

3

PERSIST



*What stories of perseverance
have inspired you?*

QUESTION #1

THE POINT

Doing God's work brings out detractors and opposition.



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."¹

You may never encounter the persecution Bill Wallace endured. However, if you follow Jesus, you can be certain you will face some opposition.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Nehemiah 4:1-3

¹ Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. ² And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, “What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?” ³ Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, “Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!”

Most of us have received a nasty note, letter, or email. I once received one on the back of an offering envelope: “Bring back the poinsettias or else!” Someone had moved the potted reds during the Christmas season because another member in the church was highly allergic to them. I hadn’t even noticed the change, but someone else sure did! The note was anonymous, so we couldn’t personally respond.

Opposition can hurt, but even more so if the attack is against an effort we believe is God’s work. The Jewish people began to rebuild Jerusalem’s walls according to God’s will, yet their work ignited opposition. Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, had already joined two of his associates, Tobiah and Geshem, in challenging this work (see 2:19), and now he was at it again. Scoffing at people requires no courage, especially if the crowd is on your side.

Sanballat initially had questioned the motives of Nehemiah and the Jews, accusing them of rebelling against the king, but now the potential of strong walls threatened Sanballat’s power in the region. Too many people don’t like change, especially when that change threatens their personal status quo—even if that change is from the hand of God. God was behind this rapid building project, but the change it brought was not in Sandballat’s favor. So he ridiculed and mocked it.

What characteristics or promises of God help us to persist?

QUESTION #2

In these verses, Sanballat and his sidekick Tobiah ramped up their hostility. They paraded their opposition and ridicule before powerful people. They attempted to paint the Jews and their wall as pathetic and weak. Nehemiah encouraged the strengths of the people, but Sanballat wanted to magnify their weaknesses. Were they weak? Perhaps in one sense they were. These were ordinary people with few, if any, professional stone builders in their ranks. They were volunteers without experience.

So, if they were weak, how did they succeed or even stay focused? They did what they knew they could do—and they trusted.

Opposition arises when we take a stand for God and do His work. Doing what God calls us to do threatens the powers of darkness, so let's just be ready.

Nehemiah 4:6-9

⁶ So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work. ⁷ But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry. ⁸ And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. ⁹ And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.

When Nehemiah first encountered opposition from Sanballat and the others, he responded by declaring to them: "The God of heaven will make us prosper" (2:20). With this second encounter—and their increased hostility and anger—Nehemiah didn't respond to Sandballat at all. "And we prayed to our God."

How can we maintain our focus on God's work in the face of opposition?

QUESTION #3

WHAT DOES PERSISTENCE LOOK LIKE?

Which of the following images best illustrates persistence to you?



How has your understanding and practice of persistence changed throughout your journey with Christ?

"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you!"

—1 PETER 4:12

The people prayed and went right back to work. They didn't seek to retaliate for the actions against them. They did not lower themselves to the level of their opposition. They kept their heads high with integrity and their hands busy with work. Their response highlights two characteristics of faithfulness:

- 1. They linked prayer with action.** The Jews kept building the wall because (1) "the people had a mind to work," and (2) "we prayed to our God." Prayer leads to action, and doing God's work leads to prayer.
- 2. They focused on what they could control.** We can't control the weather, but we can control our attitude toward the weather. The same goes for encountering opposition.

Nehemiah and his people worked harder and kept praying, but it did not dispel their enemies. At this point, their opponents did not resort to violence because they knew King Artaxerxes had given his support to rebuild the walls. Instead, Sanballat and the other attackers used psychological tactics, seeking to intimidate the people. Nevertheless, Nehemiah and the people just kept working. "So we built the wall."

Serving God and doing ministry in His name can sometimes be "messy." Building the wall did not go as smoothly as Nehemiah surely wanted it to go, but they worked through the "bumps in the road." They didn't quit, and we shouldn't quit either simply because someone complains about the way we handled something.

Nehemiah 4:14-18

¹⁴ And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes." ¹⁵ When our enemies heard that it was known to us and that God had frustrated their plan, we all returned to the wall, each to his work. ¹⁶ From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail. And the leaders stood behind the whole house of Judah, ¹⁷ who were building on the wall. Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other. ¹⁸ And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me.

What does it look like for us to work with one hand and resist opposition with the other?

QUESTION #4

One way God worked in the people's lives as they built the wall was unifying them. While everyone "returned to the wall, each to his work," each individual's work was dependent on everyone else. One individual alone could never build the wall. The wall would not rise without the united effort of everyone involved.

Just as the stones they used were of various shapes and sizes, so the church is made up of a variety of people with different backgrounds and levels of spiritual maturity. Through our vigilance, the living stones of the church form a strong wall!

- ▶ **Vigilance calls for carefulness and urgency.** After Nehemiah inspected the walls and the work, he spoke with urgency in his tone, yet he was diligent in his plans.
- ▶ **Vigilance matters because of whom we serve.** Our careful work in the face of opposition is worth it. As Nehemiah modeled for us, we must persist in the cause of the Lord.

The abundant and eternal life we have in Christ is far greater than anything we have in this earthly life, and we should always be ready to give our lives for the kingdom of God.

How can we support each other when one of us is experiencing opposition and adversity?

QUESTION #5

LIVE IT OUT

No one can predict the type of opposition you may face. You may never face martyrdom for your faith and service as Bill Wallace did, but opposition comes in many forms. How will you serve in spite of opposition?

- ▶ **Serve.** If you are not regularly involved in service or ministry to others, find a place to make a difference. Consider where you can help “build the wall.” Talk to your pastor or other Christians for input on an area where you can serve.
- ▶ **Search.** See how others deal with opposition as they serve Christ. Go to opendoorsusa.org and research Christian persecution across the globe. Pray for persecuted peoples.
- ▶ **Share.** One way to “confront” someone who opposes you is to lovingly serve that person. Without big fanfare, find a way to express and share the love of Christ through your actions.



Like Nehemiah, only God can grant our success in ministry. While hostility can be difficult to handle, it will not stop God's work if you persist in His will.

My thoughts

1. Daniel Akin, *10 Who Changed the World* (B&H, 2012), 29–46.