

Nehemiah succeeded because he knew how to recognize and defeat the tactics of the enemy. His strategies will work for Christians facing opposition today.

## Overcoming Opposition

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No one said this was going to be easy. Serving God means facing spiritual resistance. In fact, the severity of the enemy's opposition may be the best indication the purposes of God are being accomplished!

Nehemiah provides a model for identifying and overcoming even very powerful spiritual enemies. His amazing reconstruction of Jerusalem's wall in just 52 days took place in the face of many determined adversaries.

Local political figures such as Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem threw everything they had the struggling Jewish work crews to prevent Jerusalem from regaining its economic and political dominance in the region. Their strategies failed because Nehemiah knew how to recognize and defeat them. We need the same skills today.

### The Fight

The two primary strategies used by Nehemiah's enemies represent the same tactics Satan uses against the people of God in every age:

**#1 *Incrimination*: opposition by accusation.** Rather than risk a direct assault on the city, Sanballat and his henchmen launched verbal barrages designed to create doubt about the project both among the Jews and in the eyes of the empire.

*Derision* was the first avenue of attack. Nehemiah records that, "they mocked and ridiculed us." (2:19) This stinging belittlement was very public and very adamant. "What are those feeble Jews doing," demanded Tobiah, "...if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!" (4:2,3) Sanballat's aim was to get Nehemiah's followers to compare the size of the task (enormous) with the scope of their resources (slim) so that success would seem out of reach.

*Distraction*. Sanballat also invited Nehemiah to meetings away from the city. His purpose was to consume the governor's time and, ultimately, to capture and/or assassinate him. He also hired a false prophet to lure Nehemiah into the Temple area, in hopes he would abandon his leadership responsibilities to find personal sanctuary. Had Nehemiah complied, he would have been totally discredited in

the eyes of his own people. The reconstruction project would have died along with his reputation. (6:13)

Our enemy is an expert in both of these tactics. The word “devil” means “an accuser, a slanderer.” He undercuts our motivation to serve God by heaping scorn on us, sometimes using the words of other people. He creates self-doubt by translating even our best motives into something ugly.

After a particularly bruising church conflict, I found my mind overflowing with insecurities far in excess of the situation itself. Could I do anything right? Did I even have a future in the ministry? The comments of others often reinforced these thoughts.

A sure sign of an enemy incursion is this sort of self-destructive thinking. Using it, he can talk us into quitting when we should stick it out, or letting God-given opportunity pass by when we should take it. In both cases, our potential in the Kingdom is minimized without Satan needing to fire a shot.

**#2 Intimidation:** *opposition by attack.* The Jews’ opponents had the city surrounded, and sought to frighten them into submission. (6:9)

*Destruction* was the essence of their threat. Sanballat’s allies commanded forces sufficient to overcome the city’s scattered inhabitants. Even the Jews who lived nearby warned the city’s residents that, “Wherever you turn, they will attack us.” (4:12)

*Distortion* was the second form of intimidation used by Nehemiah’s foes. Knowing that the empire took a dim view of provincial revolution, Sanballat’s allies deliberately misinterpreted the motives behind the reconstruction project. “They asked, ‘Are you rebelling against the king?’” (2:19) Their question implies that Nehemiah is rebuilding the city to establish himself as king, a move sure to invoke imperial wrath. (6:6-7)

The enemy we face uses much the same technique. Indeed, the name, “Satan”, means “an adversary”. As with Nehemiah’s foes, he attempts to intimidate us so our “hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed.” (6:9)

I have been threatened verbally, physically, and administratively on more than one occasion in the pastoral ministry. In each case the assailant never actually landed a blow. They simply wanted to make me afraid. Backing away from my calling in the search for safety would hand control of my destiny over to the enemy. Fortunately, we are not facing this kind of conflict alone.

## **The Victory**

Nehemiah used the weapons available to him to fight back. Similarly, “the weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.” (2 Corinthians 10:4)

*Perceive below the surface.* Having served as a cupbearer in the court of the Persian king Artaxerxes I, Nehemiah was not a newcomer to the high stakes game of imperial political intrigue. The wisdom gained from experience served him well. When tempted to leave his responsibilities, he immediately recognized a ploy of the enemy, and retorted: “I will not go!” I realized that God had not sent him...” (6:11-12)

Experience counts. Paul was able to write of Satan: “we are not unaware of his schemes.” (2 Corinthians 2:11) The first line of defense, then, is to use common sense insight to spot difficulties that cannot be explained on the basis of circumstances alone.

However, even the best human wisdom will not be enough. to expose every scheme of the adversary. We should ask the Holy Spirit to make the gift of “distinguishing between spirits” operative within us. (1 Corinthians 12:10). The proper weapons can be used only when the enemy is correctly identified.

*Pray above the circumstances.* Nehemiah could do little to escape his situation, so he rose above it by calling on the Lord. In just one of many examples, Nehemiah prayed: “Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their heads,” (4:4) By personal example and organization, he also involved the city’s population in intercession. (4:9)

Like Nehemiah, we should pray in faith. John wrote, “for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.” (1 John 5:4) Turning to God in prayer brings all of the resources of the kingdom to bear on the opposition. The enemy is no match for our God.

*Post guards behind the gaps.* Nehemiah prayed fervently, but he also “stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families.” (4:13) His strategy was to rely completely on God, while *also* organizing his forces to protect the especially vulnerable places in the wall. Ultimate victory depended on both.

In the heat of the battle we have the same need to defend any aspect of our lives that might invite attack. For one person, the low point in the wall might be their thought life, for another it might be control over their words. The avenues of temptation and attack must be closed to avoid squandering the results of our prayers.

The posting of guards is especially important when the enemy attacks in subtle ways. Ironically, one of Sanballat’s most devious schemes was an offer to help

with the rebuilding project. This would have placed his forces inside the walls, in a position to do maximum damage to the effort.

Nehemiah responded simply: "you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it." (2:20b) Defeating spiritual forces means denying the enemy any role in our lives. Paul warns us: "do not give the devil a foothold." (Ephesians 4:27) By refusing admission to the enemy in any form, we also deny him much of the evidence he will use later to incriminate us. If I don't blow it now, he cannot use my failures against me later.

*Persevere until victory comes.* The rebuilding of Jerusalem was a long, hard struggle. There were times when, despite much praying and evident progress, the people verged on losing heart. However, with Nehemiah's encouragement, they simply refused to quit.

Nehemiah summarizes the fruits of their perseverance with these words: "When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God." (6:16) Success is the best revenge.

To overcome opposition, we must first know its nature and be able to identify the weapons being used against us. A combination of practical and spiritual weapons is available to us to turn back every onslaught of the enemy. We can use them in the confidence that, "the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world." (1 John 4:4)

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