

Working Through Opposition
Nehemiah 4:1-21
Philippians 1:27-30

“Success is not final; failure is not fatal, it is the courage to carry on that counts.”
So said Winston Churchill.

The reality of life bears this out. Sometimes an apparent success is later deemed not so. What appears as a failure in one moment may be the catalyst to new opportunities and future successes. Perspective is everything. A Christian leader once said that in all of our successes are sown the seeds of our failures. In that sense we never totally succeed nor do we ever totally fail.

Nehemiah’s project “Rebuild the Wall” is running into opposition. Sanballat throws out several questions; “What are these miserable Jews doing? Do they think they can get everything back to normal overnight? Make building stones out of make-believe?” Tobiah chimes in, “That’s right! What do they think they’re building? Why, if a fox climbed that wall, it would fall to pieces under the weight.”

So offensive is their criticism, that Nehemiah responds with what we call imprecatory prayer, or cursing prayer. Peterson translates his prayer this way; “Oh, listen to us, God. We’re so despised: Boomerang their ridicule on their heads; have their enemies cart them off as war trophies to a land of no return; don’t forgive their iniquity, don’t wipe away their sin – they’ve insulted the builders!” Not a particularly “spiritual” response.

During the Korean War, when Chinese troops captured large numbers of American soldiers, the Chinese incarcerated them in prison camps, where they were isolated and criticized. When these men were separated from their officers and received no support, they often developed serious psychological problems that sometimes led to death. These men had no alternative but to withdraw in an inner shell of silence and hurt where they were consumed from the inside. (Caring Criticism, Diehm, p 61-62)

Another way to respond to unjust criticism is to fight back, to over-respond with a battery of verbal defense mechanisms. This is what Nehemiah did, uttering a prayer full of angry words.

We’re all aware that both silence and angry words tend to destroy relationships. Criticism is a hot sword that pierces swiftly. A knee jerk response will send the sword in deeper and may cause the other person irreparable damage. In his wonderful book, Caring Criticism, William Diehm challenges us to respond slowly, think about the criticism prayerfully, and decide whether the criticism is a surgeon’s knife or a weapon. Diehm writes, “If it is a surgeon’s knife, I allow it to cut out what needs to be cut out. If it is a street fighter’s uncontrolled knife of vengeance, I neutralize it in my mind by not giving it back. It takes a long time to build, it is easy to destroy. Slow them down by not responding too quickly.” (p. 64)

There isn't any question the criticism aimed at Nehemiah and the Jews is a weapon. Notice, however, Nehemiah aims his vitriolic prayer to God, not toward his attackers.

He doesn't allow the criticism to derail them from their objective. The text says, "We kept at it, repairing and rebuilding the wall. The whole wall was soon joined together and halfway to its intended height because the people had a heart for the work." (vs. 6) The test of courage may often be simply not to react in fear, give up and die, but choose to "keep at it" and stay with the project at hand (Conte Vittorio Alfieri, *Homeletics*, May-June, '09, p. 12) Let out your feelings on God first, especially in regard to threatening critical attacks you don't control. And then keep doing what God is asking you to do. Stay focused.

Paul gives this same advice to the Philippians as he sits in a jail, concerned about people who are troubling and disturbing the church community. "Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ...striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents."

Tony Campolo says that "If you are the light of the world, you can expect to draw flies." Nehemiah and the Jews, in their efforts to participate in God's purpose were certainly drawing flies, flies named Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs and the Ammorites. When their initial intimidation tactics didn't succeed, they determined to fight against the Jews to bring down the wall.

Notice what Nehemiah does. He prays to God regarding the situation while at the same time acknowledging reality. He sets a round the clock guard. Nevertheless, the people are beginning to weaken. Peterson in the Message translates; "But soon the word was going around in Judah, the builders are pooped, the rubbish piles up, we're in over our heads, we can't build this wall." (vs.10) Meanwhile their enemies are arrogantly assuming an easy kill.

There are times when opposition is not just from without but from within as well. Of the two, the opposition from within is often the more difficult. In Harper Lee's classic novel, To Kill a Mockingbird, the main character, Atticus Finch, explains to Scout what real courage is: "I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead, of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and see it through no matter what." (*Homiletics*, July-August, p. 54-54)

The Jews are intimidated and afraid. They cry out; "From all the places where they live they will come up against us." Fearing for their lives, many begged their kinsmen to bail the project.

Again, Nehemiah demonstrates God's wisdom. He takes a variety of countermeasures. First, he looks over the situation. He stays calm while God fills him

with faith. Secondly, he stands up among all the people saying, “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your kin, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.” (vs. 14)

The Apostle John tells us, speaking of Christ, that “he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.” (I John 4:4) Follow Christ, expect trouble. Paul goes so far to say; “For he has graciously granted us the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well – since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have” (Philippians 1:29-30) After all, if there is no struggle there is no progress in life.

The question is, “What is our reference point during times of conflict?” We need help in times of opposition. Help may come from our leaders keeping us grounded and reassuring us of God’s presence and purpose. It may come from someone like a Stephen Minister who is trained to walk with us during a life need or crisis. None of us is self-sufficient. Needing help is not a sign of weakness. In Galatians 6:2, Paul doesn’t write, “Bear other’s burdens;” he writes, “Bear one another’s burdens.” We don’t always just care for other people. We are also to let others care for us. I have often felt a desire for someone to care and listen non-judgmentally, standing by me and ministering to my spiritual needs as God works through the crisis or opposition I am facing in my life. That is exactly what a Stephen Minister does. They receive 50 hours of training, not to be social workers, or be an errand person for someone, but to care, listen and be the presence of Christ to another during a tough time in life. Space is created in the relationship so that God can speak. Nehemiah is that God-referenced person for the Jews, pointing them beyond their tiredness and fears to the one who is with them in the trenches. Paul does that for the Philippians pointing them beyond their divisions to the One who unifies them.

Nehemiah convinces the people to look up, reminding them of God’s presence in the past and God’s willingness to fight for them. They unanimously agree to return to work on the wall. E. Stanley Jones in his book, Abundant Living, states it well for us from the vantage point of our Christian experience: “The early Christians did not say in dismay: ‘Look what the world has come to’, but in delight, ‘Look what has come to the world.’ They saw not merely the ruin, but the Resource for the reconstruction of that ruin. They saw not merely that sin did abound, but that grace did much more abound. On that assurance the pivot of history swung from blank despair, loss of moral nerve, and fatalism, to faith and confidence that at last sin and evil had met its match.” (Homiletics, May-June, ’09 p. 12) We all need reminding and grounding in that hope and reality every day.

Lest we think that the answer is solely to place our minds in the realm of believing faith, Nehemiah keeps us tethered in the realities of this world as well. “And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me” (vs. 18) In order to increase the security of the city and reduce the danger of the peoples’ defecting from the task, Nehemiah urged everyone to spend their nights in the midst of Jerusalem. The people were available for guard duty

by night and work by day. Nehemiah and his troops never took off their clothes and stayed armed at all times.

We are always balancing faith with actions. We are not passive pawns in the Kingdom of God but active participants. There are things which God alone does but there are also things which we alone must do. Wisdom is often to know where the line of faith and action lie. More realistically, they are dynamic. James poses the question: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?” (James 3:14)

Perspective. God-perspective through all criticism and opposition. In their book, Washington’s God, Michael Novak and Jana Novak note that from an early age George Washington deeply believed “in the idea that all people were constantly under God’s watchful, benevolent eye. This divine attention – at times harsh, probing, testing and sometimes benevolent – he was taught to call Providence” (Homiletics, July-August, ’09, p.13)

As we face and work through opposition, individually or corporately, God is watching over us all. Keep centered on God. Look always at the circumstance through God’s eyes. See where God is in it and then proceed with what you hear God is asking you to do. Let Nehemiah mentor us here. “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord who is great and awesome, and fight for your kin, your sons, your daughters, your wives and homes.” (vs. 14)