SESSION 8

Be Faithful in Adversity

God-given tasks can be completed with confidence and resolve because God has conquered all obstacles to His work.

Servant-leaders lead from the front, not from behind. As a result, they’re often the first ones to feel the brunt of an assault. Early stage attacks may come in the form of verbal onslaughts—hurtful gossip, smear tactics, or outright lies. Leaders are sometimes blamed for bad things they didn’t do and criticized for good things they tried to do. Too often, they’re misquoted, misunderstood, and never given an opportunity to set the record straight.

As a servant-leader, Nehemiah had to deal with some underhanded tactics by opponents. Jealous non-Israelite officials opposed his efforts to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. However, Nehemiah’s deep faith in God kept him (and the wall) on track.
When Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab, and the rest of our enemies heard that I had rebuilt the wall and that no gap was left in it—though at that time I had not installed the doors in the gates—Sanballat and Geshem sent me a message: “Come, let’s meet together in the villages of the Ono Valley.” But they were planning to harm me. So I sent messengers to them, saying, “I am doing a great work and cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?” Four times they sent me the same proposal, and I gave them the same reply. Sanballat sent me this same message a fifth time by his aide, who had an open letter in his hand. In it was written: It is reported among the nations—and Geshem agrees—that you and the Jews plan to rebel. This is the reason you are building the wall. According to these reports, you are to become their king and have even set up the prophets in Jerusalem to proclaim on your behalf: “There is a king in Judah.” These rumors will be heard by the king. So come, let’s confer together. Then I replied to him, “There is nothing to these rumors you are spreading; you are inventing them in your own mind.” For they were all trying to intimidate us, saying, “They will become discouraged in the work, and it will never be finished.” But now, my God, strengthen me. I went to the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was restricted to his house. He said: Let us meet at the house of God inside the temple. Let us shut the temple doors because they are coming to kill you. They are coming to kill you tonight! But I said, “Should a man like me run away? How can I enter the temple and live? I will not go.” I realized that God had not sent him, because of the prophecy he spoke against me. Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. He was hired, so that I would be intimidated, do as he suggested, sin, and get a bad reputation, in order that they could discredit me. My God, remember Tobiah and Sanballat for what they have done, and also Noadiah the prophetess and the other prophets who wanted to intimidate me. The wall was completed in 52 days, on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul. When all our enemies heard this, all the surrounding nations were intimidated and lost their confidence, for they realized that this task had been accomplished by our God. During 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, since he was a son-in-law of Shecaniah son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam son of Berechiah. These nobles kept mentioning Tobiah’s good deeds to me, and they reported my words to him. And Tobiah sent letters to intimidate me.

Circle the words or phrases in these verses that point to Nehemiah’s trust in God.
Since humanity’s fall in the garden of Eden, God’s kingdom work has been done in a hostile environment. Jesus came into the world He created, but that world didn’t always recognize or receive Him (see John 1:10-11). Both the Old and New Testaments depict the life of God’s people as one of daily struggle against a powerful enemy (see Daniel 7:17-22; Ephesians 6:10-18).

The enemies of God’s people in Nehemiah’s day were of various backgrounds. Some groups—the people of Ammon, Arabia, and Ashdod, for example—had lived in the areas surrounding Judah for centuries. Other groups—the people of Samaria, for example—had been transplanted into the area as captives when Israel fell as a result of their rebellion against God (the Northern Kingdom to Assyria in 722 B.C.; the Southern Kingdom to Babylon in 586 B.C.).

Under the Persian Empire, these surrounding groups strongly opposed the restoration efforts of the Jews who returned from exile. They were determined to do whatever they could to sabotage the work of God’s people. Consequently, Nehemiah found himself as a primary target of their verbal abuse, criticism, slander, and threats.
EXPLORE THE TEXT

WHEN FALSELY ACCUSED (Nehemiah 6:1-9)

Powerful enemies opposed the Jews’ wall-building project from the start. Tribal rulers maintained their power and wealth by making it their business to know everything that happened around them. If need be, they acted swiftly and decisively to destroy the perceived threat. When Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem learned that the wall in Jerusalem was all but complete, they sprang into action. In their minds, a restored Jewish people in a restored Jerusalem spelled nothing but trouble for the entire region.

Stopping the project meant stopping Nehemiah, the leader of God’s people. So they sent Nehemiah an invitation to meet with them at Ono (about seven miles southeast of Joppa). But Nehemiah wasn’t fooled. He knew from past experience with these men that they intended to harm him.

*What thoughts run through your mind when you sense someone wants to harm you for doing God’s work?*

Nehemiah placed priority on his work. This wasn’t boastful but rather a statement of the project’s importance. Nehemiah wasn’t distracted or detoured from the priority of his calling. Four times the opponents sent an invitation; four times Nehemiah returned the same reply. The work was too important and the finish line too close to stop now.

Sanballat ramped up the pressure with a new tactic. He sent an open (unsealed) letter to Nehemiah by a messenger. This tactic was not only to insult Nehemiah but also to spread rumors about him regarding his personal ambitions. The letter stated two unfounded accusations. First, it accused Nehemiah and the Jews of planning to revolt against the Persian Empire. Geshem the Arab was
evidently the source of this accusation. Second, the letter charged that Nehemiah intended to become the Jews’ new king. It further stated that Nehemiah had prophets standing by in Jerusalem who were ready to declare his kingship.

The letter’s “clincher” was a not-so-veiled threat that the Persian king would hear about the charges. At the very least, the king would recall his cupbearer to Susa to answer the accusations. So Nehemiah was faced with a hard choice: either agree to meet with his opponents or face a recall (and perhaps worse) from the king of Persia.

Nehemiah responded boldly, denying the rumors and confronting his accusers with their true motives. They were trying to terrorize God’s leader and God’s people, and thus were attempting to sabotage the work of God’s kingdom.

The kind of boldness Nehemiah displayed came as a result of his deep faith in the Lord. It came as he communed with God in prayer, asking for the strength that only God can give. Again and again, Nehemiah modeled the kind of prayer life needed by every follower of Christ. He prayed for God to bolster his courage in the midst of threats and false accusations. He prayed for strength to focus on the great work of God’s kingdom rather than on his personal fears and needs.

What roles do faith and prayer play in our efforts to serve Christ?

**WHEN PROMISED FALSE SECURITY**

*(Nehemiah 6:10-14)*

The next ploy of Nehemiah’s accusers involved a Jewish prophet named Shemaiah [shih MAY uh]. Not all Jewish citizens were in favor of the building project, and this prophet seems to have been one of the naysayers. Sanballat and Tobiah hired him to frighten Nehemiah into violating God’s law concerning the temple.

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**KEY DOCTRINE:**

*The Holy Spirit*

The Holy Spirit enlightens and empowers the believer and the church in worship, evangelism, and service.

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**THE KIND OF BOLDNESS NEHEMIAH DISPLAYED CAME AS A RESULT OF HIS DEEP FAITH IN THE LORD.**
Shemaiah was restricted to his house, which possibly means that he had confined himself to give Nehemiah the impression that the two of them were in imminent danger. Shemaiah suggested they hide inside the temple until the danger passed. To do so, however, would mean that Nehemiah would be disgraced by going where only priests were allowed. He would be labeled a coward.

Again Nehemiah saw through the ruse. The phrase should a man like me means that Nehemiah understood and accepted his responsibilities as a leader. A true captain doesn’t abandon the ship when storms threaten. Neither does a godly leader abandon the work of God’s kingdom out of personal fear. Nehemiah’s faith and sense of responsibility prevented him from abandoning his post, especially to run and hide in the temple. He realized that Shemaiah wasn’t speaking from God but was only a hired conspirator.

Here again, Nehemiah showed himself to be a man of constant prayer. He was being lied about, lied to, and threatened not by one but by a host of individuals. The “natural” reaction would be to lash out in revenge against his enemies. But Nehemiah prayed, leaving his feelings of vengeance with God (see Deuteronomy 32:35; Romans 12:19).

**WHEN FACTIONS ARISE (Nehemiah 6:15-19)**

Despite opposition, Nehemiah and the community of faith rebuilt the massive stone wall around Jerusalem in 52 days. Archaeologists estimate that the perimeter wall was one and one-half miles around. The completion of the project was a testimony to Nehemiah’s exceptional, bold leadership and the community’s willingness to persevere (see Nehemiah 4:6).

An account of the wall dedication service appears in Nehemiah 12:27-43. It was a joyous occasion of worship, singing, and celebration. By contrast, the enemies of God’s work (Sanballat and his conspirators) were stunned by the wall’s completion. But the wall figured into God’s ultimate plans for His people; thus its completion was assured.
Describe specific acts or events in your life you would point to as a powerful testimony of God’s greatness?

Nehemiah faced opposition because of his obedience to God. He is not alone in facing opposition. Read 1 Peter 4:12-13.

How does this passage speak to the experience of Nehemiah in Nehemiah 6?

How do the principles identified by Peter and experienced by Nehemiah give believers courage to face opposition?

Tobiah was identified in 2:10 as an Ammonite. The region of Ammon lay on the eastern side of the Jordan River. However, Tobiah had made many strategic agreements—political, financial, and marital—with some of the leading Jewish families living in Judah. Tobiah may even have been a nominal adherent of Israel’s God. In an effort to harass Nehemiah, he continued to correspond with the Jewish nobles after the wall’s completion.

Through his associations, Tobiah modified his tactics for a time from a frontal assault to a more covert campaign. He did good deeds for the nobles in return for their loyalty and for information about Nehemiah’s activities. In addition, the nobles always spoke well of Tobiah in Nehemiah’s presence. But Nehemiah still wasn’t fooled by Tobiah’s overtures. As a result, Tobiah returned to the use of scare tactics delivered to Nehemiah in letters. Nehemiah would need to depend on God’s encouragement and wisdom every day.

How can believers discern between genuine offers of friendship/cooperation and deceitful invitations?
OBEY THE TEXT

People who seek to be obedient to God aren’t immune from opposition. Faith and a consistent prayer life help the believer discern true and false motives in oneself and in others. They also help the believer stay focused on a God-given task for His honor.

When you face obstacles and opposition, in what ways do you react? What adjustments need to be made to more closely align your reactions with what you learned in this Bible study?

In what ways can your Bible study group help you stay on track in your God-given tasks?

List the tasks you must complete in the week ahead. How can you honor God with each task?

MEMORIZE

I sent messengers to them, saying, “I am doing a great work and cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?” — Nehemiah 6:3
Use the space provided to make observations and record prayer requests during the group experience for this session.

MY THOUGHTS
Record insights gained and questions to discuss during the group experience.

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MY PRAYERS
List specific prayer needs and answers to remember this week.

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MY MISSION
Acknowledge ways you will obey God’s Word this week.

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