

NEHEMIAH

FACING OPPOSITION - AVOIDING PITFALLS

INTRODUCTION

A. Review

1. Nehemiah saw the need because he was a man under authority
 - a. He had a proper view of God
 - b. He sought a proper relationship to God.
 - 1) Through prayer
 - 2) Through knowledge of the Word of God.
 - 3) Through obedience to the Word of God.
2. Nehemiah set priorities that placed people before projects.
 - a. His primary task was to affirm the covenant.
 - b. His greatest task was to build up the people of God.
3. Nehemiah had leadership skills that allowed him to pursue excellence.
 - a. Taming the task demanded strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation.
 - b. God deserves our best.

B. Resist

1. Nehemiah was competent that God was in control.
2. He was confronted by opposition from outside and discouragement inside.
3. Yet, he climbed mountains instead of being buried by them.

A LEADER STANDS FIRM DESPITE PROBLEMS

A. Problems - Round 1

1. From Outside
 - a. The opposition
 - 1) Ringleaders against the welfare of the sons of Israel (2:19), *But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they mocked and ridiculed us, saying, "What is this that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?"*
 - a) Sanballat, governor of Samaria
 - b) Tobiah, an official of some kind from Ammon, probably the governor of Ammon, who had married the daughter of Meshullam, one of Nehemiah's staff on the wall-building project (cf. 6:17-18 with 3:30).
 - c) Geshem, an Arab
 - 2) The opposition came from every direction (4:7-8), *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 the gaps were beginning to be closed, they were very angry, and all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it.*
 - a) North - Sanballat and the Samaritans
 - b) East - Tobiah and the Ammonites
 - c) South - Arabs and Edomites
 - d) West - Ashdodites, Philistines, and Phoenicians
 - b. The attacks
 - 1) Slander (2:19-20), *But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they mocked and ridiculed us, saying, "What is this that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" Then I replied to them, "The God of heaven is the one who will give us success, and we his servants are going to start building; but you have no share or claim or historic right in Jerusalem."*
 - a) False charges were leveled at Nehemiah.
 - b) Nehemiah declared that this project was for the covenant people.

2) Mockery (4:1-6), *Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he mocked the Jews. He said in the presence of his associates and of the army of Samaria, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore things? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish it in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish—and burned ones at that?" Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, "That stone wall they are building—any fox going up on it would break it down!" Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their taunt back on their own heads, and give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover their guilt, and do not let their sin be blotted out from your sight; for they have hurled insults in the face of the builders. So we rebuilt the wall, and all the wall was joined together to half its height; for the people had a mind to work.*

- a) Opponents tried to undermine the work and the workers.
- b) Nehemiah prayed.
- c) The people worked.

3) Threats (4:7-9), *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 the gaps were beginning to be closed, they were very angry, and all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. So we prayed to our God, and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.*

- a) Opponents threatened to fight the workers.
- b) The workers prayed.

2. From Inside

a. Discouragement (4:10-12), *But Judah said, "The strength of the burden bearers is failing, and there is too much rubbish so that we are unable to work on the wall." And our enemies said, "They will not know or see anything before we come upon them and kill them and stop the work." When the Jews who lived near them came, they said to us ten times, "From all the places where they live they will come up against us."*

- 1) The workers were exhausted.
- 2) The task was great.
- 3) Their enemies were active.
- 4) They became afraid.

b. The response (4:13-22)

- 1) He established local protection squads (13), *So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people according to their families, with their swords, their spears, and their bows.*
- 2) He reminded them of their spiritual strength (14a), *After I looked these things over, I stood up and said to the nobles and the officials and the rest of the people, "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the LORD, who is great and awesome,*
- 3) He called them to defend their families and homes (14b), *and fight for your kin, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.*
- 4) He divided the workers into builders and protectors (15-18), *When our enemies heard that their plot was known to us, and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his work. From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and body-armor; and the leaders posted themselves behind the whole house of Judah, who were building the wall. The burden bearers carried their loads in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and with the other held a weapon. And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me.*
- 5) He created a 24-hour a day community warning system (19-22), *And I said to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people, "The work is great and widely spread out, and we are separated far from one another on the wall. Rally to us wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet. Our God will fight for us." So we labored at the work, and half of them held the spears from break of dawn until the stars came out. I also said to the people at that time, "Let every man and his servant pass the night inside Jerusalem, so that they may be a guard for us by night and may labor by day."*

B. Problems - Round 2

1. From inside, chapter 5

a. Concerns

1) Economic (1-2), *Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish kin. For there were those who said, "With our sons and our daughters, we are many; we must get grain, so that we may eat and stay alive."*

- a) Workers had left jobs and fields to rebuild the wall.
- b) They were suffering due to lost work, famine, and high taxes.

2) Social (3-5), *There were also those who said, "We are having to pledge our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine." And there were those who said, "We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king's tax. Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been ravished; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others."*

- a) Some sold family members or themselves into slavery.
- b) Others were charged high interest for loans.
- c) All of this was contrary to God's Word, Ezekiel 18.

b. Nehemiah's solution (6-13)

1) He heard the complainants (6), *I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these complaints.*

2) He confronted the offenders privately (7a), *After thinking it over, I brought charges against the nobles and the officials; I said to them, "You are all taking interest from your own people."*

3)

4) He condemned them publicly (7b-13), *And I called a great assembly to deal with them, and said to them, "As far as we were able, we have bought back our Jewish kindred who had been sold to other nations; but now you are selling your own kin, who must then be bought back by us!" They were silent, and could not find a word to say. So I said, "The thing that you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God, to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? Moreover I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us stop this taking of interest. Restore to them, this very day, their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the interest on money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them." Then they said, "We will restore everything and demand nothing more from them. We will do as you say." And I called the priests, and made them take an oath to do as they had promised. I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, "So may God shake out everyone from house and from property who does not perform this promise. Thus may they be shaken out and emptied." And all the assembly said, "Amen," and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.*

- a) The accused and accusers came together.
- b) He appealed that they do what's right before their God and the people of the covenant.
- c) The people agreed to follow God's commands and make things right.

c. Nehemiah's example (14-19), *Moreover from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people, and took food and wine from them, besides forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God. Indeed, I devoted myself to the work on this wall, and acquired no land; and all my servants were gathered there for the work. Moreover there were at my table*

one hundred fifty people, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations around us. Now that which was prepared for one day was one ox and six choice sheep; also fowls were prepared for me, and every ten days skins of wine in abundance; yet with all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because of the heavy burden of labor on the people. Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.

- 1) He viewed his high position as one of responsibility - he was the governor.
- 2) His behavior reflected his faith in God.
 - a) He did not accept a governor's salary.
 - b) He worked hard.
 - c) He fed others from his own table.
 - d) He trusted God for his needs.
- 3) W. E. Sangster, *"Are some people outside the Church of Jesus Christ because I am inside?"*

2. From outside, chapter 6

a. *Ambush (1-4), Now when it was reported to Sanballat and Tobiah and to Geshem the Arab and to the rest of our enemies that I had built the wall and that there was no gap left in it (though up to that time I had not set up the doors in the gates), Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, "Come and let us meet together in one of the villages in the plain of Ono." But they intended to do me harm. So I sent messengers to them, saying, "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it to come down to you?" They sent to me four times in this way, and I answered them in the same manner.*

- 1) His enemies wanted Nehemiah to come to them.
- 2) He knew they planned to harm him so he refused to go -he was too busy.

b. *Accusation (5-9), In the same way Sanballat for the fifth time sent his servant to me with an open letter in his hand. In it was written, "It is reported among the nations—and Geshem also says it—that you and the Jews intend to rebel; that is why you are building the wall; and according to this report you wish to become their king. You have also set up prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem concerning you, 'There is a king in Judah!' And now it will be reported to the king according to these words. So come, therefore, and let us confer together." Then I sent to him, saying, "No such things as you say have been done; you are inventing them out of your own mind" —for they all wanted to frighten us, thinking, "Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done." But now, O God, strengthen my hands.*

- 1) His enemies spread rumors that the Jews planned to rebel and make Nehemiah king.
- 2) He denied the accusation and kept working.

c. *Intimidation (10-14), One day when I went into the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah son of Mehetabel, who was confined to his house, he said, "Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you; indeed, tonight they are coming to kill you." But I said, "Should a man like me run away? Would a man like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in!" Then I perceived and saw that God had not sent him at all, but he had pronounced the prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. He was hired for this purpose, to intimidate me and make me sin by acting in this way, and so they could give me a bad name, in order to taunt me. Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, according to these things that they did, and also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me afraid.*

- 1) An acquaintance encouraged Nehemiah to flee for safety to the temple to discredit his reputation.
- 2) He remained on the job and trusted God.

d. *Treason (15-19), So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem; for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God. Moreover in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them. For many in Judah were bound by oath to him, because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah son of Arah: and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam son of Berechiah. Also they spoke of his good deeds in my presence, and reported my words to him. And Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me.*

- 1) His enemies lost confidence because they recognized that the work had been enabled by God.
- 2) Some of the nobles were committed to his enemies and tried to undermine him.

CONCLUSION

- A. The work of God will face opposition from without and within.
- B. Nehemiah's triumph over opposition demonstrated key leadership qualities.
 1. He listened to complaints.
 2. He didn't give up despite repeated opposition.
 3. His commitment to task wasn't overcome by problems.
 4. He was concerned for justice.
 5. He had personal integrity.
 6. He was accountable to God.