



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for May 18, 2008
Released on Wednesday, May 14, 2008**

“Finishing the Task”

Devotional Reading: Psalm 71:1–6.

Background Scripture: Nehemiah 4–6.

Lesson Text: Nehemiah 4:1–3, 6–9, 13–15; 6:15.

Nehemiah 4:1–3, 6–9, 13–15

1 But it came to pass, that when Sanballat heard that we builded the wall, he was wroth, and took great indignation, and mocked the Jews.

2 And he spake before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, What do these feeble Jews? will they fortify themselves? will they sacrifice? will they make an end in a day? will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned?

3 Now Tobiah the Ammonite was by him, and he said, Even that which they build, if a fox go up, he shall even break down their stone wall.

.....

6 So built we the wall; and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof: for the people had a mind to work.

7 But it came to pass, that when Sanballat, and Tobiah, and the Arabians, and the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites, heard that the walls of Jerusalem were made up, and that the breaches began to be stopped, then they were very wroth,

8 And conspired all of them together to come and to fight against Jerusalem, and to hinder it.

9 Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them day and night, because of them.

.....

13 Therefore set I in the lower places behind the wall, and on the higher places, I even set the people after their families with their swords, their spears, and their bows.

14 And I looked, and rose up, and said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, Be not ye afraid of them: remember the Lord, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses.

15 And it came to pass, when our enemies heard that it was known unto us, and God had brought their counsel to nought, that we returned all of us to the wall, every one unto his work.

Nehemiah 6:15

15 So the wall was finished in the twenty and fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty and two days.

INTRODUCTION

Perseverance Through Opposition

Jason was a young Christian who had a vision to reach youth. He worked hard to organize a rally as a means to bring the gospel to them. His enthusiasm was certainly not lacking as he called others to join him in his vision of winning his peers to Christ.

Although there were many who supported Jason's work and shared in it by giving of their time, finances, and prayers, Jason quickly learned that with any worthy cause comes opposition. Jason heard the comments firsthand. "This is never going to work." "I don't believe anybody will attend, even if it gets organized." Some questioned his integrity—"Jason just wants to be the boss" or "he has to be in the limelight."

After hearing these comments, it didn't take very long for Jason to begin doubting whether he should continue to try to launch this outreach rally. Then came the other disappointments. People said they would help and then would not show up. Rumors spread that the rally had been canceled due to lack of interest. The posters, which had already been mailed out, had the main speaker's name misspelled.

Jason, however, continued to pray. He continued to seek support from those who shared his vision. He pressed forward despite opposition and doubts, and the rally was held as scheduled. There have been many more rallies in Jason's community since that first one, each having some sort of opposition and each being used by the Lord to further His kingdom.

Stories similar to Jason's are being acted out all over the world by God's people, because with every good work of God there are those who will try to stop it. Unfortunately, not all good works end with victory. Many works cease because the worker was not prepared for the opposition—the discouragement was just too much. Today we are going to discover biblical principles that will strengthen us to continue the Lord's work in spite of opposition.

LESSON BACKGROUND

As we saw last week, Nehemiah was the cupbearer of King Artaxerxes of Persia (reigned 464–424 BC). When Nehemiah heard about the condition of the city and its gates, he prayed to God and approached the king to seek permission to return to Jerusalem to rebuild. Artaxerxes granted his request. As God's chosen man, Nehemiah arrived to inspect the ruined walls and lead the people in a campaign to rebuild them.

Nehemiah 3, which occurs between last week's text and today's, shows us Nehemiah and his work crew in action. Great progress is made in building the wall, despite the anger of some neighboring officials. But the opposition is about to kick things up a notch!

TODAY'S AIM

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

1. Describe how Nehemiah overcame opposition in rebuilding Jerusalem's walls.
2. Give an example of faith that overcomes adversity.
3. Make a plan to identify, take charge of, and complete a project or ministry that is facing opposition.

How to Say It

ASHDODITES. *Ash-duh-dites.*

SANBALLAT. San-bal-ut.
TOBIAH. Toe-bye-uh.

Opposition (Nehemiah 4:1–3)

1. Why did Sanballat and Tobiah act with so much opposition to what Nehemiah and the Jews were doing (Nehemiah 4:1)?

We first meet *Sanballat* in Nehemiah 2:10. He is governor of Samaria (confirmed in secular literature), and Tobiah was probably one of his closest advisers. They felt very threatened by Nehemiah's presence and the project he was undertaking.

Opposition toward what is good and right starts in the heart. Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem to promote "the welfare of the children of Israel" (Nehemiah 2:10) draws Sanballat's initial displeasure. As the work to rebuild the walls proceeds, his displeasure turns to great anger. He does not want the city of Jerusalem to be strengthened, possibly because he wants to be governor of Judea as well as Samaria.

When we are engaged in God's work, we should not be surprised when opposition comes. The enemies of God will be angry at attempts to build Christ's kingdom (John 15:20; 2 Timothy 3:12).

2. Why should we expect opposition when working for God? How has God strengthened you to overcome opposition?

A very real conflict exists between the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God. Satan (which means "adversary") uses his servants, both demonic and human, to try to interrupt the good that God's servants attempt to do. Since this may happen daily, we need to take precautions daily (Ephesians 6:10–18).

Those who opposed Nehemiah had vested interests in doing so. Christ also faced opposition from those who had vested interests that they were trying to protect: "If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him; and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation" (John 11:48). If what we are doing is important enough for an enemy of the cross to oppose us, sometimes that can tell us that what we are doing is right!

3. In what ways did Sanballat mock the Jews publicly when he heard of their progress on the wall (vs. 2,3)?

Now when Sanballat heard that the wall was progressing, he became furious and filled with rage and mocked with increased intensity. Sanballat expressed his disdain through a series of questions (4:2).

Sanballat's address was a public one probably given to the political group surrounding him, as well as to the army of Samaria. He obviously wielded a large amount of influence in the area and was determined to get everyone on his side in this situation. Mockery always seems to draw a following, and Sanballat proceeded with his questions. He referred to the Jews as feeble and implied they would never succeed in fortifying themselves. He mocked the idea that they would redevelop their worship system.

He then made fun of the fact that the Jews were trying to revive something meaningful out of a pile of burned rubbish. He implied that the Jews were to-tally naive if they felt for one moment that they could bring something good out of the mess they faced. His entire attitude was one of contempt, and it was echoed by his sidekick, Tobiah, who sounded much like a puppet figure instead of a man capable of independent thinking. He jeered that if even a little fox jumped up onto the wall, it would crumble back to the ground.

Determination (Nehemiah 4:6–9)

Between verses 3 and 6 is a prayer of Nehemiah against the enemies. We notice in this prayer that Nehemiah directs his reaction to God, not to the enemies. The prayer looks like what we see at Jeremiah 18:23.

4. To what human reason did Nehemiah attribute the wall's progress (v. 6)?

Having expressed his heart and mind to God, Nehemiah returned to the task at hand. With everyone busy working on the wall, it was not long before it was connected all the way around the city and up to half its designated height. Nehemiah 4:6 includes a pertinent reason for such success: "the people had a mind to work." The word translated "mind" means "heart." The hearts of the people were into this project, so they worked wholeheartedly.

Because they have a *mind to work*, they do not allow the attempted distractions to stop them from achieving their mission. They continue to move forward, setting their hearts on completing the work God has given them instead of wallowing in their difficulties.

We can see the value of teamwork as God's people join together in a single-minded work. Everyone does his or her part, and no part of the wall is left undone. Cooperation means that the wall goes up at a rapid pace.

5. Where did the allied forces getting ready to attack Jerusalem come from (vs. 7,8)?

We now see more enemies mentioned, namely the Arabians, Ammonites, and Ashdodites. The large multitude of people mentioned here surrounded the city of Jerusalem. Samaria, Sanballat's territory, was to the north. The Arabs were to the south. The Ammonites were east, and the Ashdodites were west. Ashdod was one of the five Philistine cities near the coast of the Mediterranean.

The plan within this large confederacy was to carry out a direct attack on Jerusalem. The closing of the gaps in the wall indicated that the restoration process was moving along well. The anger level of the opposition grew immensely, and determination to put a stop to the project propelled these groups to action. Since Sanballat had failed in his attempts to verbally intimidate the Jews, he now had to call on his allies for assistance. The growing threat needed further attention.

6. What did Nehemiah do with the people when he discovered the plan of the enemies to attack (v. 9)?

While the enemy conspires, Nehemiah prepares to face the opposition by combining faith in God with action. The faith and action take the forms of *prayer* and setting a *watch*.

Before Nehemiah does anything else, he seeks God's protection and guidance. (See how Nehemiah prays in Nehemiah 1:5–11; 4:4, 5; 5:19; 6:9b, 14.) Having confidence in God's protection and favor does not rule out the obligation that the godly person has to watch out for the traps of the enemy. The Scriptures match together the ideas of watching and praying (see Matthew 26:41; 1 Peter 4:7).

God will protect those who watch as well as pray. It has been said that prayer without watchfulness is presumption and watchfulness without prayer is sinful self-confidence. The two truly work together to enable the worker to keep going in the face of opposition.

Victory (Nehemiah 4:13–15; 6:15)

The enemy's mocking does not discourage the workers in and of itself. But when fatigue and the threat of force is added, the people began to lose heart (vs. 10–12,

not in today's text). So Nehemiah takes special action to reverse this morale problem.

7. Since the Jews did not have a standing army, how did Nehemiah arrange for their protection (v. 13)?

Nehemiah shows his shrewdness in military tactics and human nature. He sees certain areas that need to be strengthened, and he does so. He supplies the weapons necessary for defense. Positioning those with weapons *after their families* provides another reason to work and defend the city together.

8. What challenge did Nehemiah offer after he organized the people to be ready to defend themselves (v. 14)?

Nehemiah then issued a stirring challenge intended to inspire faith and courage in the face of possible danger. They did not need to fear but only to re-member their God, who was great and awesome. They were to courageously fight in order to protect the ones they loved the most, including their brothers (probably all fellow Jews), sons, daughters, and wives. Nehemiah was confident that as they fought, God would be the real Protector.

9. Are the steps Nehemiah took to overcome ungodly opposition still valid today? Why, or why not?

Before Nehemiah did anything, he brought the matter before God in prayer. This is still a valid first step when (and before) we face opposition. Next, Nehemiah set watchmen up in preparation for the enemy attack. We can serve as watchmen over our own character, attitudes, or actions; we should not give the enemy a valid reason to accuse us in these areas because of our own carelessness. A failure of vigilance invites disaster (1 Thessalonians 5:6–8; 1 Peter 5:8).

Finally, as Nehemiah did with his people, we can encourage our fellow workers to stand fast in the face of opposition. With God's help, we can be victorious.

10. What happened when the enemy found out that the Jews were ready to face opposition (v. 15)?

The planned surprise attack by Nehemiah's *enemies* is no longer a surprise. So the enemies abandon their plan. It is difficult to assault a fortified position when the defenders are expecting an attack and are prepared to fight back. The sight of God's people standing strong on the partially rebuilt wall, prepared to defend themselves against an attack, is enough to discourage the opposition.

Nehemiah's tactics succeed, but he gives credit to God. This is not the first time God has caused His enemies to despair (Exodus 15:14–16; 23:27, 28; Deuteronomy 2:25). The focus of this and other texts is on what God achieves within a community of believers. It is evident that God is working through the people's prayers and actions to protect and strengthen them. Knowing that God is working through them and that He has brought the enemies' plan to nothing leads the Jews to return to *work*. They have confidence in God's protection and provisions.

11. How long did it take to complete the wall, and what were the important factors behind such success (Nehemiah 6:15)?

The enemies said it couldn't be done! "They are too feeble." "It will never work." "If a fox jumps on it, it will break down." When the ridicule doesn't work, the enemies contemplate using force, planning to attack the Jews. Their plan is frustrated and *the wall* is now *finished*. From start to finish, the entire project took just fifty-two days. When we realize all the obstacles that arose during that time,

we discover it was amazing. The completion of this project in such a short time is a testimony to the power of God and the zeal of the workers.

The month of Elul corresponds with the latter part of August and the beginning of September on our calendar. The year is 444 BC. Nehemiah's vision has become a reality—and we are less than halfway through the book of Nehemiah at this point!

Despite opposition that comes both from within and without (6:10-14), Nehemiah never loses sight of his mission and for whom he is working. Nehemiah will continue to seek the guidance of God through prayer. Nehemiah will continue to encourage his fellow workers all the way.

Conclusion

Finishing the Task

The fruit of the efforts by Nehemiah and the workers brought glory to God (Nehemiah 6:16). The efforts resulted in emotional and physical security for the Judeans. Undoubtedly there was joy at accomplishing a task against tremendous odds (compare Ezra 3:10-13).

We have a wonderful example of godly and devout leadership in Nehemiah. He was a man of prayer who had his heart in God's work. We see Nehemiah engaging in self-denying labor while inspiring others to do the same. He was steadfast in his work, not easily sidetracked. He depended on God and was ready to give Him the glory.

God has called the church to a tremendous task of strengthening its members and taking the gospel to a lost and dying world. It is important that the church be led by people who exemplify the characteristics of Nehemiah. There will be opposition—there always has been—but as God's men and women join together with the same goal in mind, we will be able to accomplish great things for the glory of God.

What has God called you to do? Whatever it is, do not let the size of the task or the amount of time it will take to complete it keep you from setting your heart and hand to it. No job is too big and no problem is too great when we are following God every step of the way. God has called us and equipped us to finish the tasks of the church despite the opposition.

Prayer

Holy Father, thank You for Your faithfulness to Your people and to Your work. Without the assurance of Your love and guidance toward us, we would not be able to stand. Strengthen us to accomplish what You have called each of us to do. Cause our focus to remain on Your great character when we are faced with a difficult task. In Jesus' name, amen.

Thought to Remember

Focusing on God leads to victory!

Anticipating Next Week's lesson

It was a wonderful thing for the Jews to rebuild their temple and the wall around Jerusalem, but the ceremony that followed was even better. The people assembled and heard the law of God read to them by Ezra. This resulted in a revival of the Festival of Booths, which was started in Moses' time. Study Background Scripture:

Nehemiah 8 "Renewing the Covenant."

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