

“Under Attack”  
Nehemiah 4 & 6  
Series: Book of Nehemiah [#4]  
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Theme: **Defeating Opposition To God’s Work Requires Active Faith.**

## Introduction

This is our fourth look at the book of Nehemiah, and our third at the truth and importance of *Active Faith*. Nehemiah went from a prestigious and powerful position in the palace of Artaxerxes I to Jerusalem, to serve as governor and rebuild its defences. Under his leadership about three miles of walls, gates, and fortifications were built in fiftytwo days.

There were problems all along the way, conflicts and opposition. He was surrounded on all sides by people who were dedicated to his failure, people who kept on attacking him. Chapters 4–6 show us Nehemiah’s response. This morning we will look at chapters 4 6, and come to chpt 5 next time.

“*Under Attack!*” How do you respond? What do you do? We need to be prepared. When we live for God, do what is right and good, His work, there will be some opposition. From Nehemiah we learn that *defeating opposition to God’s work requires active faith*. We see two kinds of attack here. The first is ...

## Facing Opposition Which Can Discourage You.

Think about some of the strategy used against you. There is ridicule. Nehemiah new all about this. Chapter 4 verse 1 “Now it came about that when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious and very angry and mocked the Jews.” This is not the first time he mocked the Jews rebuilding the wall. In 2:19,

“But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard it, they mocked us and despised us and said, ‘What is this thing you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?’”

Sanballat was “furious and angry.” Behind his mocking he knew if Jerusalem’s defences were rebuilt, people would return. That would spell big trouble for him, his position as governor of Samaria.

He gathered his friends and ridiculed the Jews. Look at the last part of verse 2, “What are these feeble Jews doing? Are they going to restore it for themselves? Can they offer sacrifices? Can they finish in a day? Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble even the burned ones?” His friend Tobiah chimed in at the end of verse 3, “Even what they are building--if a fox should jump on it, he would break their stone wall down!” Their goal was to *discourage* the Jewish people, which would bring the work to an end.

Ridicule of God's people and work abounds today. The terms *fundamentalist*, *evangelical*, *evangelist* are often used as negative, loaded terms to subtly or overtly try to make Christians look like stupid country bumpkins, and so *discourage* them. More than 2,400 years have gone by since Nehemiah's day and the same strategy is still being used. You and I are not building a defence ring around Edmonton, but as we simply respond to do what is right, to do God's work, we can also be ridiculed.

Then there is slander. This was flung at and about Nehemiah freely. The incident at the opening of chapter 6 took place when the walls were joined, but the gates not finished. Let's review the lies and slander, **6:5-7 READ**.

“Then Sanballat sent his servant to me in the same manner a fifth time with an open letter in his hand. In it was written, ‘It is reported among the nations, and Gashmu says, that you and the Jews are planning to rebel; therefore you are rebuilding the wall. And you are to be their king, according to these reports. You have also appointed prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem concerning you, “A king is in Judah!” And now it will be reported to the king according to these reports. So come now, let us take counsel together.’”

Nehemiah knew the motive of this slander, as he tells us in verse 9,

“For all of them were trying to frighten us, thinking, ‘They will become discouraged with the work and it will not be done.’”

Today as well, ridicule is often not enough to stop people doing what is right, doing God's work. So, some attack with lies, with slander to try to frighten and to *discourage*. These are two basic weapons in the arsenal of the opponents of God's work: Ridicule and Slander to discourage.

God has a strategy for us to defeat discouragement. There are three key parts to it that we see here. The first is prayer. We have seen a strong and consistent emphasis on prayer in Nehemiah's life—as it should be. When ridicule was fired at him, what did he do? Go to 4:4,

“Hear, O our God, how we are despised! Return their reproach on their own heads and give them up for plunder in a land of captivity. Do not forgive their iniquity and let not their sin be blotted out before You, for they have demoralized the builders” (4-5).

When slander was hurled at him, what did he do? Drop down to chapter 6, the last part of verse 9, “But now, O God, strengthen my hands.” He prayed. He did not sit in a corner, intimidated and discouraged. Nor did he rashly lash out at the opponents of God's work. Before he did anything, he went to God in prayer.

It is often said, “*prayer changes things*.” It does! ... beginning with me! With the person praying. It changes our attitude, motives, and objectives even before we get to facing the

opposition. God also uses it to change other things and people that we could never effectively influence on our own. Prayer is critical, indispensable to defeating discouragement.

The second part of God's strategy for us to defeat discouragement is to keep on working. In chapter 4 Sanballat and Tobiah ridiculed the wall, "even if it is built, it won't stand!" Nehemiah prayed, *and* 4:6 tells us, "So we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work." He prayed *and He kept on working*.

Prayer should surround and saturate our action, but it is not a substitute for action. As we saw in Nehemiah back in chapter 1, we are to proceed in faith, to keep on proceeding in faith to accomplish the task.

Question: "What does it take to stop you?" Opposition in and of itself is not a certain indicator that we should stop or take a break. Don't let opposition freeze you with fear, deaden you with discouragement. Keep moving, keep working for God ... and *He* will accomplish the work through you.

A third part of the strategy is a clear, calm denial of persistent lies. Nehemiah was met with verbal abuse when he arrived. He was ridiculed as he planned and got the work going. He was slandered when the work was nearing completion. With prayer and continual work there also came a time to clearly, calmly expose the lies, to set the record straight. Go to chapter 6 again, verse 8. "Then I sent a message to him [Sanballat] saying, 'Such things as you are saying have not been done, but you are inventing them in your own mind.'" His statement was short and to the point.

You can be sure that many inaccurate things have been said about you, including when you have been doing what is right, doing the work God has called you to do. Fortunately, we don't know all of those things. Not all the ones we hear are worth answering. Persistent, damaging mis-truths, however, can and should be answered in the same way that Nehemiah did—clearly and calmly laying out the facts. It should go with out saying that we need God's wisdom to do this as we should.

We have and will face opposition which can *discourage* us, defeat us. God's strategy for defeating discouragement is faith in action—to pray, to keep on working, and to make clear, calm denials of persistent lies. In addition to opposition which can discourage you, you also can find yourself...

### **Facing Opposition Which Can Overpower You.**

Let's note some of the strategy used against us in this attempt to overpower us. First there is guerilla warfare. The assault of words did not work on Nehemiah, so he enemies now turned to force. But they had a problem: Nehemiah was the governor and had the king's authorization for the work. So they could not launch a direct attack. Instead, they planned and schemed. Go to verse 7 in chapter 4.

“Now when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem went on, and that the breaches began to be closed, they were very angry. All of them conspired together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it” (7-8).

Drop down to verse 11. “Our enemies said, ‘They will not know or see until we come among them, kill them and put a stop to the work.’” This was guerilla warfare—no flags or standards waving; quickly get in and get out without being identified.

Fortunately, we do not face armies with either standard or guerilla tactics charging forward against us. We do need to guard against paranoia that “*they* are all out to get us.” We do need to be aware that those who do not like *the light* of God’s truth and work, will use the tactics of darkness to try to *overpower* God’s truth, work and those who carry it out.

Again, we are fortunate not to face the threat of military physical force. The force that opponents of that which is truly God’s work use is that of public opinion, political and elite correctness to force God’s work and those who do it the sidelines, to marginalize them.

A second tactic to overpower is to depose the leader. As we come to chapter 6, all the work is done except the gates.

- Trying to discourage the builders did not work.
- The idea of guerilla warfare did not fly.
- So, a new plan was put in place: get rid of the leader and everyone else will scatter.

Note the opening verses of chapter 6.

“Now when it was reported to Sanballat, Tobiah, to Geshem the Arab and to the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall, and that no breach remained in it, although at that time I had not set up the doors in the gates, then Sanballat and Geshem sent a message to me, saying, ‘Come, let us meet together at Chephirim in the plain of Ono.’ But they were planning to harm me. So I sent messengers to them, saying, ‘I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?’ They sent messages to me four times in this manner, and I answered them in the same way.”

(1-4)

This has been a common tactic down through the centuries.

- In 1414 John Hus, a follower of John Wycliffe, who argued that people ought to be able to read the Bible in their own language and be free from the tyranny of the Catholic Church, was given *safe passage* by the Pope to a debate. But he was arrested and then burned at the stake, with some of Wycliffe’s manuscript Bible used as kindling.

- In 1513 William Tyndale, another reformer who gave us the first printed English Bible, was invited to dinner by *a friend*, but was captured and hanged

The same tactics are used today, although Christians in Canada are not murdered because of their faith. Every notable Christian leader who acts and speaks boldly and so gains a following, has been the target of the “*Depose the Leader*” tactic. While we are not people taking the lead with large followings, we can face the same tactic—attempts to dispose of the leaders.

A third tactic to overpower God’s people doing His work is to discredit the leader. Everything Nehemiah’s opponents have tried has failed, even a trap to get Nehemiah out of Jerusalem to kill him. They make one last attempt. Look at verse 10 in chapter 6.

“When I entered the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined at home, he said, ‘Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you, and they are coming to kill you at night.’”

Skip down to verse 12. “Then I perceived that surely God had not sent him, but he uttered his prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him.”

Shemaiah, a traitor, suggested going to the temple for safety, in the Holy Place of the temple, where no one would dare come after him, where he would be safe. Practically, Nehemiah said, “I’m not a coward!” More importantly, he knew the Holy Place was only for Priests. If he entered, he would be discredited and subject to the death penalty.

This is a strategy that is still used today. Find an opening, any area where the leader is careless or proud, or weaknesses such as greed exist, and work that to pressure or even set him up to make a bad choice so he then can be discredited. The goal is to overpower the leader, the work, all who work with him.

God has a strategy for us to prevent being overpowered. First, add watchful readiness to prayer. When guerilla threats were flying all around, Nehemiah watched and prayed. “But we prayed to our God, and because of them we set up a guard against them day and night” (4:9). Note some details. First in 4:13,

“I stationed men in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, the exposed places, and I stationed the people in families with their swords, spears and bows.”

Then beginning at verse 16.

“From that day on, half of my servants carried on the work while half of them held the spears, the shields, the bows and the breastplates; and the captains were behind the whole house of Judah. Those who were rebuilding the wall and those who carried burdens took their load with one hand doing the work and the other holding a weapon. As for the

builders, each wore his sword girded at his side as he built, while the trumpeter stood near me. I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, ‘The work is great and extensive, and we are separated on the wall far from one another. At whatever place you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.’” (16-20)

Prayer and preparation, watchful readiness. The balance, I know, is sometimes difficult for us to keep. We may plead with God, but not be watchful; at other times we may rush ahead on our own.

The second part of God’s strategy to keep from being overpowered is to keep on working on top priorities. After the walls were up, the gates in place, but the doors not yet in place, the attempt was made to lure Nehemiah out where he could be killed. His response? Go back to 6:3.

“So I sent messengers to them, saying, ‘I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?’ They sent messages to me four times in this manner, and I answered them in the same way.” (3-4)

Keep working, don’t be derailed by the opposition! I once read, “Model your behavior on a duck... remain calm and unruffled on the outside, but paddle like crazy underneath!” We should add to that, “paddle like crazy *on God’s agenda*.” Don’t succumb to the opposition’s agenda. And, don’t allow the opposition to become *the* agenda.

The final part of this strategy is to obey God’s Word at all times. Shemaiah’s plot was to frighten Nehemiah, “They’re coming after you! Flee to the temple for safety!” Nehemiah tested this against God’s Word, and quickly knew that God had not sent him, his prophecy was not true, that Shemaiah was a traitor.

There is no substitute for reading, knowing and following God’s Word, the Bible. Each of us is responsible for our decisions. Even if someone claims special insight from God, believes he has 20/20 vision on God’s will, doesn’t mean he or she does! Measure everything by God’s Word.

## **Conclusion**

In following God, trying to do what is right, to do God’s work, we will face opposition. Jesus has told us,

“If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you.” (John 15:18-19)

And so John wrote in his first letter, “Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you” (1 John 3:13).

When “*Under Attack*” what do you do? *Defeating opposition to God’s work requires active faith.* Let me sum up with the words of a modern Nehemiah, the late Francis Schaeffer,

“When I first found Christ through my Bible reading he was very real to me, and I yet remember the loving wonder of His closeness. And then came the struggle against the Old {Presbyterian} Church machine, and then against Westminster, and then against the N.A.E. {National Association of Evangelicals}, and gradually ‘the {separatist} movement’ loomed larger and larger. Do not misunderstand me: my experiences here have convinced me more than ever that each of these struggles was needed and right; but the correct perspective got mislaid in the process. And I tell you frankly, that though I realize I may be wrong, it seems to me that I was not alone in my mistake — that many are as deeply involved, or even more, than I have been. The “movement” grew in our thinking like the great bay tree until for me that wonderful closeness which I have felt to Him in previous days was lost. I wonder if that is not what happened to the Church of Ephesus in Revelation 2?

“God willing, I will push and politick no more ... the mountains are too high, history is too long and eternity is longer. God is too great, man is too small, there are many of God’s dear children, and all around there are men and women going to hell. And if one man and a small group of men do not approve of where I am and what I do, does it prove I’ve missed success? No; only one thing will determine that — whether this day I’m where the Lord of lords and King of kings wants me to be. To win as many as I can, to help strengthen the hands of those who fight unbelief in the historical setting in which they are placed, to know the reality of ‘the Lord is my song’ and to be committed to the Holy Spirit — that is what I wish I could know to be the reality of each day as it closes.”

[from some of his personal correspondence, 1951]  
<http://www.thewords.com/articles/schaeffer1.htm>

In your moments of personal reflection and response, come face to face with the truth that doing what is right, doing God’s work will bring opposition. As you do this, thank God and praise Him that He can lead you to victory over that opposition by *active faith*.

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