

## GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes

**DISCUSS:** Draw attention to the picture on **PSG page 122** and ask **Question #1: Growing up, what were you taught about the best way to handle a bully?**

**GUIDE:** Direct attention to the story about missionary Bill Wallace in **The Bible Meets Life** on **PSG page 123** that tells how he was arrested, tortured, and finally beaten to death for his stance for Jesus.

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

Reinforce **The Point** on **PSG page 123: Doing God’s work brings out detractors and opposition.**

**PRAY:** Begin the Bible study with prayer. Ask God to give us the courage and faith to stand up against opposition we will face when doing His work.

# SESSION 3 PERSIST



## ***The Point***

Doing God’s work brings out detractors and opposition.

## ***The Bible Meets Life***

Not everything we do will be universally popular or accepted. Even good actions can be questioned and opposed by others.

If the tasks we are pursuing are

done in service to God, opposition is likely to be directed against the One we seek to serve and honor. Thankfully, the fruitfulness of our service is not dependent on the reactions of others but on Christ, the one who calls and empowers us. Therefore, we can persist in doing what He has called us to do.

## ***The Passage***

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

## ***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.

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## Nehemiah 4:1-3

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!”

**1 ▶ Verse 1.** Nehemiah encountered resistance from his enemies as he led God’s people to restore the walls and gates in the city of Jerusalem. King Artaxerxes had given his support to Nehemiah’s rebuilding plan, authorized the resources needed, and released Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem. Nehemiah then motivated the Jewish leaders and others in the city to get started with him in the rebuilding effort. Just when it seemed nothing could hinder the mission, however, we are introduced to two key individuals: “Sanballat the Horonite” and “Tobiah the Ammonite” (Neh. 2:10). After learning of Nehemiah’s intentions, these men immediately launched an effort to shut down the project that would be a major threat to their personal interests. They began by insulting the Jews and questioning Nehemiah’s loyalty to the king (v. 19). These men knew of the Jews’ previous rebuilding efforts and how taunting, questioning, and threatening brought about an end to the project at that time. They expected similar tactics would work to halt the work this time.

Some sources indicate **Sanballat** was governor of Samaria at this time or several decades later. He was possibly appointed by the king as an official Persian satrap when Nehemiah arrived. He may have been related by marriage to the Jewish high priest (his daughter married a grandson of the high priest; see 13:28). Most likely he had informants who kept him updated on activities outside of his region that could impact his influence in the area. When he **heard that** Nehemiah was leading the Jewish people in **rebuilding the wall**, he was concerned. Nehemiah 2:10 mentions he was displeased over that prospect. ◀

## STUDY THE BIBLE

### Nehemiah 4:1-3



10 minutes

**SUMMARIZE:** Before reading the passage, set the context by summarizing the information in **The Setting** on page 122.

**READ:** Read or ask a volunteer to read Nehemiah 4:1-3.

**SUMMARIZE:** Use **Bible Commentary 1** to provide background information about the opposition Nehemiah faced from Sanballat.

**OPTIONAL ACTIVITY:** Display a shovel, a sword and a trumpet. (You may wish to use toys as models or print images of the items.) Explain that these items represent tools used in this passage.

- *The shovel represents the work of rebuilding the wall.*
- *The sword represents the defense of the city.*
- *The trumpet represents an alarm when there is danger.*

(Continued on next page.)

Ask your group:

- Which item represents what you do best?
- Who has been a good example of someone who worked hard to complete a task?
- Who have you known that fought hard for the good of a project or a cause?

**SUMMARIZE:** Use **Bible**

**Commentary 2** to describe Sanballat's outrage at the work of rebuilding the wall and what he did to try to stop the work:

- Sanballat became **furios**. This word is a combination of two Hebrew words that reflect both intense heat and anger. We might say he was ballistic or burning with rage.
- Sanballat started first with psychological attacks as **he mocked the Jews**. He laughed at them, scorned them, and ridiculed them. This remains a favorite weapon of those who oppose God's work.

**2** ▶ Nehemiah 3 highlights the projects that commenced in Jerusalem and the variety of people who worked on them—from temple workers to city leaders to merchants to ordinary citizens. Their work had been ongoing for some time and they were clearly making progress toward their goal of restoring the city walls and gates. When Sanballat realized the Jews were determined in their efforts, he became **furios**. This word is a combination of two Hebrew words that reflect both intense heat and anger—we might also say he was ballistic or burning with rage. He recognized Nehemiah's leadership was weakening his influence and power over the Jews in Jerusalem. Perhaps he also anticipated a financial loss if the Jews had been paying him for protection or contracting with him as a middleman to obtain essential goods from local suppliers or even from official government sources.

We live in a fallen world where there will always be human enemies of God and His work. Undergirding their efforts, however, is the adversary, Satan, who is opposed to God and to any who follow Him and seek His will. It should never be a surprise to us, then, that our work for God will be met with opposition from those who are not thinking about God's concerns but about their own interests (Matt. 16:23).

Sanballat may have known that the rebuilding project in Jerusalem was sanctioned and resourced by King Artaxerxes. Since he could not count on the king's help to put a stop to the work, Sanballat had to come up with his own plan. He started first with psychological attacks as he **mocked the Jews**. He laughed at them, scorned them, and ridiculed them. This remains a favorite weapon of those who oppose God's work. ◀

**3** ▶ **Verse 2.** Sanballat's mockery was not just in private, however. He brought along his colleagues (probably other local political leaders) and **the powerful men of Samaria**. These men could have been an actual army (as the Hebrew term is sometimes translated) or simply others who carried great influence in the region just to the north of Judea. Perhaps Sanballat had assured them that the Jews' efforts would be a threat to them as well.

Often our greatest enemy is in our own mind; when someone laughs at what we are doing it can be debilitating to our intended activity. It is especially demoralizing when friends accompany the mocker. Quite often, one person's words prompt similar words from his or her peers until a barrage of insults is being hurled our way.

Sanballat's rhetorical questions may have been spoken to his associates, but they most certainly were targeted toward the Jews. There was some measure of truth in them, as noted in his first question that ridiculed the people: **What are these pathetic Jews doing?** The Hebrew word for "pathetic" literally means *weak, withered, or feeble*. 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.

Humanly speaking, it was not a wise thing they were doing trying to **restore** the wall by **themselves**. Perhaps with his second question Sanballat was hoping many of the Jews would question the wisdom of 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 they had started.

Next he wanted to cast doubt on the likelihood they would ever **finish** the wall. Like many major projects it was far easier to get started but much harder to stay motivated and see the project through to completion. Adding to the difficulty was the building materials they were using—burnt stones drawn from the rubble of previous walls—which Sanballat also scornfully questioned. While the Babylonians had originally set fire to the gates, most of the walls were only torn down; 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 they could get started rebuilding.

With his mocking questions Sanballat likely hoped the people would rethink what they were doing, question themselves, come to their senses, and forget about the task to which Nehemiah had rallied them.

**Verse 3.** After Sanballat finished his initial barrage, one of his associates took over. **Tobiah the Ammonite** was also introduced in Nehemiah 2:10. 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.

While speaking to his friends Tobiah envisioned the completed wall and ridiculed its stability. He noted that if a **fox** were to climb on top of it he would **break down their stone wall**. Certainly the Jews knew how the Babylonian army had torn down the previous wall, but now this man was suggesting it wouldn't require more than a small, agile animal to do the same damage. Tobiah was obviously

**SUMMARIZE:** Use **Bible Commentary 3** on pages 124-126 to share insights from verses 2-3:

- *Sanballat mocked the Jews before influential and **powerful men of Samaria**.*
- *He ridiculed the Jews by calling them **pathetic**. The word means "weak, withered or feeble."*
- *He cast doubt on their ability to finish the project.*
- *Tobiah joined in, ridiculing the wall's instability.*

**READ:** Ask a volunteer to turn to **PSG page 125** and read 1 Peter 4:12-13.

**DISCUSS: Question #2**  
**(PSG, p. 125): What options do we have when we face ridicule and opposition?**

*(Alternate: Why does involvement in God's work sometimes incite opposition?)*

**TRANSITION:** "In the next verses we will see the critics' response when it became obvious that the Jews were making progress on rebuilding the wall."

## STUDY THE BIBLE

**Nehemiah 4:6-9**

10 minutes

**READ:** Read or ask a volunteer to read Nehemiah 4:6-9

**SUMMARIZE:** Use **Bible Commentary 4** to show how the rebuilding work progressed:

- *It was joined together, indicating it completely surrounded the city.*
- *It was half its original height.*
- *The people had the will to keep working, meaning they were whole-hearted in their devotion to the mission of rebuilding the wall.*

**SUMMARIZE:** Use **Bible Commentary 5** on this page and page 127 to describe the opposition's response to the progress of rebuilding the wall.

- *They were **furious**.*
- *The enemies **plotted together to ... fight against Jerusalem and throw it into confusion**.*

exaggerating about the wall's instability, however, as archaeologists have discovered it was nearly nine feet wide. As is so often the case in such situations, his effort was not to be factual but to be intimidating. ◀

**Nehemiah 4:6-9**

**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.

**4 ▶ 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. This was what Nehemiah and the Jewish people did when their detractors came against them with derision and worse. Despite the campaign of mockery launched by the neighboring leaders, neither Nehemiah nor the Jews responded to their critics. Instead, Nehemiah prayed and they all continued working diligently. Soon they had **rebuilt the wall** so that 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. ◀

**5 ▶ 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 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 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 create confusion so 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. Too often we view prayer as our last course of action after we have exhausted other possibilities, but Nehemiah, as was his pattern, made it his first step. He also stationed a guard in the city **day and night**. Prayer does not exclude planning, as Nehemiah already demonstrated. He trusted God but still wanted to be prepared for a possible attack.

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## **Nehemiah 4:14-18**

**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.”

**GUIDE:** Refer group members to **PSG page 126**, and point out how the Jews responded to their enemies. They prayed, stationed a guard, and got back to work. Their response highlights two characteristics of faithfulness:

- *They linked prayer with action.*
- *They focused on what they could control.*

**GUIDE:** Refer group members to **PSG page 127** to how we are to serve God when things get “messy.”

**DISCUSS: Question #3**  
(PSG, p. 127): **How can we maintain our focus on God’s work when facing opposition?**

*(Alternate: Why do you think some people are always opposed to progress?)*

**TRANSITION:** “In the next verses we will see the plan Nehemiah instituted in response to the threats of the opposition.”

## STUDY THE BIBLE

*Nehemiah 4:14-18*

15 minutes

**READ:** Read Nehemiah 4:14-18.

**GUIDE:** Refer members to **PSG page 129** to the call for the “living stones” of the church to maintain vigilance in forming a strong wall:

- *Vigilance calls for carefulness and urgency.*
- *Vigilance matters because of whom we serve.*

**SUMMARIZE:** Use **Bible Commentary 6** on this page and page 129 to explain Nehemiah’s response to the threats of the enemies:

- *He gave assurance to the people by saying “don’t be afraid of the enemy.”*
- *He reminded them of the great and awe-inspiring God who was for them and with them.*
- *He encouraged them to fight for their families.*
- *He implemented a plan of defense against the enemy.*

**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.

**6 ▶ 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. Thus Nehemiah took action, challenging and encouraging the people to work with vigilance despite their opposition. He first stopped the work and assembled all the Jews together, which was a visual reminder of their combined strength. Then he stood up in their midst to speak.

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 He would continue to work in their situation just as He had worked for previous generations of their people.

Then 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 the greatest enemy they faced was in their minds. Nehemiah then called attention to the real reason they were working and fighting—for the future of their loved ones—their countrymen, their sons and daughters, and their wives and homes.

**Verse 15.** The local **enemies heard that** the Jews were aware of and prepared for their scheme of a planned or proposed attack. These enemies realized God 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.

**Verse 16.** Nehemiah anticipated the threats would continue but he didn't want the work to stop again as the pressures mounted. 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 (Neh. 2:9) the king had previously sent with Nehemiah. Or they could be another special group of attendants or bodyguards, perhaps the same as those Nehemiah later referred to in various ways (5:10,16; 13:19). The fact 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.

**Verse 17.** Nehemiah supplemented this defense force by giving a **weapon** to each of the laborers who carried the various loads associated with the actual work on the wall. These men might have moved the rubble out of the way so the rebuilding could continue or they may have carried lumber, rocks, and other supplies needed for construction. Thus they would carry their load with one hand while carrying a sword, spear, club, or some other 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.

**Verse 18.** For additional defense, **each of the builders** who worked on the wall had a sword strapped onto his person while he was building. These men would have needed both hands to do their work, but they also had a weapon at hand in case they needed one immediately for protection.

While the building continued, Nehemiah wasn't holed up in a secure command post. Instead, he was among the people who were 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 then rally to the site of conflict to fight together.

Nehemiah's words and actions are a reminder that others will not always support our work for the Lord and may even oppose us. We should pray to God and trust His protection while we stay alert and take precautions against anyone or anything that would try to deter us from His mission. ◀

**DISCUSS: Question #4**  
(PSG, p. 129): **What does it look like for us to work with one hand and resist opposition with the other?**

**DISCUSS: Question #5**  
(PSG, p. 130): **What difficult task is God calling you to that could result in opposition?**

*(Alternate: How can we support each other when one of us is experiencing opposition and adversity?)*

**LEADER PACK:** Distribute copies of **Item 8: Opposition Assessment** handout. Give group members a few minutes to complete the survey and briefly discuss if time allows.

**OPPOSITION ASSESSMENT**

Take this survey to determine what degree of opposition is your faith's experience.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

In a typical month, how often are you ridiculed or mocked because of your faith?  
(0 = never, 10 = every day)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

How many of your family members are hostile to your faith?  
(0 = none, 10 = all)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Does your faith in God make it easier or harder to be a member of your community?  
(1 = easier, 10 = harder)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

What impact has your faith had on your work or career?  
(1 = no impact, 10 = positive impact)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

**DO:** Encourage group members to take a few minutes to complete the activity "**Personal Assessment: Opposition**" on **PSG page 130**.

## LIVE IT OUT



5 minutes

**GUIDE:** Emphasize **The Point:** **Doing God's work brings out detractors and opposition.**

**REVIEW:** Review **Live It Out (PSG, p. 131)**; (see text to the right). Encourage each group member to follow through this week with at least one of the applications.

## WRAP IT UP

**GUIDE:** Encourage group members to reflect on a season when they faced opposition to their faith. Remind them that God is for us and with us as we deal with resistance to doing what God has called us to do.

**PRAY:** "Father, help us to trust You when we face opposition. Thank You for Your faithfulness and Your promise to always be with us."

## 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](http://opendoorsusa.org) and research Christian persecution across the globe. Pray for persecuted countries.
- ▶ **Share.** One way to "confront" someone who opposes you is to lovingly serve the person. Without a 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.



BIBLICAL  
**ILLUSTRATOR**



Base of a small tower in Jerusalem that was part of Nehemiah's wall reconstruction work.

Nehemiah 1:3 says, "They said to me, 'The remnant in the province, who survived the exile, are in great trouble and disgrace, Jerusalem's wall has been broken down, and its gates have been burned down.'" Almost four months after Nehemiah began to pray for the people in Jerusalem, Artaxerxes gave Nehemiah permission to go to Jerusalem to make the needed repairs.

When Nehemiah came to Jerusalem, men, including Sanballat and Tobiah, were threatened by the idea of someone—especially an "outsider"—rebuilding Jerusalem. Prior to Nehemiah's arrival, these men enjoyed positions of power and authority. They probably thought Jerusalem existing securely would diminish their power.

According to Nehemiah 2:19, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem the Arab mocked Nehemiah and the Jews

in an effort to discourage them from doing the work. Nehemiah responded, however, that the God of heaven would grant them success.

When Sanballat heard that the rebuilding was underway, he became furious and mocked the Jews in front of his Samaritan colleagues. Tobiah joined in, saying, "Indeed, even if a fox climbed up what they are building, he would break down their stone wall!" Despite the mocking, the Jews continued their work.

When Sanballat and Tobiah saw that Nehemiah and the Jews had closed the gaps in the walls, they were furious. They plotted to fight against the work and attempted to "throw it into confusion." Again Nehemiah prayed. He then established a guard to protect the work and the workers, both day and night.

Sanballat and Tobiah enjoyed the power and authority they held. They felt threatened by Nehemiah and those working with him. They used threats, intimidation, rumors, and schemes to harm Nehemiah. Yet, God honored Nehemiah and the work with success. In spite of Tobiah's and Sanballat's relentless efforts, Nehemiah and those working with him completed the wall in 52 days. And Nehemiah may have been including Tobiah and Sanballat when he said, "When all our enemies heard this, all the surrounding nations were intimidated and lost their confidence, for they realized that this task had been accomplished by our God."

The excerpt above is from the article "Sanballat & Tobiah" (Winter 2014-2015), which relates to this session. More *Biblical Illustrator* articles are available that relate to this session. See page 7 about *Biblical Illustrator*.



Free additional ideas for your group are available at

[BibleStudiesforLife.com/AdultExtra](http://BibleStudiesforLife.com/AdultExtra)