



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

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 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 (CSB)

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!”

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.

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



10 minutes

Notes



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

SUMMARIZE THE PSG (PAGE 98):

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 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.”²

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

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

ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): To introduce the idea of opposition while working toward a task, enlist a volunteer to play “basketball.” Obtain a “goal” (trash can) and “basketball” (made of crumpled paper). Enlist a volunteer to guard the “goal” by preventing any shots from making it in. Explain that the goal is to make five shots in a row. Allow your volunteer a few tries. Ask, “What impact did the guard have on the final count?” In today’s session, we’ll learn that the Jewish people faced significant opposition while trying to build the wall. However, they did not quit or turn aside from their assignment.

PRAY: Transition into the discussion with prayer.

TIP: Make it your goal to be well-prepared to lead each week. Solid preparation allows you not to be bound to your notes, so that as you listen you can adjust the discussion to respond to comments and questions.

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PACK ITEM:
Pack Item #8
“Opposition Assessment”
handout
PLAYLIST PICK:
“All In”
By Matthew West

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 challenging 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. 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: Nehemiah and the Jewish people prayed but continued their work 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 disturb the Jews so much 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” (Psalm 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.



STUDY THE BIBLE

Notes

Dotted lines for taking notes.

Nehemiah 4:14-18 (CSB)

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.

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Nehemiah 4:14-18.

SUMMARIZE THE PSG (PAGE 102): Regarding the opposition, Nehemiah encouraged the people, “Don’t be afraid of them” (v. 14) and to “remember the great and awe-inspiring Lord” (v. 14). Nehemiah also stationed half of the men to do the work while the other half stood guard with weapons.

DISCUSS: Question #4 on page 101 of the PSG: **“What does it look like for us to work with one hand and resist opposition with the other?”**

DO: Instruct group members to complete the activity on page 103 on their own. If time allows, invite volunteers to share their responses aloud.



PRESS ON:

- » Identify one God-given task you’re currently facing. Circle the image that best represents where you are on that task. (Note: The PSG includes the following images: someone preparing to run; someone rowing; and someone reaching a goal).
- » In the space below, write out a brief prayer asking God for what you need to persevere and accomplish the task.

DISCUSS: Question #5 on page 102 of the PSG: **“How can we support each other when one of us is experiencing opposition and adversity?”**

ALTERNATE QUESTION:
How does remembering the Lord help us persist in our current struggles?

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 (Nehemiah 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 (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 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.



5 minutes

LIVE IT OUT

Notes

OPPOSITION ASSESSMENT

Take this survey to determine what degree of opposition to your faith you experience.

In a typical month, how often are you ridiculed or mocked because of your faith?

How many of your family members are hostile to your faith?

Does your faith in God make it easier or harder to be a member of your community?

What impact has your faith had on your work or career?

LEADER PACK: In advance, make copies of **Pack Item #8**, "Opposition Assessment," and distribute these to your group. Invite group members to complete this handout individually. Encourage you group to keep their responses in mind as you discuss the following application ideas.



SAY: "No one can predict the type of opposition we may face or when it may come.

As believers, though, we can be ready. How will you serve in spite of opposition?"

GUIDE: Lead group members to consider the responses to the Bible study listed on page 104 of the PSG.

- » **Serve together.** There is great power in community. If you're not already, get connected with a Bible study group in a local church. Find people who are seeking to grow and serve Jesus.
- » **Stick with it.** This week, identify and pray about one area in which you need to be more persistent in your life. Prayer? Daily devotions? Encouraging others? Ask God to help you press on in that area each day this week and commit to take action toward this goal.
- » **Pray.** See how others deal with opposition as they serve Christ. Check out Persecution.com to learn more about Christian persecution across the globe and how you can pray for believers experiencing ongoing opposition.

Wrap It Up

SAY: "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.**"



Additional ideas for your group are available at BibleStudiesforLife.com/AdultExtra