

Good evening. My name is Beau. I'm one of the pastors and elders. I know Adam said hello and introduced himself. Ben did as well. We're really glad you're here, especially if this is your first time. We're just delighted you came to be with us tonight. This being your first time, you are actually entering into a service where, at least in the Bible study portion of our time, we're going to be reading through a narrative in the Old Testament called Nehemiah.

As you might imagine, it's about a guy named Nehemiah and him getting a vision from God, being led by the Spirit of God to go rebuild the walls of his city, Jerusalem, that they had been cast out of as a people years before. It has been a really fascinating, encouraging read. I know many of you are actually going through it in your home groups with the study guide we put together. I've just been going through it. It's terrific. So I pray you've been encouraged.

Those of you who are new, you're actually coming in on the fourth week. If you have a Bible, turn to Nehemiah 4. If you don't have a Bible, there should be one right in front of you that's black. It's a hardback Bible. If you don't have a Bible at all, you can actually keep that, and I pray it would be useful to you as you take it home and maybe read some things in there.

What we've done the last three weeks of Nehemiah is we've looked at chapters 1-3, chapter 1 being this initial setting the stage for what God is doing in Nehemiah's heart and his life as he hears the news about his people and his country, his city, and how it's languishing after the invasions that have taken place, and how it's just not going well there, that the city walls are still in ruins, which means the city itself is in disarray.

In chapter 1 he gets this burden given to him I think by God, obviously, and it moves him to prayer, which is what we talked about in chapter 2, prayer and planning and expecting and hoping to be able to go back to his countrymen, to go back to his city. Of course, he does. The king, whom he is the cupbearer for, actually grants him that and gives him some things to send him on his way. Then chapter 3 that we somewhat covered last week is just a bunch of names, and it's the people, now that they're in the city, being put to work and equipped to do the work of putting the wall back together.

So that's where we've been, this journey of Nehemiah having a vision and prayerfully beginning to pursue, doing a good work in the name of the Lord for the good of his people and the good of the city of

Jerusalem, and chapter 3 is them actually beginning that work, getting on the ground, picking up those boulders, and starting to put them back. In chapter 4 (and really chapters 4-6) what we're going to see is opposition coming against Nehemiah and the people as they are trying to do the will of God.

I don't think it's unimportant to note that you have two chapters on prayer and about the initial call of Nehemiah. Then you have one chapter on actually preparing to do the work, getting everybody organized. Then you have three-and-a-half chapters of opposition. I just mention that to say there's something about this particular topic God intended for us to see, that the writer of the narrative intended for us to see, in terms of opposition in the lives of those who are trying to do God's will.

You can just mark it down that if you're really trying to live faithfully as God's child, if we're trying to live faithfully as God's people here in our own city, even though it's years and years later, opposition is going to come. Jesus said as much. We'll get into some of that. One of the key questions we're going to be looking at is...*How do we, both personally and corporately as the people of God, respond to opposition in our lives?* It's no small thing to know this, in some ways, makes up the heart of the entire narrative.

I'm just really hopeful tonight that some of you who may be coming in here with opposition raging in your life would be encouraged, that you'd be filled with hope tonight. I know in this service the majority of you are Christians. The majority of you even are covenant members of our church. I've just been praying for you, that the Holy Spirit, as we read this portion of the narrative, would turn your hearts to the Lord, especially those of you who are downcast in different ways tonight.

Let me give you three hopes for what I am praying and have prayed we would take away from this sermon. This is just me saying if you go to dinner after this and somebody says, "What was the sermon about? What was your pastor trying to communicate?" here are at least three things you should be able to say. I just want to be real up front with them.

First, I'm hoping as we read this portion of the text that you and I would identify either unhealthy or unrealistic expectations regarding pain and discomfort in our lives, especially as Christians, that we would get a better framework and a better set of expectations about pain in the Christian life, discomfort in the Christian life, opposition, suffering, whatever words you want to throw in there, in the Christian life, how they go together.

Secondly, tied into this, is that, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit tonight, God would be gracious to show us where we may, because of our unhealthy or unrealistic expectations about pain and discomfort, in response to those things, be putting our hopes in something or someone other than the Lord to be our chief comfort and consolation as we attempt, by God's grace, to walk faithfully through a fallen world.

That's the other thing I hope the Holy Spirit... If we *are* looking for refuge ultimately and primarily in something or someone other than him, that that would be exposed tonight, that God would be gracious to reveal that to us tonight in love, and to reveal also that he's our refuge, he's our strength. So just a reminder of that, possibly, even for your heart tonight.

Lastly, that God would further equip us as a church (this is thinking less individualistically, less personally), that he would equip us personally but for the sake of one another to actually be able to counsel one another through difficult times in our faith in a way that's more helpful than maybe we currently are...in our home groups, in our friendship circles, just as we come into contact with one another, even providentially through the week.

Ultimately, my hope is that from this text you and I would really have, by the Holy Spirit's grace and guidance, another rock...if we *have* a rock already under our feet, another one, and if we don't have one, to have a rock put under our feet...that will equip us to persevere in our faith through times of opposition and trial and pain in the Christian life. That's the big picture hope I am really trusting will come out of this.

Again, this is no small thing. Many people, especially those who are young in their faith, vulnerable in their faith... Their lives, spiritually, have been shipwrecked by trials, by hardship, by difficulty when it comes, because they don't have a proper perspective. They don't have proper expectations. They don't look to the Lord for help. They don't counsel one another or receive counsel from others that's wise and good and leading them to hope in the Lord. I just want us to be further equipped to be able to persevere together well.

Let me just give you a couple word definitions before we begin, and then we'll pray and get right into Nehemiah 4 and just walk through it verse by verse. Let me just define opposition, because I'm going to use that word over and over and over again. If you're a Christian, the way I'm going to define opposition (if you have a better definition, great; I'm preaching the sermon, so we're going to use mine)... This is the way I'm going to define opposition for us. It's based in this text.

Opposition is anything or anyone that threatens your perseverance in the faith or in the work of ministry. Anything or anyone that threatens your perseverance in the faith, that tempts you away from the will of God in your life. By *will of God* I don't mean God's secret will, like who you're going to marry or how many kids you're going to have or what you're going to major in. I mean God's revealed will for all of us as Christians, which is the same: to live faithfully, as Paul says, in light of our calling. Anything that tempts you away from that is opposition in your life.

If you're *not* a Christian in here, I want to offer a definition. I don't know if you're not a Christian whether you believe in a god, just not the Christian God, or you're agnostic and you think something is out there but you don't know really what it is, but I'm just going to offer a definition. Again, I would encourage you to make up your own if mine doesn't suit you, and that's fine. For non-Christians, I would say *opposition* is anything or anyone that threatens your goals in life. Anything that comes against what you're wanting, what you're hoping for and aspiring toward, is opposition in your life.

Here's partly why I want to make that clarification. For one, those of you who are non-Christians, so maybe it will help you better track with us tonight as we walk through the text and maybe even see how some of this could be relevant to you even though you don't believe in Jesus Christ, that he's the Son of God. For us as Christians, there is a slight but crucial distinction between opposition for those who are Christians and those who are non-Christians.

If you're a Christian, the distinction is that we're not primarily, as Christians, interested in our own goals, but God's will. The two aren't opposed to each other all the time, but as Christians, we're primarily thinking about, interested in, and pursuing not our own will, but God's will. So to think of opposition in a distinctively Christian way actually means we should view opposition in our lives not as something that gets in the way of what *we* want, but actually something that gets in the way of what *God* wants *for* us. Does that make sense?

I do think that distinction is important, lest we not think about it in a distinctively Christian way. As a Christian, *opposition* is distinct in that it's what's coming against God's will for our lives, not our own will for our lives. It's helpful to think about it that way. This is where we're going tonight as we read Nehemiah 4. I can try to lead us through there as awkwardly as I may do so, but it really is going to take the Holy Spirit of God to speak to our hearts to accomplish some of these things I've hoped, things I don't even know I *should* have hoped for, that God intends to communicate to you personally and to us corporately.

I know Ben already prayed, but let's just pray and ask God to speak to us, to humble our hearts. Some of you came in here prepared to hear from the Lord tonight. You're ready. You're prayed up. Some of you haven't. You just got here, which was great. You dropped your kid off, and you're just taking a deep breath. Let's just pause and ask God, by his sacred Word he has given us, to speak to us tonight in a way that I can't, even though I'm going to try my best.

Father, we are so thankful that you love us, that we come in here not as orphans, but as sons and daughters. Lord, in light of that, we can be confident that you intend to meet with us and to minister to us tonight. Where our hearts are in any way prone to not hear you, to not receive your Word, would you help

us? Where we're proud and prone to be defensive, will you humble us? Where we're tired and prone to just glaze over what you would intend to communicate, Lord, would you make us attentive?

Would you incline the ears of our hearts toward you tonight, toward your Spirit? We thank you for your Word, that in this dark world we pilgrim through together it is a lamp to our feet. It's a light to our path. O God, would you use this narrative about Nehemiah and the people he was leading and those who were opposing him for our benefit tonight? God, would you help us to glean things that might lead us to be more faithful, both together and individually. We ask it in Jesus' name, amen.

Okay, Nehemiah 4. Let's just start in verse 1. Again, if you've been studying the narrative, in Nehemiah 3 they started the work of ministry. They're prayed up. Their hearts are in the right place. They're wanting to do what God has them do. They've organized. They've gotten to it. Then in chapter 4, verse 1, it says, "**Now when Sanballat...**" He was a guy who was introduced earlier on as an agitator.

When he heard they were building the wall, that the work had begun, that they had started to repair what had been torn down, "**...he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria...**" (All of his posse is around him, his entourage.) "**What are these feeble Jews doing?**" He's mocking them. "**Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?**"

He's just mocking with his crew. Then here's his little buddy. I don't know how you read it, but I think of it like a schoolyard bully. It's like the guy who's more vocal and then the guy sitting next to him. It doesn't say that. It may not be that way at all, but that's how I envision it. Tobiah, his little buddy next to him, pipes in as well. He says, "**Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!**" They're just jeering and coming up against the people of God.

Regardless of what the scene really looked like, I do want you to know it was far more than just a schoolyard bully offering some threats against them that they really didn't intend to back up. These enemies surrounded Nehemiah, surrounded the people of God. They had enemies on every side, much in the same way they do today, at least in many respects. If you've ever been over to Israel today, you know. You feel this is a little tiny group of people, a little tiny nation, and there are all of these nations surrounding them that could do some harm.

When these people are jeering, there's a real danger. There's a real present danger they're having to consider together. They're just mocking. Yet what I want you to know is it has always been this way for the people of God: this mocking, this jeering, people opposing and coming up against the people of God. It

has always been this way, even the way in which they're going about it. It's nothing new under the sun, historically or even currently.

In fact, one of the commentaries I read this week said about the scene we just read, "The use of mocking sarcasm in the face of what one suspects may truly be a work of God is illustrated time and again in Scripture and in the experience of God throughout the centuries of church history right down to our own day." In other words, every time the people of God are compelled by the Lord to do a good work, to be faithful to the Lord, this comes.

Mocking and jeering and sarcasm in the face of what one intends to be faithfulness unto the Lord happens. It has happened all through church history, all the way down to today. It says, "Moreover, it's known both at the personal level..." It happens personally to Christians and then also at the institutional level, corporately. We'll talk about both of those. I love this sentence: "Perhaps it was never linked with such irony as when Jesus heard it said to himself, 'He saved others, yet himself he cannot save.'"

In other words, what this commentator is getting at is this experience we've read about in verses 1-3 of Nehemiah 4, it's not just Nehemiah and the people's experience back then. It has been every Christian's experience for all times, including the Christian's Lord and Savior and God, Jesus Christ. He of all, while he was on the cross, was being mocked by the very ones he was on the cross dying to save, which is just so heartbreaking and devastating to consider. This has been the experience all through the history for the people of God.

Thus it is for us today, so it does behoove us to pause and think about, "Okay, personally..." They gave a couple of different categories. Personally and institutionally, personally and corporately there's opposition that is either coming against us currently, *has* come against us, *will* come against us. So let's think about this together tonight. I want to lead you in a little exercise to help you think...*For us now, how does this apply to us?* Obviously, corporately speaking... Let's start there. Let's not start individualistically or personally. Let's think about us as a church body, corporately.

Many of you are covenant members. What's coming against us corporately as a church? What's opposing us? We don't live in Iran or Somalia like many of our brothers and sisters do, where it's immediately obvious what's opposing them: the people who want to kill them because they're Christians. That's not our reality here in the West. That's not our reality here in good ol' North Texas. If it's not that, if it's not what it was in Nehemiah's day, what today, for us as a church in 2013 in Denton, Texas, would possibly be opposing us that we would need to consider and be aware of?

Our staff thought through this together and came up with at least a couple of things, both of them having to do with the general tide of culture. It's not something that's so much personal, where someone or something is saying, "I'm going to come up against The Village Church in Denton," but it's more the general culture that is impersonally coming against our church and coming against *every* church that's trying to be faithful day in and day out. Let me just give you a couple of examples of what this looks like.

First is the reality of what I'll call the "intolerance of tolerance." There's this phenomenon in culture that we should all be tolerant, until we think somebody else's view is intolerant, of course, and then we're going to be intolerant toward them underneath the banner of tolerance. Are you with me? Does that make sense? Our theological positions, because they're exclusive, become viewed as intolerant by those who think we should be tolerant and accepting of everybody's perspective.

So then in response to our intolerance, they actually carry out their own intolerance toward us underneath the banner of being tolerant, in doing it for tolerance's sake. It's just this weird thing. Some practical examples... On university campuses across the nation there have been a few instances now, mostly in places in the Northeast and Northwest, where these Christian organizations, these parachurch organizations on campus, have actually been removed from campus because they have not allowed non-Christians to be a member of their organization.

They're not saying, "You can't come to our gathering." They're just saying, "We're a Christian organization, so to be a member of our organization means you need to be a Christian." People are coming in and saying, "That's intolerant. Therefore, under the banner of tolerance, we're going to kick you off campus." This is happening again and again, popping up all over the place. It's just coming for us. That's fine. In fact, this summer we're going to journey through 1 Peter, just study that together, about how to live in a distinctively Christian way in a post-Christian context.

In these places, because of our theological position on this issue or that issue, we're constantly coming up against culture, where culture is saying, "That's intolerant; therefore, you need to be silenced." All you have to do is look at the presidential inauguration over the past few months to see it rearing its head even there. Who was asked to pray? Who then was asked to step down...sort of...to pray? Maybe pressured is more the word. And why that was. Just our exclusive beliefs coming under the gun of culture in general.

Again, we don't feel it as much here. We may feel it here in Denton more because we're right across the street from a college campus, which in some ways tends to be the tip of the spear in a lot of these things, but in general in North Texas we're still insulated to this, where our brothers and sisters in the Northwest and the Northeast are experiencing it more outright.

Then, of course, as we've already mentioned, all over the world...Iran, Somalia...these places where they're not just flying the banner of tolerance; they're actually flying the banner of, "I'm going to kill you because you're a Christian." That's one area where I think opposition to us as Christians here in North Texas in Denton in 2013... We may feel that a bit.

More so, though, in terms of culture, is the tidal wave of narcissism, consumerism, individualism, hypersexuality, and anti-authoritarianism in our culture coming against us every single day. And it is, my friends, a tidal wave. In fact, let me just give you an example of what I mean. This is from a book by Mark Sayers, who wrote a book called *The Road Trip that Changed the World*. He talks about how in our culture today there's no longer any transcendence. Nobody ponders the meaning of life. Nobody ponders the deeper things of life.

So there are no highs. There are no real low lows. Everybody just sort of skips along at the surface. What he calls this is a "superflat culture." It's flat because there's no transcendence. It's just what's immanent. It's just what's near. It's just what I can feel and see and get and lust after and have realized in the moment. Instant gratification. This is what he says about our culture. You'll immediately begin to hear how you could see where this would be opposing our efforts as a church corporately to live out our faith together. He says this in his book:

"In a superflat culture where nothing matters, we escape into obsessions and hobbies, interests that bear little ultimate consequence. In a commodified culture, we move and shift around meaning, giving weight to things that do not deserve mountains of time and attention. The twenty-first century will be a century marked by conspicuous consumption but also a flagrant misuse of time. With religion off the agenda, our culture finds new avenues of devotion and distraction.

Instead of moving us toward relationship and people, the immanent, superflat culture pushes us toward things. Millions of hours in the twenty-first century will be spent working through DVD TV series, scanning social network sites, gorging on celebrity gossip, downloading music, flipping through home magazines, and playing computer games. Things will take precedence over people. Meaningless activities will overtake our lives.

There is nothing wrong with interests and hobbies in their right place, but the twenty-first century culture will gorge on such activities. The real issue of human existence that have sat front and center of human consciousness have in the superflat, immanent world [we live in] been shoved aside. They are too heavy to be carried on the road. Instead we buzz across the surface of life, never venturing below the surface."

Man, I'm convicted. This is my third time to read it today. I've been convicted every time. Let me just give you a real practical, personal illustration of this. Lena Dunham... I don't know if you've heard about this show called *Girls* on HBO. I wouldn't encourage any of you to watch it, but I know some of you probably do, just because that's where we are. It's such a hot show in culture right now. It's a hot show in culture because it exemplifies and speaks to what we just read about from Sayers.

This was a magazine article from *Rolling Stone*. Lena Dunham did an interview for them. She acts in the show, but she's also the writer of the show. Listen to what she said about her own self personally, which no doubt comes out in the show in her writing for it. She says, "Some of my anxieties might be solved by a better awareness of what's actually befalling this planet and what makes everything run and what's come before us, but it overwhelms me too much. It makes me want to take a nap. And in that respect, I really relate to people in my generation."

Sadly, yes she does. "I really would probably benefit from that, and others around me would, but it's just too much. I'm just going to take a nap." That culture, day in and day out, commercial in and commercial out, song on your iPod in, song on your iPod out, is speaking these messages to us, influencing our hearts, immersing us in the sense that this is normal.

So as a church, one of the primary things that is coming against us, even though it's not personal... Culture is not personal toward The Village Church, but no doubt one of the primary things coming against us, opposing our faith, threatening our perseverance in what the Lord would have for us, is becoming just like the culture, is not living contrary to the culture, but actually blending in with it. So that's corporately some of the things we're up against, I think, that we need to be aware of.

Personally now, let me help you think through what personal opposition right now in your life might look like. There are common oppositions we all share personally...the Devil, our flesh, and the weakness of our spirit, even self-imposed opposition that arises in our lives that's created by our own foolishness or sin or cynicism or even laziness.

For example, you failing a test because you didn't study for the test is not opposition. That's self-imposed opposition. That's not someone coming up against you. That is you coming up against yourself because you were lazy and you should have studied for your test. That's a different category that we're not talking about right now. But opposition that's not self-imposed... What would that be in your life? What's tempting you or threatening your faith and your perseverance in the will of the Lord?

Maybe it's a strained relationship with a coworker or your supervisor on the job. Maybe it's a lingering sickness in your body or in the body of someone you love. Maybe it's tension with a particular person in

your circle of friends or struggles in your marriage or within your family. Maybe it's your parents or your professors who weekly discourage you and remind you, because of your views of Christ, you're a close-minded bigot. Maybe it's a teething child. Hello? That's practical and real for many of us.

Maybe it's fear of your peers and what they think about you, just the constant lust and fear of whether or not you're going to be accepted. Maybe it's your debt or your continued struggle with your finances. Maybe it's busyness or loneliness or the media and advertisement, the fact that you've just given in to being a part of this culture instead of living contrary to it. Maybe it's just a general lack of purpose in your life.

Whatever is threatening your perseverance or growth in faith, whatever is hindering your ability to be faithful in what God has asked of you as a Christian, the key question we need to be asking ourselves tonight is...*How do we respond to this opposition?* As we read Nehemiah, how are we, as the people of God, to respond? How did Nehemiah and the people respond? I'm so glad you asked, because it gives us a picture in verse 4. Let's read together. Pick it back up.

"Hear, O our God, for we are despised." They begin praying again. Then they pray a prayer I don't know if I would encourage you to pray, but it's just sort of a retributive prayer where they're trying to align their hearts with God's heart on this issue. It says, **"Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders. So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work."**

I love these verses, because you know how Nehemiah and the people at least initially responded to the opposition that came against them? They prayed, and they got back on the wall. They prayed, and they got to work. Nehemiah didn't get distracted or debilitated by the opposition and the taunting and the mocking that came his way. Let me tell you one of the reasons I think he didn't. Again, this is me conjecturing. This isn't explicitly in the text.

One of the reasons I don't think he got pulled off of the wall when opposition came is that he actually expected it, which, on the flip side, is one of the very reasons I think you and I so oftentimes *do* get pulled off the wall when opposition comes. We live in a way as if we don't expect it. We live as if we don't live in a fallen world with fallen people with fallen creation that's going to come against us and our faith in a thousand different ways every day.

We live as if we don't expect opposition. Maybe mentally we kind of know it's there and it could be there, but functionally, day in and day out, we just don't expect it. Because we don't expect it, when it comes our

world falls apart. So instead of responding like Nehemiah with prayer and preparation and getting back to work, the way we often respond is not with prayer, but anger, despair, fear, anxiety, hopelessness, rage. Opposition comes, whether it's in the form of this person or this statement or this circumstance. Our world just begins to crumble, our faith begins to flounder, and what it's revealing is we don't really expect it.

Then slowly but surely, if we're not careful, we actually begin to question the character of God because it didn't work out the way we thought. Our unhealthy expectations begin to lead us toward questioning who God is, whether or not he's good or faithful, whether or not he loves us. This is so devastating. As Christians who are trying to live faithfully in a fallen world in a culture that's increasingly hostile toward us, we need to expect opposition.

Jesus himself said one time, "If I'm your Lord and they've done this to me, they've treated me like this, how in the world do you think they're going to treat you? Do you think they're going to treat you better than they treated me? No." What he was trying to do for his disciples as he was saying that was really frame their expectations about what it was going to mean to follow him. "This *is* a fallen world, and until I return, things are not going to be made straight. The crooked places are going to stay crooked in a lot of regards."

So you just need to expect it and not live as if we don't live in a fallen world. Yes, it's being redeemed. Yes, ultimately Jesus will come back, but we live in a fallen world. I love Paul Tripp. He's a counselor and pastor. He actually wrote a book... One of the areas you can really see this is in the relationship between husband and wife, especially newlyweds, and he wrote a book for married people called *What Did You Expect?*

What the book's title (and the rest of the book) is getting at is, "Of course there's conflict in your marriage, young married person or old married person. What did you expect?" Sadly, many people *don't* expect for there to be conflict. Many people don't go through premarital counseling; don't think about some of these underlying issues that no doubt are going to surface. Because they don't, it leads to conflict. It leads to discouragement. It leads to frustration. It leads to more conflict. Ultimately it leads to separation, and if God is not being gracious and people aren't helping well, it leads to divorce.

Because people's expectations about marriage are horrible, we have a culture in our society where marriage is not held in high esteem. A lot of it gets at the root of our expectations. So about the Christian life, I think you could make the illustration, "What did you expect?" Some of you tonight are in that place. You are deeply discouraged about your faith, and you're deeply discouraged because something has gone wrong in your life and you have not had a category for it. You've not been able to understand how that goes with God's faithfulness.

Because you can't put that together, you assume God doesn't love you or that he's evil or that he has some bad intention for your life, when the opposite is actually true. He promised we would have tension and trouble in this world. Then he said in the same sentence, "But take heart; I've overcome the world." He'll never leave us or forsake us. So just a few questions to help you think through this: What do your reactions to opposition in your life, either historically or currently, reveal about your underlying expectations of the Christian life in regard to suffering and opposition?

The way you initially, the way you have historically, the way you characteristically respond to hardship in your life, be it a teething child, be it a conversation at work... It doesn't matter. Get as practical as you need to get. When that moment happens, what does your response reveal about what you really believe about the Christian life? What does it reveal about your understanding of God's character? What does it reveal about your understanding of trials for the Christian? What does it reveal about your faithfulness in terms of holding fast to the truth?

How is opposition in your life perhaps taking you off the wall? How has it taken you off the wall? Maybe some of you have been off the wall for a long time, and you can point back to a specific circumstance, a specific person, a specific event, and say, "That circumstance, because I didn't have a healthy view of it, because I didn't respond well to it, took me off the wall, and I've been off the wall for years." And you know it. Tonight I just want to encourage you. The Lord is faithful. He loves you. Come back and join us.

When opposition came, it did not debilitate Nehemiah. He threw himself upon the calling and the character of God. I love the next verses, because look at what we see. The opposition came. Nehemiah and the people prayed and got back to work, and then everything got better. Right? Wrong. That's not how it happened. They prayed, they got back to work, they remained faithful to God, and do you know what happened? It actually got a lot worse. Read with me verses 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 that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry. And they all plotted together..." So now it has moved from just mocking and jeering to they're actually plotting together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it.

Sometimes we get pulled off the wall and away from faithfulness not because we don't expect opposition to come... Many of you have heard good sermons about suffering. You have a framework for it when it comes into your life, and that's great. Some of us get pulled off the wall not because we don't expect opposition to come, but because we expect it will come and then go away faster than it does. In other

words, it's not actually opposition coming *against* us that threatens our faith; it's opposition that *stays* against us that threatens our faith.

Some of us are in that category tonight. We wouldn't be in the first category of our expectations being unhealthy. We would be in the category of our expectations being unhealthy in terms of what we're entitled to, or what God's wisdom is, in leaving the opposition in our lives. That's the type of opposition you have in verses 7 and 8. They prayed about it. They remained faithful. I mean, they started building the wall all together again. What happened? Nothing. It got worse. Because God doesn't love them? No. Because we live in a fallen world, and a thousand other reasons we're unaware of. Yet they remained faithful.

If you've ever been through a time of opposition in your life that is extended, you know that's a different sort of test to your character and your faith than just a one-off moment of opposition here and there. Even the most mature in faith are tempted to crumble underneath the weight of extended opposition. Even the most mature among us. Everybody has a breaking point, especially if we're living in our own strength, as we're going to talk about here in a minute. Even the most mature come up against the temptation to crumble underneath opposition that comes and stays.

There are all kinds of examples, even among our body. There are sicknesses in people's bodies that just haven't gone away. There have been four or five people in the last year who have been diagnosed with Lyme disease, and they've just had it. They've prayed about it, they've gone and seen doctors, and it hasn't gotten better; it has gotten worse.

Cancer that has remained, unemployment that has remained (not just a day or a week of unemployment; a *year* of unemployment), separations from spouses that have remained unchanged and unreconciled even though the one spouse is trying to be faithful to make amends, young children who aren't sleeping through the night, teenagers who seem like they're never going to get it, friendships and relationships with your family that are still not mended despite years of prayer and intentionality to do so.

Even just a real practical example. There's a couple in my home group who are in the midst of moving, which is stressful, if you've ever done that, and they were supposed to be out of their house... There was going to be a transition period of about a week, and it has turned into like eight weeks. Week two or three, it's fine. Week seven or eight, the prayer requests begin to change.

The longer it sticks around... You just feel it. You see it. You begin to take on that burden for those you're walking with. That extended opposition, whatever it is, that would threaten your comfort, your perseverance in the faith, when it stays, it's difficult. Let me tell you a couple of things that happen when opposition stays in our lives.

First, our faith is exposed. We are exposed about where we're living under the illusions that we can do things in our own strength and that we are in control. Eventually, if opposition lingers, that is exposed in every single one of us. When opposition kind of comes and goes, we can grit our teeth. We can bow up. We can change a few things and control it to such a degree that we don't have to actually realize our dependence upon God. We can fix it in our own strength, so we can still live underneath the illusion that, "Yeah, I'm depending on God." Are you really?

One of the only ways we ever really know if we are, or to what degree we are maybe is a better way to say it... Most of us aren't trying not to. We're just not, and we don't know it until we get tossed into this season where we're so disoriented and it doesn't go away. What's exposed is that our strength eventually runs out, and our good ideas eventually are no more, and the degree to which we're walking in our own strength and wisdom is exposed.

Do you know what's beautiful? In that moment, where it's finally exposed and we come to the end of ourselves, it's in those moments the Holy Spirit intends to teach us sweet graces that are only learned in the crucible of discomfort and dependence. Sadly, it's right when we get to that point where many don't stay and remain teachable or dependent on the Lord. They just run away from the faith or their marriage or their responsibilities as a church member or whatever circumstance is bothering them. We could go on and on.

Sadly, it's right in the moment where we're finally teachable, where we're finally broken, where we're finally at the end of ourselves and God intends to teach us about his love for us and his kindness toward us and the way he wants to lead us and guide us, that we bail because we don't have control anymore, because we can't be independent anymore and that's really what we want. That's the first thing. Our faith is exposed in beautiful ways and in heartbreaking ways as opposition stays.

Secondly, what inevitably begins to happen, if we're not careful, is subtly, but very surely, when we have opposition that stays, getting rid of the opposition actually becomes the focus and the pursuit of our hearts, the very goal of our faith. I'll just use an example from my own life to my shame. Many of you are aware I've struggled with depression my whole life. I was diagnosed as clinically depressed when I was 3 years old or something.

A few years ago I went through a difficult season. This comes up from time to time. The Lord has been gracious as of late, and I've not struggled as much. A couple of years ago, for a couple of years, I was really underneath the cloud of despair in a deep way. It was brutal. Do you know what began to happen? It didn't start off this way, but slowly and surely the pain that was coming from my despair and my anxiety was so

excruciating to me it tilted my focus away from the Lord and onto itself, and getting rid of that pain, getting rid of that despair, actually became my goal.

I was no longer hoping in the Lord; I was hoping in this pain, in this discomfort, going away. You know what? It didn't. And I had no control over it. I was doing this and doing that, and somebody would come up with some crazy idea and I would try that. I mean, my whole life began to orbit around getting rid of this discomfort in my life. Do you know what soon happened? I was actually beginning to be depressed about being depressed.

It was like I wasn't depressed about what was going on circumstantially anymore. I was depressed about that, and then I wanted to get the depression gone and I couldn't, and then I was actually depressed about being depressed about that. I was just in this vortex of depression. I was walking in places anxious about being anxious. I wasn't even anxious about the thing that initially made me anxious. I didn't even remember what it was. I just knew I wanted the anxiety to go away. I couldn't make it go away, so I was now anxious about not being able to make it go away. That was my reality.

Do you know what's sad when we get in this place? Many of us fail to realize...I failed to realize...that although God is not unconcerned with our pain and discomfort, in many cases he's much more concerned with teaching us to trust him through it than he is taking it away. Because we're so intent on him taking it away, we don't hear that. We don't see that. Because we don't, we despair.

The whole time God is saying, "Child, you know what this entire life is really about anyway, don't you? It's about me conforming you to the image of my Son. I'm being gracious here, and your pain is going to teach you something about what it's like to be my son that you'll never know. And by the way, my Son knows. So run to him. Don't run to this as being your hope. Don't run to the obliteration of discomfort in your life as your god. That's not your refuge. Your refuge is in me."

That pain may remain, like it did for Nehemiah, like it did for Jesus himself, like it does for many of you, but it's not because God is angry at you; it's because he loves you. Some of you, I know the opposition in your life has just stayed. That cloud has stayed over your life, over those circumstances, over those relationships, so even in here tonight you're just so beaten down by it. You're just done, and you're doing everything you can to fix it. Of course you can't, because you're not in control of it, any more than you're in control of the sky outside.

Maybe tonight the Lord would whisper to your own heart, "Just trust me. Quit trying to get rid of this, and just trust me through it. Just hold on to me," and maybe you'd be encouraged to keep going. That's why I love verse 9. Look at verse 9. A constant sense and vision of the Lord before us day and night, day and

night, is what we need in times of extended opposition. Verse 9: **"And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night."**

They continually were setting their hearts on the Lord in the midst of their opposition. I'm not saying we should just sit around and thank God for opposition without ever doing anything. Verse 9 doesn't say that. Verse 9 says they did that, and then also they got to work. They prepared. There's no dichotomy between faith and action. It's all through the book of Nehemiah. It's not just pray. It's pray and do this, pray and get prepared, pray and get ready to fight, as we'll see here in a minute.

What I *am* saying, though, is we're spending the majority of our time spinning our wheels about, "What's going on around me? How am I going to fix it? I want it to go away," and not looking to the Lord and getting back to the work. We're going to despair, and that's exactly what you see in verse 10. The people finally began to despair. This is them speaking about their own load as they're lifting the rocks. These rocks are heavy. This work they're doing is manual labor. It's brutal.

They say, **"The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall."** This is actually a lament, like poetry in the Hebrew. They're beginning to say this to one another. The people, psychologically, are getting weary and discouraged. Of course the opposition continues in verse 11. **"And our enemies said, 'They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.'"** It has escalated from mocking to plotting to "Now we're going to kill you."

Then possibly, at least it has been for me in the last couple of weeks, the saddest verse of this chapter is verse 12. **"At that time..."** While they're already discouraged inwardly, while opposition continues to rage around them. **"At that time the Jews..."** Their own people, their own friends and family members who were supposed to be for them and encouraging them in the work. **"...who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, 'You must return to us.'"**

Do you know what's happening here? Even their own friends, as the opposition lingered, became a stumbling block to them. Even their own friends in the midst of the opposition came to them... They were well-meaning I think. They heard they were going to be killed. They heard the plots of those who were coming against them.

They came to them and said, "In light of that, get off the wall. In light of that, stop doing what you're doing. I know God has given you this vision, I know the Lord has led you into this, but I don't want you to experience pain. I don't want you to experience discomfort. I can't stand to watch you go through that

opposition continually. They're going to come kill you. Get off the wall. Quit doing what it is the Lord has given you to do."

Ironically, as we move through opposition, even our most well-meaning friends and family, both biological family and church family, can begin to oppose us through well-meaning yet bad counsel. So for us as a church, one of my particular burdens as I read this was I wonder how we're counseling one another through opposition. Most of you aren't receiving counsel from me on a week-to-week basis. You're receiving counsel from one another. You're receiving counsel from your home group leaders, from those you're walking with day in and day out, from those you work with who are members of this church, on and on and on.

So I just have been burdened about... As opposition is coming into our lives individually, how are we counseling one another through it? Well-intentioned horrible counsel... The best illustration of this in the history of the world is Peter to Jesus, if you remember this story. I thought about using a personal example where I've done that, but Peter's was just too epic. I'll show you why here in a minute. Matthew 16. This is what it says:

"Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.'"

Listen. We can give Peter a hard time. Peter is not an idiot. Peter did exactly what you would have done and exactly what I would have done if our Lord, if our Messiah, if our rabbi, if our friend was saying crazy things like, "Hey, I'm going to go here and all of the religious people are going to kill me." Peter said, "No, that's not what you're going to do." He said the same things the Jews said to Nehemiah and the people. "No. Then let's not go to Jerusalem. You don't need to do that."

Listen to Jesus' response to him. **"But [Jesus] turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.'"** Can you imagine? Peter was giving him well-intentioned counsel. He loved Jesus. He didn't want to see Jesus go through pain any more than you want to see *your* best friends or the people *you* love go through pain. So he gave him counsel based on that.

You know what? He gave him the most well-intentioned worst possible counsel he could have given Jesus, not just for Jesus' sake, but for everybody in the history of the world's sake. You do realize that? If Jesus had given in to Peter's counsel, none of us would be here. That's the worst counsel in the history of

mankind. "No, don't go die on the cross." Granted, he didn't really know what was going on in the cross and the resurrection at that point still, at least not in its fullness, but he told him, "Don't go do that."

If we could be there we'd go, "No! Let him do that. That's exactly what he needs to do." We could read that into the story, but you can just imagine. It was the most well-intentioned advice, and yet Jesus called it satanic. I do have to wonder how much well-intentioned yet horrible, even satanic, advice happens in the body of Christ on a day-in and day-out basis as we're counseling each other through our sufferings, as we're counseling each other through opposition. I just wonder.

Even for you, how do you counsel your friends and those you love through opposition? Are you counseling them in a way that is inclining them to fix their minds and their hope in God, or are you counseling them in a way that's inclining them to fix their hope on their circumstances getting better? We do this. We don't even have to *try* to do this. This is the air we breathe. This is the culture we're a part of. The American dream does not include pain and discomfort, and we have been influenced by that dream more than we know.

It's just so natural to say, "It'll get better. You should want it to get better." Maybe. Maybe not. Again, I'm not saying we should want anybody to go through harm, but I'm just saying that when that moment comes where there's opposition and struggle and discouragement, are you pointing people Godward in your counsel, or are you pointing them to hope in their circumstances getting better, which both of you have no control taking care of and could actually lead down the road we've already talked about.

My burden for us as a church is that we would grow in our counsel to one another, that we would counsel each other Godward, that we'd counsel each other toward hoping in the Lord and not hoping in our circumstances being better and our pain going away. This is what Nehemiah does as we read verses 13-15. He does the exact opposite of what the Jews did. Read with me.

"So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, 'Do not be afraid of them.'" I know what they're saying. I know what they've said. I know they're threatening to kill us. Do not be afraid of them. Why?
"Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes."

It says, **"When our enemies heard that it was known to us and that God had frustrated their plan, we all returned to the wall, each to his work."** Nehemiah pointed them Godward. He got them together, he got them prepared, and he turned their hearts Godward. They got back on the wall and kept going. I just

love that. I just love how he did that. He said, "Don't be afraid. Why? Because you can remember the Lord who is great and awesome."

That meant something to them. The Lord who was great and awesome was the same great and awesome Lord who led them out of slavery in Egypt, who again and again and again had been faithful to his people. Remembering the Lord who is great and awesome... How does that work for us today? Well, God's greatness and awesomeness has been most clearly and perfectly seen in Jesus Christ...Jesus, the great and awesome One, God who became man and lived among us.

Every Sunday we remember the Lord in a particular way in our services through what we call the Lord's Supper, which is what we're about to do. So right now, for those of you in the midst of opposition, those of you who are struggling, we have this opportunity we have every week, but especially in light of what we've read tonight, to take the bread, to dip it into the juice, and to remember that Jesus the Christ, the great and awesome God, came in the flesh and for us went to the cross and gave his body and his blood. Jesus, even more so than Nehemiah, never wavered from the purposes of God.

Jesus' mission wasn't to rebuild a wall; Jesus' ministry was to come and to rebuild and redeem a broken people, and a broken planet at that. The Scriptures say he endured opposition all the way to death, even death on the cross. When he gave his body and his blood on the cross, and when he said, "It is accomplished," do you know what he was doing in that moment, for those of us who are Christians? He was actually taking upon himself the greatest opposition any of us could ever imagine: the opposition of God himself against us because of our sin. The wrath of God we deserved because of our rebellion Jesus took upon himself on the cross.

Even tonight if you're not a Christian and you've been thinking through, "What's opposition in my life?" The greatest opposition in your life is God. If you're not in Christ, God is opposed to you because of your sin and your rebellion. I know that's not popular to say, but I wouldn't be loving to you if I didn't say that, that God loves you, and he sent his Son to die for you, and his Son endured horrific atrocities all the way to the cross, where the greatest miscarriage of justice ever happened, and on the cross he took upon himself God's opposition for all those who would put their faith in him and what he has done.

We come to the Table tonight with a High Priest who knows what it's like to have opposition, who has taken away the greatest opposition in our lives, the opposition of God himself. So we should come joyful. Praise the Lord that the greater Nehemiah has come and has led us, his people, into his redemption in his rebuilding of humanity.

Father, we're thankful these things are true, and we're thankful that, even tonight, Jesus, represented in the bread and the juice, stands ready to receive us in the throes of our discouragement, in the throes of the opposition that has and is coming against us in our lives, that he stands ready to embrace us and to remind us that he knows, that he too knows what it's like. So we thank you that even tonight, Jesus, you are a refuge for us to run to. You are a strong tower we can come to.

You are the One who not only endured opposition in your own life, but you endured the greatest opposition the world has ever imagined *for* us, in our place on the cross. So we bless you. We pray now that, as we come to the Table, our hearts would be overwhelmed with gratitude and hope, that those who have been downcast because of the circumstances and the discouragements in their life, God, that they would be filled with hope, that, Lord, you would fill us with joy as we remember all that you are and all that you've done for us. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.

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