

Opposition: The Reality of a Leader - Part 3
Nehemiah 6:1-19

Introduction: On the night before Jesus died, He had an overwhelming desire to spend time with His disciples (Luke 22:15) for several reasons. First, these were His friends whom He had ministered with, taught, and travelled with for over 3 years. They were precious to Him. Second, in His humanity He realized the amount of pain and turmoil He was going to enter into, and the comfort of companionship was hoped for, even though these men failed on their end (sleeping, arguing, denying, etc). Lastly, this was the last time He would have to instruct them before their relationship radically changed. He would see them after His resurrection, but no longer would they walk in training days but would have to be able to handle life without the physical presence of Jesus with them. He spoke plainly (John 16:25) at this point, mincing no words and holding nothing back concerning the reality of what life in this world would be like. Right before His High Priestly prayer of John 17, Jesus said these words:

*"Do you now believe? Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. **I have said these things to you, that IN ME you may have peace. In THE WORLD you will have tribulation. But TAKE HEART; I have overcome the world.***

John 16:33

Jesus packed three monumental phrases into one sentence: we are at peace with God through Jesus and His work on the cross since we have been justified by faith (Rom. 5:1) - peace from God's wrath, our sin, and in a reconciled relationship; we will simultaneously have **trouble** in this world - since we are now at odds with the system, with our satanic enemy, and our loyalty/allegiance/citizenship; but we also have **hope**, since we know that all of this trouble is only for "a little while", and though we will be sorrowful, our sorrow will turn into joy (John 16:20), knowing that this world is NOT THE END.

Because we will have trouble, tribulation, and opposition we need more than just pithy, token, flowery platitudes in nice fonts to help us endure, and endure with joy. We don't need inspiration as much as we need revelation. We don't need artificial encouragements as much as we need to be grounded in the truth and reality. ***What is needed to navigate this world through all of its trouble and opposition?***

Nothing less than the FEAR OF THE LORD.

Fearing God is a theme and thread throughout Scripture. Fear means a reverential awe, keeping worshipful posture. It implies trust, dependency, and service. When we fear someone, it means we care about what they think of us or what they can do to us. We serve what we fear because we recognize they are greater than we are, ultimately submitting our lives to them, either directly or indirectly. With a quick overview of Scripture we see the importance of this fear:

Israel was called to fear God, serving and swearing by Him only. This included putting away all other gods and serving with sincerity, since God is a Jealous God - Deut. 6:13-14, Joshua 24:14

Fearing God is the beginning of wisdom and brings true understanding and knowledge of God - Psalm 111:10; Prov. 1:7, 2:5. In fact in the end of **Ecclesiastes 12:13** Solomon summarizes ALL of life in relation to the fear of the Lord "*The end of the matter; all has been heard. **Fear God and keep his***

commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil."

God loves and offers friendship to those who fear Him - Psalm 25:14, 103:17

Fearing the Lord is how we overcome evil, including pride and arrogance (Prov. 8:13), **insecurity** (Prov. 14:26), **envy** (Prov. 23:17), and **fear of man** (Prov. 29:25).

When we realize God is our light, salvation, and stronghold, we no longer fear men or circumstances - Psalm 27:1

Fearing God motivates us to persuade others of both judgment and righteousness - 2 Cor. 5:11

Fear of the Lord is how we are to conduct ourselves in this world - 1 Peter 1:17-21 - including with oppressive governments (1 Pet. 2:17), terrible bosses (1 Pet. 2:18) unsaved spouses (1 Pet. 3:1), and overall suffering in this world (1 Pet. 3:13-17). With all of this, we are faced with this **fundamental reality**: We will either **fear God or man**, will either serve God or man, and will ultimately either worship God or man. There is no middle ground in this. God will not compete. He is either our LORD and glorified in our life or is opposed to us in judgment.

What does all of this have to do with our study in Nehemiah? Everything. Turn back with me to Nehemiah 5 and quickly notice how **fear** plays out in Nehemiah's leadership and his opponents. Remember, that as he began rebuilding the wall he faced **opposition** from without and within. The cities around him threatened with psychological and physical threats, and those within the community threatened with oppressive financial tactics against their own brothers. Chapter 5:14 is an insertion into the narrative by Nehemiah, explaining his thinking during this time, and chapter 6 picks up with a final round of external opposition. Notice that fear is a driver in 5:15, 6:9, 13, 16, and 19. As Nehemiah looked back at the events of the final stages of rebuilding the wall, he gave us insight into his own mind, the tactics of the enemy, and how he overcame those tactics. In doing this, we are left with foundational truth as we face a life of tribulation and trouble in this world: **we overcome IN the Fear of the Lord.**

When Opposition is Overcome by a Leaders Example (5:14-19)

In chapter 5, the wealthy from among the nation, those with resources, were leveraging the poor who were committed to rebuilding the wall by withholding food, charging interest, and forcing the forfeiture of property or enslaving family members as payment. Nehemiah responded swiftly in anger but also in wisdom. He not only got a verbal commitment from the abusers but held them accountable to reverse their practices and refund what they had taken. This led him to recount how he acted as Governor for the 12 years he was stationed in Jerusalem.

Leaders are Selfless When They Fear the Lord

Because government officials preceded him, there was already a precedent in place between the government and the people. The former Governors "*laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them for their daily ration forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people*" (15). It would have been Nehemiah's right to have continued the practice. He could have gained more money and power without even seeming cruel by simply *keeping* the practice handed off to him. He could have demanded more from taxes, could have leveraged this to acquire more land, and done it all WITHIN the bounds of the law.

But Nehemiah refused to exercise his rights this way. He refused his governmental privilege and benefit. He foot the bill for all the food around the table, where he would entertain dignitaries and people of the community. **What motivated him to act so magnanimously? "But I did not do so, because of the FEAR OF THE LORD.(15).**

- **He knew that he'd have to give an account for all things one day (19)**
- **He saw the people he lead as souls to care for, not those to further an agenda (18)** - this gave him **compassion** on the people rather than disdain
- **He knew true freedom was a willingness to give up freedom** - see **1 Cor. 9:15-18** - Paul gave up his freedom and rights for the sake of the gospel, making himself a slave to all that he might win more
- **He knew that changing a culture starts with the leader** - How does a culture of disunity, polarized factions, and materialism change? When the leader begins to live differently. Think about how that affects our families, marriages, friendships, and the way we parent. We can redirect a history of selfishness, anger, fighting, pride, and gossip by leading and living differently. We can speak tenderly toward our spouse, can serve selflessly at the end of a work day without expectation, and begin to use our words to build others up instead of tearing them down. This is leadership. This comes out of fearing the Lord, not man.

When Opposition Uses Public Peer Pressure (5:1-4)

The wall was almost finished except for the doors and gates, and the enemies around were more than concerned, they were desperate (v1). Their tactics became more deceptive, dangerous, and aggressive.

Tactics of Peer Pressure

We all have a natural drift toward the fear of man. We can't help care what people think of us and we all start with a desire for approval and acceptance. This does not stop once we are out of our school years (unfortunately), where peer pressure is a daily mine field to navigate. Nehemiah's enemies understood this and used it as a tactic to try to get Nehemiah to leave the work on the wall unfinished, lure him away from protection, and do him bodily harm.

Two of the leading voices of the opposition sent correspondence to Nehemiah under the veil of peace. "I know we opposed this in the past, but now look at you, all grown up and nearly finished with this project. You got us. You win. Now lets bury the hatchet and talk about moving forward." On the surface, this seemed like a reasonable and even rational response. But they tipped their hand just enough. **First**, they asked for Nehemiah to meet them on the far North side of Judea (plains of Ono), which would be far away from his work and people. They were calling him away from a home-court advantage to their turf, even though there was **NO REASON TO DO SO**. **Secondly**, they tried the full court press - they not only sent it from the 2 most powerful leaders, but did so **4 times!** Each time Nehemiah's response was "no", but knowing relentless pressure consistently applied wears people down, they pressed down. We get weakened under this kind of pressure because we start to question ourselves, or we think that if we say "no" enough times the relationship will end. This is what happens in **dating relationships** or other relationships where the first "no" is broken down by relentless peer pressure.

Facing Peer Pressure

Notice Nehemiah's response: "I am doing something significant here, its not done, so why would I stop now? How does time with you help me accomplish this task?" At first glance this may seem conceited, but this is truly **convictional leadership**. Not only did Nehemiah perceive their intentions, but what he

was committed to was greater than what was offered! In other words, how do we withstand peer pressure, how do we say "no" over and over to the siren song of compromise, capitulation, and unrighteousness? We are committed to something greater! We are committed to God's glory, out of the fear of the Lord, knowing that we no longer live for ourselves but for Him. This is true for our **teenagers here** or adults who are tempted to give into desires of those around us.

When Opposition Uses False Accusation (5:5-14)

Desperation kicked up the opposition tactics to 11. They were done with the "Mr. Nice Guy" stuff, now the gloves were coming off as well as any semblance of decorum. They sent a **5th letter**, this time the "open" variety, one that would be known by the immediate community and even back to the King. They used **false accusation** as one of the last ditch efforts to stop the train that Nehemiah had going full speed. How do these tactics work?

Tactics of Creating a False Narrative

- **Narrative created by vague but multiple reports (6)** - This open letter represented "many" people as well as leading officials (Gesham also says it). These were not substantiated, but that does not matter in our culture (or any for that matter). If enough people say it, it must be true in our minds.
- **False accusation with a semblance of truth (6b-7)** - The public accusation was three fold: you intend to rebel, you want to be king, and you've set up prophets to validate and proclaim this. Obviously, if true, this would have been high handed sedition and would have forced King Artaxerxes to not simply remove Nehemiah's head from his body, but also knock down the wall that was now almost finished. With every false narrative there is enough truth to make it believable. It was true that the Jews were re-establishing worship in place given to them by God, anticipating a King that would come to lead them. But the intention of Nehemiah had nothing to do with rebellion or his own kingship.

In 1983, the German news magazine *Stern* was convinced they had come into possession of Adolph Hitler's lost diaries, which would have given light to the mind of a madman, exposing the interworking of a Nazi regime that committed unimaginable atrocities. The story was that at the closing of the war, Hitler had his private possessions flown out of Berlin to a different location, including his personal diaries. One of these planes crashed along the way, preserving volumes within. A known forger named **Konrad Kujau** had apparently come into possession and was willing to sell at a price. Not only did *Stern* buy it, but **Newsweek and The Sunday Times** purchased these, even though it was found by simple tests these were not only forgeries, but terrible ones to boot. There was a desire for these to be real, enough people validated them, and millions were duped into believing these to be real. False narrative against believers works the same way. Enough people believe it and it **becomes truth in the public realm**.

- **Fear driven ultimatum given (7b)** - Once something is public, it does not easily come back. Much like toothpaste once its out of tube, false accusation accomplishes what it sets out to do whether it is substantiated or not. I remember **John MacArthur** shared in chapel that was not concerned about threats against his life or family, but his biggest concern would be **false accusation**, since that is a tactic that is fought in the public court, not in the realm of truth and reality. The enemies of Nehemiah knew this, and they basically said, "*Stop working or the King is going to hear about this!*" We need look no further than Joseph in Genesis 39 to find that false accusation works, though never counteracts God's purpose and goal in our life.

Tactics of Using False Prophets

A second deceptive tactic was the hiring of a false prophet (12). The enemies had hired someone from inside to betray, knowing that Nehemiah would listen (at least initially) to this man. Shemaiah the son of Delaiah (10) potentially was a priest (if his father was the same mentioned in 1 Chronicles 24:18), which means he would have had credibility. His message: *"Lets lock ourselves into the Temple where we will be safe, since I know they are coming to kill you."* Notice that the possibility that they would come to kill Nehemiah was not shocking revelation, but the way that Shemaiah represented it was. The way he phrased his warning represented that this was a prophecy or revelation from God.

The tactic was to take Nehemiah down in two ways: One, if he had gone along with this, he would have violated the Law by entering the part of the Temple reserved for priests alone, and TWO, they could discredit his leadership by causing him to cower in fear, becoming the object of more taunts. Nehemiah saw through this false prophecy and refused to go along with it.

Standing Firm When the False is Flying

How do we deal with the false accusations and narratives about us? Notice how Nehemiah responded to these:

1. **He responded to false accusations with the truth, but did not try to defend or argue** - Look at verse 8, where he makes a statement, *"No such things as you say have been done, for you are inventing them out of your own mind."* After making this statement, he did not address it anymore. Often the more we try to defend ourselves, the more the narrative continues. We stand in the truth and eventually the lie will be exposed or go away.

2. **He prayed that God would strengthen him and deal with his accusers** - He needed God's help because ALL OF US STRUGGLE when we are attacked by what is false (9). But he also called for God to deal with those who were against him instead of trying to vindicate himself or to accuse his accusers. Leaders KNOW they will face false accusations, and it is a mark of an insecure leader that tries to defend himself or fire back to all those who would speak falsely against him. Fearing God means a leader can trust God will always do what is right and best in every situation.

3. **He stood by God's Word and Courage when he was threatened** - When there was a credible threat by a credible source, he had to lean on what he knew was true. First he said *"Should such a man run away?"* A leader stands firm in the midst of threat, and one that hides when it gets hard is no leader at all. Second, if he had gone into the Temple for security, he would have trusted structures instead of God, and would have been willing to violate the Law to save his own skin. He was convinced of the truth and this became a grid to think everything through. This is exactly what God told **Joshua** as he entered into the Promised Land: to meditate and do the Law of the Lord, and to be strong and courageous.

Courage and conviction to the Word are intimately united and create an iron clad defense against the arrows of false accusation and advice.

When Fear Tactics Are Reversed (5:15-16)

All the tactics failed, and the Wall was finished in **52 days**, an improbable and incredible feat, considering the tools and resources available. Upon completion, there was a **reversal of fear**:

*"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.**"*

The enemies were as devastated as they were deflated. Their strength was drained and their strength and resolution to fight was gone. Convictional leadership and the ability to stay the course not only got the job done, it put opposition in its place.

So we are left with the real question: "**Whom do we fear?**" Are we characterized by the fear of the Lord? Do we do all things, from work to entertainment, from resting to activity, from leading to following, in light of the fear of the Lord? If we are going to live fearlessly in this world of trouble, if we are going to fight for joy and hope, it all begins with a proper understanding that God is glorious, in control, and is good. We live in reverence of Him, knowing we will live with Him forever, knowing we will account for all that we do, and knowing that He is working in and through us. In this world we will have trouble and tribulation, but Jesus has overcome the world!