 NKJV)

Some were discouraged because they focused on the enemy's threats, the piles of rubble, and all the work left to do. Nehemiah directs their focus back to the Lord. When opposition hits, it's easy to lose your focus and lose sight of the goal. Nehemiah put his trust in God and kept moving forward. He didn't:

- Give up and go home.
- Panic or go into hiding.
- Cease working.
- Try to Negotiate or make a pact with the enemy.
- Send messages to the King, asking for more help.

He calmly trusted God, maintain his focus, and continue to work on the wall. In verse 15, we see their enemy's response. "And it happened, when our enemies heard that it was known to us and *that* God had brought their plot to nothing, that all of us returned to the wall, everyone to his work." (Neh 4:15 NKJV)

Once they saw the people meant business and were willing to stand their ground, they backed off. When you're under spiritual attack, it's easy to think that just enduring the storm is the victory. It isn't. The attack often comes to prevent you from making progress and completing your work for the Lord. The victory is in not only enduring the attack but in continuing the progress and work, you're doing for the LORD.

In verse 16, we see Nehemiah's solution to their threats."And it happened, when our enemies heard that it was known to us, and *that* God had brought their plot to nothing, that all of us returned to the wall, everyone to his work. So it was, from that time on, *that* half of my servants worked at construction, while the other half held the spears, the shields, the bows, and *wore* armor; and the leaders *were* behind all the house of Judah. Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon. Every one of the builders had his sword girded at his

side as he built. And the one who sounded the trumpet *was* beside me." (Neh 4:15-18 NKJV)

Some defended the workers who did the work of building. All the workers had a sword at their side and a trowel in their hands to get the work done. Verse 19, "Then I said to the nobles, the rulers, and the rest of the people, "The work *is* great and extensive, and we are separated far from one another on the wall. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us." So we labored in the work, and half of *the men* held the spears from daybreak until the stars appeared. At the same time I also said to the people, "Let each man and his servant stay at night in Jerusalem, that they may be our guard by night and a working party by day." So neither I, my brethren, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me took off our clothes, *except* that everyone took them off for washing." (Neh 4:19-23 NKJV)

They used trumpets to sound the alarm so they wouldn't be caught off guard. They worked hard from sunrise to past dark, even spending the night out at the job site to protect against attack. And they even slept in their clothes because they didn't want to be caught off guard or unprepared.

## **Conclusion**

As Christians, we need to be armed with the same attitude. We must be ready to defend our faith while we do the work of the Lord. The Apostle Paul says in Ephesians Chapter 6 that we need to put on the whole armor of God and always be ready for that final trumpet blast that will gather us all together to be with the Lord.

The historian Will Durant wrote, "Rome remained great as long as she had enemies who forced her to unity, vision and heroism. When she had overcome all her enemies, she flourished for a moment and then began to die" (cited in "Bits & Pieces," 9/87).

He notes that it was the opposition that kept Rome strong. The New Testament truth is that if you try to accomplish anything for the cause of Christ, you will experience opposition, especially if you are in leadership. Nehemiah prayed first, but then he kept up with the work and remained vigilant against the enemy.

That's how we keep our focus on the great and awesome God we serve. And that's how, in the end, we will be successful to the glory of God!