

3

Persist



What stories of perseverance have inspired you?

QUESTION 1

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 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

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 (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!”

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 (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.

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

What are some ways believers respond to ridicule?

QUESTION 2

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. “The God of the heavens is the one who will grant us success” (2:20).

Nehemiah 4:6-9 (CSB)

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.

When Nehemiah first encountered opposition from Sanballat and the others, he responded by declaring to them: “The God of the heavens is the one who will grant us success” (2:20). With this second encounter—and their increased hostility and anger—Nehemiah didn’t respond to Sandballat at all. “We prayed to our God” (4:9).

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:

- » **They linked prayer with action.** The Jews kept building the wall because “the people had the will to keep working” (v. 6), and they prayed (v. 9). Prayer leads to action, and doing God’s work leads to prayer. When we face opposition, we can prayerfully do what God has led us to do.
- » **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. When we encounter hostility to God’s work, we can control our attitude through prayer and continuing to focus on what we know we can do.

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

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

QUESTION 4

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.

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.

Your church most likely has walls and doors, but it is more “a spiritual house” than a brick and mortar building, built out of God’s people





who are "living stones" (1 Peter 2:5). What God does in His people's hearts is far more important than any external construction work. This truth applied to Nehemiah and the Jewish people too. Nehemiah led a movement to rebuild the physical walls of Jerusalem, but the endeavor was as much a spiritual effort as it was a physical task.

One way God worked in the people's lives as they built was in unifying them. While everyone "returned to his own work on the wall" (v. 15), 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.

Vigilance calls for carefulness and urgency. As they worked, the threat of danger kept all the people on edge. After Nehemiah inspected the walls and the work, he spoke with urgency in his tone, yet he was diligent in his plans. Regarding the opposition, Nehemiah encouraged the people, "Don't be afraid of them" (v. 14). At the same time, he was not reckless. Nehemiah stationed half of the men to do the work while the other half stood guard with weapons. Others "worked with one hand and held a weapon with the other" (v. 17).

Vigilance matters because of whom we serve. Our careful work in the face of opposition is worth it. We must persist in the cause of Christ. After Nehemiah encouraged the people not to be afraid, he told them to "remember the great and awe-inspiring Lord" (v. 14). Focus on God, not the enemy. When we remember God, we are less inclined to fear those who oppose us.

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. But that does not mean we should be reckless. When the mission is complete and God calls you home, you can approach His throne ready to collapse into the arms of Jesus. What a joy to hear the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" (Matthew 25:23).

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

QUESTION 5

"Perseverance is more than endurance. It is endurance combined with absolute assurance and certainty that what we are looking for is going to happen."

OSWALD CHAMBERS

PRESS ON

Identify one God-given task you're currently facing. Circle the image that best represents where you are on that task.



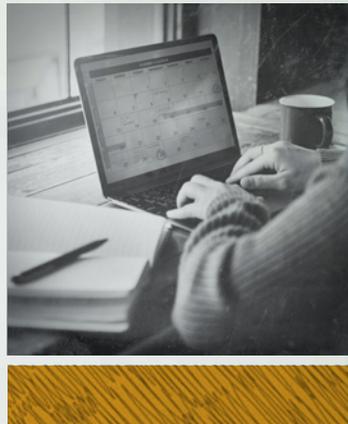
In the space below, write out a brief prayer asking God for what you need to persevere and accomplish the task.

LIVE IT OUT

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?

- » **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.

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