



SESSION 3

PERSIST

▶ **The Point**

Doing God's work brings out detractors and opposition.

▶ **The Passage**

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

▶ **The Bible Meets Life**

Did you know what you wanted to do with your life when you were seventeen? Bill Wallace wasn't sure. After pondering, *What should I do with my life?* he asked a better question: *What would God have me do with my life?* In that moment, Bill Wallace had his answer.

In 1935, Bill went to China as a medical missionary. It was a time of great political instability. During World War II, he performed operations while bombs landed around him. His hospital was eventually destroyed. Often urged to leave, he insisted, "I will stay as long as I am able to serve." Later, the communists arrested him as a spy and tortured him. One night, the guards had had enough of his stance for Jesus, and they beat him to death. Refused a funeral, Bill was buried in an unmarked grave. But some of his friends defied orders and erected a monument inscribed with seven words: "For to me to live is Christ."⁶ You may never encounter the persecution Bill Wallace endured. However, if you follow Jesus, you can be certain you will face some opposition.

▶ **The Setting**

Nehemiah embarked on a mission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Up to that point God had done amazing things on Nehemiah's behalf. The Lord gave Nehemiah a vision for restoring the city, guided his planning, and made a way for him to go to Judah. In Jerusalem he gained the support and help of priests, officials, and other Jews who eagerly started on the work. Soon enough, however, the Jews encountered opposition that threatened to derail their efforts.

What does the Bible say?

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

¹ When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious. He mocked the Jews ² before his colleagues and the powerful men of Samaria, and said, “What are these pathetic Jews doing? Can they restore it by themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they ever finish it? Can they bring these burnt stones back to life from the mounds of rubble?” ³ Then Tobiah the Ammonite, who was beside him, said, “Indeed, even if a fox climbed up what they are building, he would break down their stone wall!”

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⁶ So we rebuilt the wall until the entire wall was joined together up to half its height, for the people had the will to keep working. ⁷ When Sanballat, Tobiah, and the Arabs, Ammonites, and Ashdodites heard that the repair to the walls of Jerusalem was progressing and that the gaps were being closed, they became furious. ⁸ They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and throw it into confusion. ⁹ So we prayed to our God and stationed a guard because of them day and night.

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¹⁴ After I made an inspection, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people, “Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the great and awe-inspiring Lord, and fight for your countrymen, your sons and daughters, your wives and homes.”

¹⁵ When our enemies heard that we knew their scheme and that God had frustrated it, every one of us returned to his own work on the wall. ¹⁶ From that day on, half of my men did the work while the other half held spears, shields, bows, and armor. The officers supported all the people of Judah, ¹⁷ who were rebuilding the wall. The laborers who carried the loads worked with one hand and held a weapon with the other. ¹⁸ Each of the builders had his sword strapped around his waist while he was building, and the trumpeter was beside me.

GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes



Notes

DISCUSS: Question #1 on page 97 of the Personal Study Guide (PSG): **“What stories of perseverance have inspired you?”** Allow time for each person to respond.

GUIDE: Direct group members to **“The Bible Meets Life”** on page 98 of the PSG. Emphasize the reality of opposition for the Christian by reading or summarizing the text—or by encouraging group members to read it on their own.

GUIDE: Call attention to **“The Point”** on page 98 of the PSG: **“Doing God’s work brings out detractors and opposition.”**

ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): In advance, gather several short stories of Christians who have persisted in their faith despite persecution. Resources include imb.org, persecution.com, and *Lives Given Not Taken* by former IMB president, Jerry Rankin. Ask two or three members to read a different story. Invite prepared members to briefly share the stories they selected. Take a few minutes to have a season of prayer for persecuted believers around the world.

PRAY: Transition into the study by thanking the Lord for those who have gone before us who suffered greatly for the cause of Christ. Ask God to help us prepare for whatever level of opposition comes our way.

Dotted lines for taking notes.

Nehemiah 4:1-3 Commentary

[Verse 1] God's miraculous work through His people accomplishes His purposes. However, the work is often difficult for God's servants. It was exactly for Nehemiah and the people in Jerusalem. **Sanballat** was probably an official Persian satrap (regional ruler appointed by the king) somewhere outside of Judea and related by marriage to the Jewish high priest. (See 13:28.) Most likely he had a network of informants who kept him updated on activities that could impact his influence in the area. When he **heard that** Nehemiah was leading the Jewish people in **rebuilding the wall**, he was undoubtedly concerned. The people were clearly making progress. When Sanballat realized the Jews were determined in their efforts, he became **furious**. This word is actually a combination of two Hebrew words that reflect both intense heat and anger—we might say he was ballistic or burning with rage. Probably he foresaw his influence and power over the Jews in Jerusalem weakening. Perhaps he also anticipated a financial loss if the Jews had been paying him for protection or contracting with him to obtain essential goods. He had to come up with a plan to put a stop to the work. He started with psychological attacks as he **mocked the Jews**.

[Verse 2] Sanballat brought along **the powerful men of Samaria**, possibly an army (as the Hebrew term is sometimes translated) or simply others who carried great influence in the region. Sanballat's rhetorical questions may have been spoken to his associates, but they most certainly were targeted toward the Jews. The first question ridiculed the people: **What are these pathetic Jews doing?** The Hebrew word for "pathetic" literally means *weak, withered, or feeble*, which was true. There may not have been a lot of Jews and most of them probably were not builders. There was no earthly reason why they should have ever started such a massive undertaking.

Perhaps with his second question Sanballat was hoping many of the Jews would question what they were doing and give up. When he questioned their potential **sacrifices**, he was ridiculing their trust in God (and in a sense mocking God), implying they would need more than God's help to finish the task. Next he wanted to cast doubt on the likelihood they would ever **finish** the wall. Adding to the difficulty was the building materials—burnt stones drawn from the rubble of previous walls—which Sanballat also scornfully questioned. Likely the majority of the stones were still in good shape and sufficient for building. Even so, the Jews were faced with **mounds of rubble** that had to be moved before rebuilding.

[Verse 3] **Tobiah** is a Jewish name, he was from Ammon, the region east of Judah. He (or an ancestor) may have been the same Tobiah mentioned in Ezra 2:60 who was excluded from the community because he could not prove his Jewish heritage. If true, this might explain why he was so antagonistic toward the Jews. Tobiah ridiculed the wall's stability. He noted that if a **fox** were to climb on it he would **break down their stone wall**. Tobiah was obviously exaggerating, however, as archaeologists have discovered it was nearly nine feet wide.

Nehemiah 4:6-9 Commentary

[Verse 6] When God gives us a vision, we should expect opposition as we carry out His work. When we experience opposition, however, we should pray to God and continue to do as He leads. Nehemiah and the Jewish people did this when their detractors came against them with derision and worse. Despite the campaign of mockery launched by neighboring leaders, neither Nehemiah nor the Jews responded to their critics. Instead, Nehemiah prayed and they all continued working diligently. Soon enough they had **rebuilt the wall** so it completely surrounded the city and reached **half its height**. This happened because the Jews had the **will** to keep working. The Hebrew word for “will” is often translated “heart,” the seat of emotions, decision-making, and commitment. We could say they were whole-hearted in their devotion to the mission of rebuilding the wall.

[Verse 7] Sanballat and Tobiah **heard** about the progress the Jews were making to restore **the walls of Jerusalem**. In addition, other groups—the Arabs, Ammonites, and Ashdodites—learned, likely from Sanballat, that the work was progressing. Perhaps Sanballat had called a summit to inform the leaders of the surrounding areas what was transpiring and to discuss their response to the events in Jerusalem. The Arabians lived south of Jerusalem while the people of Ashdod (a Philistine city) lived in the west near the Mediterranean Sea. Since the Samaritans were in the north and the Ammonites were on the east, the Jews were surrounded by people who hated them and wanted to stop their efforts of restoration. These enemies were **furious**. They had much to lose from a fortified and independent city of Jerusalem. Verbal attacks had not brought the intended results, so the opposition moved to the next level.

[Verse 8] The self-serving alliance realized they needed to move quickly to have any hope of regaining their control of the Jews. So they **all plotted together**. The Hebrew word for “plotted” pictures things that are bound or tied together. We might say they put their heads together (or had a meeting of the minds) to conspire against the Jews. While the leaders of these surrounding regions surely had their differences, they had no trouble uniting against a common enemy. Whether they really intended to **fight against Jerusalem** (with physical violence) is unknown. Had they actually done so, they could have faced serious punishment if word of their actions got back to the king. One of the easiest things they could have done, however, was to start rumors of an impending attack. They hoped such a threat would throw the Jews into confusion, that is, create such an internal disturbance that they would end their work out of fear for their lives.

[Verse 9] Nehemiah was aware of the threats and he took appropriate action. First he led the Jews to pray. Like the psalmist, Nehemiah knew God was their “refuge and strength, a helper who is always found in times of trouble” (Ps. 46:1). He also stationed a guard in the city throughout the **day and night**. Prayer does not exclude planning, as Nehemiah had already demonstrated. He trusted God but did not want to be caught unaware or unprepared for a possible attack.

Nehemiah 4:14-18 Commentary

[Verse 14] The remaining work was difficult and the growing threats were discouraging. Some Jews outside the city added to the disturbance as they continued to echo the enemies' threats. Nehemiah challenged and encouraged the people to work with vigilance despite opposition. He assembled all the Jews together, which was a visual reminder of their combined strength. He began by exhorting, **"Don't be afraid of them."** He urged God's people to be strong and remember the great and awe-inspiring Lord. They were the people of Almighty God. Nehemiah encouraged them to stay focused on God and know that He would continue to work in their situation just as He had worked for previous generations of their people. Nehemiah inspired them not to give up but to fight the enemies they faced—especially fatigue and fear. Thus far no one had actually attacked them, so their greatest enemy was in their minds. Nehemiah called attention to the real reason they were working and fighting—the future of their countrymen, their sons and daughters, and their wives and homes.

[Verses 15-16] The local **enemies heard that** the Jews were prepared for their proposed attack. God had frustrated their plans. Since the Jews also recognized God's involvement on their behalf, each of them **returned** to their work on the wall. Nehemiah's rally had done what he had intended—renewing the people's trust in God and their commitment to His work. The threats would continue but he didn't want the work to stop again. Thus he devised a plan where **half** of his **men** provided protection while the other half worked. These men could refer to officers of the infantry and cavalry (see Neh. 2:9) the king had sent with Nehemiah. Or they could be another special group of attendants or bodyguards, perhaps those Nehemiah later referred to in various ways. (See 5:10,16; 13:19.) That these men had **spears, shields, bows, and armor** indicates they may have had responsibility for protection all along. Their presence gave moral support to all the workers.

[Verses 17-18] Nehemiah supplemented this defense by giving a **weapon** to each laborer who carried the various loads associated with the actual work on the wall. These men might have moved rubble or they may have carried lumber, rocks, and other supplies needed for construction. They would carry their load with one hand while carrying a weapon with the other hand. While it wasn't the easiest way to work, it did give them a sense of security as they labored. For additional defense, **each of the builders** who worked on the wall had a sword strapped onto his person. These men would have needed both hands to do their work, but they also had a weapon at hand in case they needed immediate protection. While the building continued, Nehemiah wasn't holed up in a secure command post. Instead, he was among the people working on the wall. Perhaps he was on the move answering questions, providing encouragement, and making sure things progressed. Accompanying him was **a trumpeter**, who was ready to sound the alarm should there be an attack on any of the workers. If that occurred, others would rally to the site of conflict to fight together.



Previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles "Nehemiah's Adversaries" (Winter 2016), "Sanballat & Tobiah" (Winter 2014-2015), and "The Arabians" (Summer 1991) relate to this lesson and can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at lifeway.com/biblicallillustrator. Look for Bundles: Bible Studies for Life.

