



Building when opposition becomes intense

Main Point: We have recognised the importance of building walls of protection around our heart and mind. But often, while we are in the process of building, God's enemies come against us and stir up opposition. Nehemiah certainly faced this problem.

This week, we learn that God's enemies usually use the strategies of disorientation, discouragement and distraction. Identifying these strategies equip us to withstand the enemy's attacks, so our faith-filled task of building walls may continue.

Intro |

If I was to start my message today with the statement,

"no matter what you do, someone is not going to like it"

I'm confident that every one of you will not only nod in agreement, but more than likely you'll immediately remember a time when you did what you believed was the right thing to do – only to cop a barrage of opposition and personal attack.

... and that's exactly what happened to Nehemiah.

Almost as soon as he and his fellow Israelites agreed on the humungous task of rebuilding the Jerusalem wall – opposition arose.

Every one of us can resonate with the feeling of being opposed or attacked. We feel attacked when someone speaks harshly to us. Or when our status quo is challenged or disturbed. Or when someone threatens someone or something we hold as important or valuable. We feel opposed when someone takes legal action against us. And we feel particularly vulnerable, when our opposers group together and become physically violent towards us.

These same feelings arise when people actively challenge our plans to do something, even if it is carrying out a work that we know God has asked us to do.

Because so much opposition seems to come through the mouths of people, we can begin to believe that people are our primary problem.

That's probably why the Apostle Paul had to remind the Ephesians that our battle is NOT against people, rather it is against evil rulers who live in the unseen realm.

The very reason Paul had to remind them that people are not our problem, is because we so quickly forget. People do indeed oppose the work of God, and they do indeed use evil strategies to hinder God's work – all the while completely unaware that they are being used as puppets for the devil's schemes.

What is the Scriptural basis for this observation? Apostle Paul explained that the devil, whom he calls "the commander of the powers in the unseen world, "is the spirit that is at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God." (Ephesians 2:2)

I think we are all able to discern those evil spirits are very capable of hitching a ride on the backs of people, to get people to do what they want. We will see this dynamic operating very vividly in our story today.

In fact, Nehemiah's diary, shows us three dominant strategies used by the devil and his spiritual subjects as they war against us.

These three strategies are pulsating through the world right now. Unless we have the wisdom and discernment to identify them as a work of God's enemy, we will be powerless to overcome them.

So let's begin.

The enemy's first strategy: Attack hope by disorienting one's focus

As soon as Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem and communicated his plan to rally together the Israelite men to rebuild the wall – the opposition rose and presented itself (see 2:10).

We read last week, *"when [they] heard of our plan, they scoffed contemptuously. "What are you doing? Are you rebelling against the king?"(2:19)*

As long as the Israelite nation were happy to stay in their disgraceful, broken-down state, they presented no threat to their enemies. It is only when they set their minds on building the walls of protection that their enemy began to feel threatened.

The Philosopher John Mills once said, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

As long as we do nothing, the devil doesn't see us as a major threat. It is only when we start partnering with God on His mission in the world that the devil gets worried.

As the building of the wall was progressing,

"Sanballat was very angry when he learned that we were rebuilding the wall. He flew into a rage and mocked the Jews, saying in front of his friends and the Samaria army officers, 'What does this bunch of poor, feeble Jews think they're doing? Do you they think they can build the wall in a single day by just offering a few sacrifices? Do they actually think they can make something of stones from a rubbish heap – and charred ones at that?'"(4:1-3)

Notice, the enemy's first strategy is to attack and steal our hope, sowing confusion in order to disorientate us, so that we lose our focus.

When we take our eyes off God's power and strength, we will become disorientated as our focus moves to our own inadequacies and weaknesses – and we lose hope in God's ability to sustain us.

How does the enemy cause disorientation?

They'll mock our shortcomings, weaknesses and past failures.

They'll mock our lack of materials and resources.

They'll emphasise the enormity of the task at hand and taunt us about our inability to complete it.

We may hear this scorn inwardly, "Who am I trying to kid? I must be some kind of idiot to think I can achieve this! Why, oh why, did I take on such a huge task. What have I gotten myself into to?"

Comments like these can also come through people who are being used by God's spiritual enemies.

But look how Nehemiah responds, *"Hear us, our God, for we are being mocked. May their scoffing fall back on their own heads"(4:4)* (Note: I realise that Nehemiah prayed more vengefully than this. However, Jesus taught us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:43-48 and see Romans 12:20).

The enemy's second strategy: Attack faith through discouragement, which will cause dissension

Now, as with any labour-intensive task, after a while everyone started to get tired. And when tiredness sets in, discouragement starts to grow.

"then the people of Judah began to complain, 'The workers are getting tired, and there is so much rubble to be moved. We will never be able to build the wall ourselves.'"(4:10)

When we allow ourselves to become tired, it is easy for doubt to grow and we lose our faith in God's power. When we lose faith, fear creeps in and we become more vulnerable to attack.

Unless we recognise that discouragement is a tool of the enemy, a strategy which we must fight against, we will not resist it when it comes against us.

When Nehemiah's enemies saw their discouragement increase, they ramped up their attack.

"They all made plans to come and fight against Jerusalem and throw us into confusion. before they know what's happening, we will swoop down on them and kill them and end their work." (4:8, 11)

But Nehemiah was wise, *"so I placed armed guards behind the lowest parts of the wall in the exposed areas. I stationed the people to stand guard by families, armed with swords, spears and bows."*(4:13)

We now arrive at the image that encapsulates the story of Nehemiah – the picture of the labourers building the wall, trowel in one hand, a sword in the other (4:17-18).

Nehemiah was bringing the Israelite nation together, to fight *for* each other, so they would re-identify as the united people of God. He told them, *"Don't be afraid of the enemy! Remember the Lord, who is great and glorious, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives and your homes!"*(4:14)

When the enemy attacks us, his attacks are never designed to only harm the individual – rather the devil always intends to create as much damage as he can, so that harm comes to everyone associated with that person – whether it be a couple, an entire family, a church, a community, a whole nation.

And don't you love verse 15, *"when our enemies heard that we knew of their plans and that God had frustrated them, we all returned to our work on the wall."*(4:15)

Praise God! Another of the enemy's schemes had been frustrated.

The enemy's third strategy: use distraction and intimidation, so fear grows

We are going to jump a little in the story. Turn to chapter 6.

Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem saw that the wall was indeed nearing completion.

So, their next strategy was to distract Nehemiah from his work. They wanted him to leave his building, lay down his trowel, and come and talk with them.

But the Lord gave Nehemiah divine insight into his enemy's strategy.

"But I realised they were plotting to harm me, so I replied by sending this message to them: 'I am engaged in a great work, so I can't come. Why should I stop working to come and meet with you?'"(6:3)

Now, let's make this really practical, because I think this is a major strategy the devil uses today.

Imagine your Bible and praying as a sword that sits on your kitchen table. The devil will do everything to distract you from picking up your sword and using it against him. He knows how powerful the Sword of the Spirit (Word of God) is against him – no wonder he throws distraction after distraction at us to stop us from reaching for our sword!

But, God's enemy also has another strategy, which thankfully Nehemiah discerned,
"They were hoping to intimidate me and make me sin. Then they would be able to accuse and discredit me."(6:13)

Intimidation involves using fear to make someone do what you want them to do.

But Nehemiah would not turn aside from the work God had divinely appointed him to do – for to do so represented sinning.

Application | What strategies is the devil using on you?

It is not hard to perceive that the devil is using these same strategies today – and I feel he has turned the intensity up especially in the realm of fear.

So, let me ask you,
'which of the strategies we've identified today, is the evil one using on you?'

Is the evil one using disorientation so that you take your eyes off God's strength and power, so your eyes become consumed by your own inadequacies?

Is the evil one using discouragement and dissension so that you give way to weariness, making you fall into a heap of despair?

Is the evil one using distraction and intimidation to pull you away from the work of building the walls of protection around your heart?

May the Lord give you discernment to identify the enemy's strategies in your life.

Once you have identified them, may you also be filled with wisdom to know how to stand firm and resist all of the devil's devices.

Discussion and Reflection Questions

Can you identify some of these common schemes of the evil one?

1. *The strategy of disorientation:*
(Whether your 'good work' is praying for God's church and mission in the world, or building walls around your family and marriage, or telephoning those who are lonely or hurting, all are ministries which God encourages us to participate in.) It is easy to become disorientated from the most important work – fixing our eyes on Christ and the work He has for us to do in this season. Has the devil been successful in disorientating you away from the work God requires you to do?
2. The strategy of discouragement:
(One way the enemy can discourage us is to tempt us into feeling we are all alone and that God has forgotten us. We need to remind ourselves of what God told Joshua, *"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."*(Joshua 1:9)
Has the evil one been successful in discouraging you from the 'good work' He desires you to accomplish during this season?
3. The strategy of distraction: We know we need to pray and we know we need to read our Bible and spend time praising and thanking God for all He is doing in our lives – but it is so easy to become distracted by other things. Has the evil one been successful in distracting you?