

Over 10 years ago, I signed up to teach a preaching class at the Bicol Center for Christian Leadership in the Philippines. I was excited about the possibility and the good work God might do through it. Yet, we faced serious obstacles. First, there was the obstacle of distance. The Philippines is over 10000 km away from here. Getting to the school required a flight to Vancouver; then a 14 hour flight to Manila; then 2 full days to recover somewhat from jet lag; then another 2 hour flight down to school's location.

Yet more obstacles stood in the way of the students actually receiving and grasping the teaching. We faced the obstacle of fatigue. Each class was 3 hours long in the evenings. Students spent the day at their regular full time jobs. Then they made the journey to the city and the school. Some faced opposition to their participation in the class from their employer or family member. At the school we faced the obstacle of heat. It was between 34-38 degrees every evening with no air conditioning. After teaching for maybe 20 minutes, I was soaked with sweat. I had to work hard to keep hydrated and to keep the student's attention. We also faced the obstacle of language. English is the second or third language in the Philippines. Most understood some or even a lot of English. But they primarily spoke Tagalog and various dialects. So some students struggled to understand me and I struggled to understand them. Yet by God's grace, your prayers and His power, we all persevered through those two weeks. The good work happened but not without opposition and obstacles.

This seems to happen with most good work especially those that honor the Lord. Say you want to spend focused time with the Lord; read your Bible; pray and abide in Him. When we're motivated, and we're well rested and not under pressure, we make personal time with God. But try to stay close to the Lord during normal, everyday, full on life. There are distractions, tiredness and other needs pressing us. The enemy will pounce on weakness or vulnerability in our lives to prevent us from spending focused time with the Lord.

Say you're in a relationship and you want to increase the spiritual part. But your partner ignores it, opposes it or gets angry when you bring it up. You want to stay close to your spouse or significant other. But your friends keep pulling you to spend more time with them and away from him or her.

You want to raise your kids to the glory of God. You want to teach them self-control and respect of authority. Yet other parents want to take the path of least resistance with the kids. Whatever the kids want to do, your kid's friend's parents let them do it so that we can have peace in the home. No boundaries; no curfews; no limits. Or your teenager opposes you. They push against your boundaries. They disagree with your restrictions.

You want to honor God in your spending and cut back impulse buying or excessive debt. But one trip to the mall invites you to break that vow with the latest "deal of a lifetime."

You try to do your work for God's glory. Others oppose you for working too hard to make them look bad. You try to do your schooling honestly to God's glory. But someone else cheats and gets better grades. We try to regather, reconnect and invite others to this community for the sake of God's name this fall. But the pandemic, concerns and fear keep us from fully reconnecting. .

How do you respond when you attempt some good work and face opposition to do it? Sometime we give up. We had good intentions but only if thing went smoothly. At the first sign of opposition, we give up. Sometimes we gear up. We determine to overcome by the sheer force of our own effort and strength. It doesn't matter how it gets done or who gets in the way. We will succeed and then point out our great strength and determination.

Or we find ourselves somewhere in the middle between these two. Some days we're determined to keep going. Other days we give up more easily.

But there's another way. This other way is central to living the Christian life. It can apply to any situation regardless of our energy, enthusiasm or personal resources at that moment. This other way does not depend on personality type, bank accounts, intelligence, education or

opportunity. When followers of God throughout history have used this other way, they have overcome opposition to good work.

Such as Nehemiah was a follower of God. He had a comfortable government position in the Persian Emperor's court. Yet Nehemiah learned about the desperate state of his people back in Jerusalem. They lived in a city with broken down walls and burned gates. So with the Emperor's blessing and God's favor, he returned to Jerusalem to lead a rebuilding project. Yet he faced immediate opposition from local governors. They did not want Jerusalem to succeed. Yet many people accepted Nehemiah's call to join this good work of God.

Last week we saw their wide diversity. They joined together to begin this rebuilding project. Today we pick up the story with the opponent's realization of the project's progress. We will see Nehemiah use this other way to overcome this serious opposition to God's good work.

But first we will see the types of opposition he faced and we might face. Then we will see the other way he uses. I pray that you will gain courage to keep going on the good works God has prepared for you to do despite opposition.

Nehemiah 4 – ESV

4 Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. 2 And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, "What are these feeble Jews doing? 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?" 3 Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, "Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!" 4 Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. 5 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.

6 So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

7 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. 8 And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. 9 And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.

10 In Judah it was said, "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." 11 And our enemies said, "They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work." 12 At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and

said to us ten times, “You must return to us.” 13 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. 14 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. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.”

15 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. 16 From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail. And the leaders stood behind the whole house of Judah, 17 who were building on the wall. Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other. 18 And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. 19 And I said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, “The work is great and widely spread, and we are separated on the wall, far from one another. 20 In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.”

21 So we labored at the work, and half of them held the spears from the break of dawn until the stars came out. 22 I also said to the people at that time, “Let every man and his servant pass the night within Jerusalem, that they may be a guard for us by night and may labor by day.” 23 So neither I nor my brothers nor my servants nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us took off our clothes; each kept his weapon at his right hand.

What kind of opposition did Nehemiah face and how did he respond to it?

Opposition Type 1 – Verbal Intimidation. We meet Nehemiah’s opponents again in chapter four verse 1. They hear about the progress on the wall reconstruction. So they resort to a common tactic in an attempt to stop the work – Verbal intimidation. Discouraging Words. Sanballat unleashes a series of blistering and mocking questions.

In the presence of his brothers and the army of Samaria he asks, “What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves?” Those questions attacked the people’s vulnerability. The Jews *had* suffered the humiliation of total defeat. They were feeble compared to other nations and even the people living right beside them. When you try to do good work and someone immediately attacks your area of weakness, it can cut deep.

He asks, “Will they sacrifice, will they finish up in a day?” This probably refers to offering a sacrifice to God. The taunt takes aim at their faith. Sanballat implies they think offering a sacrifice will somehow result in a magical appearance of a wall in a day. He knew this project

would take much longer than a day. When we start a good work, the opposition may ridicule our ability to see it through.

He also asks, “Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish and burned ones at that?” His friend Tobiah joins in the taunt. “If a fox goes up on that, he will break it down.” Here they mock the quality of the work because of inferior building materials. They would also build a lower quality wall because they had few if any stonemasons. They were all volunteers from different walks of life. Verbal intimidation can have its effect. It can stop us from going forward on good works of God.

So how does Nehemiah respond? **Response 1 – Prayer and Continued Work.** Verses 4 and 5 contain Nehemiah’s cry to the Lord. He reveals the effectiveness of these questions. “Hear O God. We are despised.” Then he calls on the Lord to deal with these enemies. Not only does he ask the Lord to defeat them but also to not forgive them and blot them out of His sight.” It’s like he prays for their eternal destruction. .

That’s a pretty harsh prayer for our modern and New Testament ears. We know we’re supposed to pray for our enemies and even love them. Yet this prayer reveals the serious threat Nehemiah and the people face. Notice at the end of verse 5 he adds the phrase “they have provoked you to anger *in the presence of the builders.*” This adds another layer to the threat. Not only did Sanballat express these questions to his brothers and the army of Samaria. He said this in the presence of the builders. He spoke so they people could hear to spread fear in their ranks.

So Nehemiah cries out to God for help. But he and the people do not let this intimidation stop them. Verse 6 tells us they continued on with the good work. In fact, they reached the half way point of the project. The wall took shape. It reached half height surrounding the city. There is counsel for us here. When we face obstacles and opposition, we can just stop working. We just throw up a prayer and expect God to miraculously do everything while we do nothing. But after asking for God’s help, we need to keep working. We can’t let verbal intimidation or threats hinder the good work God has for us. Nehemiah and the people kept working. But soon they faced another type of opposition.

Opposition Type 2 – Physical Intimidation. Verse 7 -“But when Sanballat and (the other opponents) 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 to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it.” Once they saw their verbal taunts fail, they decide to do something to stop the work. They plot to attack the workers and cause chaos.

If we keep going despite verbal intimidation, the opposition may do something to stop us. Maybe they stand up and walk towards us in a threatening way. Maybe they break something, storm out, slam a door. Maybe they give you the silent treatment or disappear for a while or make the whole family or workplace or classroom suffer with their bad mood. Maybe gather signatures or go to the police or file a lawsuit. The intensity rises to the next level. So how do Nehemiah and the people respond?

Response 2- He prayed for God’s protection and set a guard for protection. Verse 9 – “And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.” We are not told the contents of their prayer. Yet it likely involved an appeal for the Lord’s protection. They learned of the plot. But they also took their own action and set guards in place.

When we face active opposition, we need to bring it to the Lord in prayer. We also need to take the necessary steps we can take. I hope you’re beginning to see the pattern of the other way between giving up and gearing up. It shows again with the third type of opposition.

Opposition Type 3 – Bad News. Nehemiah and the people get three pieces of bad news. First, the people themselves get overwhelmed by the task. Verse 10 – In Judah it was said, “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.” The people begin to believe they can’t do it. This belief spreads among the people.

Second, Nehemiah and the people receive more news about the plot of their opponents. Verse 11 – “And our enemies said, ‘They will not know or see till we come among them and kill

them and stop the work.” So now the threat of surprise attack looms over them. They want to kill the people building and stop the work.

Third, they receive bad news from fellow Jews surrounding Jerusalem. They feel the threat. 10 times they come with news. So their appeal “to return to us” may mean “return and protect us.” Or it may mean “come out and stay with us because Jerusalem is no longer safe.”

Bad news can derail good work. It can bring discouragement and despair. I think of the Gospels when Jesus received the news that John the Baptist had been executed. Jesus does ministry. Many believe in him. Then comes this devastating news. Jesus goes away to pray. Or we’re trying to do some good work and we get news that threatens everything. Our significant other announces they will end the relationship because we kept on insisting on this spiritual stuff. Or the boss comes in to announce a review of our work because the other employees have raised concerns. Or we’ve tried to walk more closely to the Lord. Then He says no to one of our major prayer requests. We wonder, “Why did we even bother to draw near to God?”

Response 3 – He reminded the people of the great and awesome Lord and called them to fight for one another. Verse 14 – “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. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives and your homes.” Nehemiah addresses the people’s fears. He exhorts them to not fear because of the great and awesome Lord. When we receive that bad news, we need to bring the great and awesome Lord back into our vision. Then we can to appropriately deal with the news. We need to do our part – take up the fight – stand our ground in the strength of the Lord.

All this adds up to the other way. When facing opposition to good work, we can give up or gear up to do it with our own guts and strength. But Nehemiah shows us the other way.

How did Nehemiah (and the people) overcome the opposition to the good work? **He trusted God to intervene AND took action himself.** When verbally intimidated, he cried out to God and continued working. When physically threatened, he prayed to God for protection and

set a guard for protection. When receiving bad news, he reminded the people of the great and awesome Lord and called the people to take up the fight.

The rest of the chapter shows more precautions and steps they took for the work to continue. He assigned half his force to guard duty and armed the workers. He came up with a rapid response plan in case of an attack. He lengthened the work day and cancelled leave. He joined the people in staying on guard even through the night with their weapons at their sides. So they continued building but did not disarm. They trusted God to work and they continued to work.

So we can apply this same approach in our lives. **We can overcome opposition to good work, by trusting God and taking action.** When it comes to good work, it's not God does everything and we do nothing. Or we do everything and God does nothing. It's Trust God and Take Action. One of the challenges in the Christian life involves figuring out God's part and our part. I came across a quote this week that talks about this. It comes from Ray Seutter who is a Christian Psychologist. He spoke to the Alberta Baptist Association Pastors last Spring about mental health during COVID for pastors and congregations. Here's the quote: "Growth in life and faith comes with accepting what we can do and that we can't do everything. So we must lean into God with what we can't do." Did you get that? Growth in life and faith involves accepting what we can do and that we can't do everything. Then we need to lean into God with what we can't do."

So apply this to the Nehemiah story. When threatened verbally, Nehemiah could not turn back the oppositions taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered. So he trusted that to God. Yet he and the people could keep working. Nehemiah could not supernaturally frustrate the plots of the opponents. But he could set a guard. You and I cannot do what only God can do. Nor can we do everything. We must entrust much to God while doing that which we can.

Psalm 37 lays this out for us tremendously. It is full of commands to trust the Lord and do His good work. Psalm 37:3 summarizes it simply. "Trust in the Lord, and do good." Trust in the Lord

and do good – when you face opposition; when we face a crisis; when a serious problem arises or a complex situation lands on our plate. Trust in the Lord and do good.

We share the Gospel. God does the saving. We do the praying. God does the healing. We speak truth in love. God does the heart change. We look for a job. God opens the door. Jesus promises to be our companion. We need to pursue a relationship with him.

We start a good work. Opposition arises. So we trust God and continue the work. It starts by trusting God with our lives. We must first be reconciled with Him. In the area of our initial – It's God's work completely but we need to trust. Jesus' life, death and resurrection overcome the greatest opponents we face in our lifetime. He overcame the opponent of our sin by taking our sin upon Himself and paying for it with His blood. He overcame the opponent of death by rising again. He will one day raise everyone who has died in him. He overcame our opponent the devil by obeying the Father and going to the cross destroying the devil's work.

So to overcome your greatest opponents in life, we first need to put the trust of your life onto Christ. Then while continuing to trust him, act on that which he calls you to. God does mountains of unseen work to enable our good works. He hears our prayers. He will bring justice upon oppressors. He frustrates the plans of evildoers. He fights for us. He empowers us to move ahead despite opposition.

So now as we come to the Lord's Table, I want to invite you to prepare to meet with the Lord here. If you don't know Jesus, put your trust on Him and receive Him. Give your whole life over to Him. Begin to walk that journey of trusting God and doing good from His strength. If you've been distant from Him, confess it. Then join Him for close fellowship. If you have given up a good work because of some opposition, confess that. Then get back to it. If you have a tendency to gear up and try to do it all yourself, confess that. Ask the Lord to do His work on what you cannot do. Then, no matter what kind of opposition arise, we don't have to give up or gear up. We trust Him and do good.