

Opposition
Let's Rebuild Week 5
9/13/20

Welcome/Intro/Vision

TODAY: new stuff rolling out: we've got sites across the county watching in backyard outdoor gatherings

And we're going to shorten the service a bit and close with some discussion questions for people at those sites to engage with and end the service that way

And if you're watching at home we haven't forgotten about you, I'm hosting the Online Site discussion on Zoom RIGHT AFTER the service

In fact, the link is below and popping up in the chat right now and if you want to go ahead and join that Zoom call right now, you can do that

But at the very least, if you're watching on a tv, push pause, go grab your laptop, and join me live at the end of the service for a live discussion

It's never been harder to get deeply connected than right now. So we're excited to roll out new opportunities to facilitate connection happening live and online.

Just joining us today, in a series called "Let's rebuild"

If you're like most people, life in COVID-land has wreaked some measure of havoc on your life

Over the past couple of weeks I've had more conversations with more people who are feeling weary, isolated, and anxious

All is not right in our nation, in our local communities, in our extended families, in our own homes, with our kids or our work, and in our own souls

But throughout the Scriptures, we that God is committed to rebuilding broken, steamrolled things

And the WAY that God most often rebuilds broken, steamrolled things is by raising up normal people like you and like me to rebuild them

And so throughout this series we're inviting all of us to participate in the wonderful story that God loves to write and re-write: "Let's rebuild!"

The story we've been looking at in Scripture is the story of Nehemiah, about 400 years B.C.

The nation of Israel has been a conquered people for over 150 years at that point

And Nehemiah is far away in the capital of Persia when he gets word that the city of Jerusalem is still in ruins, 150 years later

And Nehemiah has likely never been there, but he's heartbroken over the situation

And he gets permission from the king to return to Jerusalem and rallies the people to engage in a major rebuilding project

and as Nehemiah leads this huge project he's teaching us some key rebuilding principles

And today we're going to see how Nehemiah demonstrates both the spiritual and the logistical sides of rebuilding as he deals with opposition

First, let's define what we mean by opposition, which is different from conflict

Opposition is conflict, calcified. It is to have a person or a system or a situation implacably set against you that refuses to be negotiated with or resolved without a winner and/or a loser.

Conflict is a situation where you have a disagreement and there's room for dialogue, peaceful resolution, perhaps there's a way to create a 'win-win'

But oppositional means that there is no negotiation possible.

Football season kicks off in full throat this afternoon to empty stadiums, but still for a big fan like myself it offers a welcome distraction from everything else in the news!

And when the two teams meet before kickoff, they are not meeting to see if they can reach peaceful resolution before the game begins.

They are opponents. And one will win and one will lose. This isn't a conflict, this is opposition: you've maybe experienced this with a boss or a co-worker or a neighbor or family member

Sometimes opposition is systemic or circumstantial—COVID has unleashed all sorts of opposition to human beings flourishing, from sickness to the economic fall-out

For some of us, some of our lowest moments in our lives have happened when we've been locked in an oppositional situation so how we deal with opposition matters

Today we're going to get some help in dealing with opposition as we pick-up our story in Nehemiah 4

Nehemiah 4

¹ When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, ² and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said,

"What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble—burned as they are?"

³ Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, "What they are building—if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!"

Some time ago I was shopping at Harris Teeter buying ice for a gathering of people

Moral quandary: one bag or two? The fate of the free world hangs in the balance, this is a decision of epic proportions: one bag or two?

The evil people at Harris Teeter, they know this, and so this is what they put on their ice bags: **"IS ONE BAG ENOUGH???"**

"Is one bag enough?" See, the evil people at Harris Teeter, they know that guys like me can never quite guesstimate if one bag is enough.

They speak back to me my deepest fear that one bag isn't enough,
and then I'll be hosting the party and I'll have grumpy people drinking warm sodas and everyone will hate me and I'll be a terrible person.

And of course I took this picture of the full bag of ice that I had leftover from the party because I was a sucker, bought 2 bags when actually one bag WAS enough, thank you very much.

But see the power of that question is that it feeds back into what I'm already unsure about, already insecure about.

And this is exactly what we see in this passage with Sanballat and Tobiah.

The people of Jerusalem are a conquered people, the walls are in ruins, they've been living among this rubble and chaos for many years

And then Nehemiah shows up and he rallies the people to take on this overwhelming task. And they're diligent, but there's lots of fears and anxieties and questions just beneath the surface:
how will we ever finish this? Will it even matter? There's so much to do and so many enemies! Are we even a people or nation worth preserving?

And what Sanballat and Tobiah do is take the people's deepest fears and insecurities and speak them back to them out loud.

Opposition [in whatever forms it takes, human or a global pandemic] often echoes or amplifies or surfaces our own worst internal fears

Ever been in situation where the person or situation spoke back to you or surfaced your deepest fears and held them up as a mirror and made you say “maybe that’s really true about me?”

“Maybe I did make a huge mistake getting into this marriage/relationship/job/project/having kids

Maybe I don’t have marketable skills. Maybe I’m really not loveable or likeable or maybe I AM in over my head. Maybe I can’t get this done. Maybe I don’t have it in me.”

For me, over the past month-plus, most of the headlines and stats about churches nationwide have fed into my own fears

across the country, there’s fewer people watching church online, where churches are reopening fewer people are returning in person, and giving is way down at churches across the nation

Most of the voices from across the nation are feeding my fears, telling me that accomplishing the work and mission that I love is getting less and less likely

Are there voices feeding back to you out loud some of your own internal fears and anxieties in this season?

I heard a quote this week that I thought was really helpful: Danger is real, fear is a choice. Threat is real, fear is a choice.

Nehemiah and his builders are facing opposition that is a legitimate threat, echoing back their own worst fears, let’s see how Nehemiah responds:

4 Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. 5 Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders. [How does Nehemiah respond? He prays!]

6 So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart.

7 But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the men of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. 8 They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. 9 But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.

First note that Nehemiah’s first response to the initial taunts is prayer—he talks to God, not the mockers; in fact at no point in this chapter/this part of the story does Nehemiah ever address Sanballat or the sidekick! Nehemiah prays!

Opposition is inherently a two-party system—me v. my boss, me v. my situation, me v. whoever

But THROUGH OUT ALL OF NEHEMIAH: GOD IS ALWAYS THE THIRD PARTY ACTIVE!!!

Crucial b/c so much about those times or seasons of opposition is how much it locks us in emotionally, intellectually to the battle

you're having conversations in your head, talking out loud in the shower or in your car, stewing, all wrapped up and tangled around in this emotionally toxic environment inside your own heart and head

WE get all wrapped up in having conversations in our heads with the other party, Nehemiah gets un-wrapped by having conversations with GOD!

It's not just me v. them. It's God's battle.

This opposition will not dominate my thoughts, it will not keep me from the work that I know that God has given me to do, it will not run my life.

Healthy prayer reminds us that God is God; this puts an emphatic boundary around the power of our opposition to define us, rule over us.

Turning things over to God is making the statement that we will not allow this opposition or this situation to become Lord over our lives.

So Nehemiah prays—he acknowledges and leans into God as the active 3rd party

But it doesn't stop there!

v. 9: after further threats, they “**prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.**”

Ladies and gentlemen, depending on your personality and whether or not you've had your coffee this morning, my guess is that you will tend to lean in one direction or the other:

You will either be inclined to pray and post no guard, thinking that guard-posting is somehow a faith-less action OR you will just post a guard and never get around to praying

But when it comes to dealing opposition in a Godly, wise way, we must live in the fullness of what Nehemiah does IN THIS ORDER

we must pray FIRST and then many times we must act to put a boundary in place or to take steps towards a solution

Posting a guard means you wisely take action to propel or protect your rebuilding project

That might mean calling the police. That might mean getting a lawyer. That might mean bringing in a mediator.

That might mean putting physical or emotional space between you and your opposition

Posting a guard means you wear a mask in public spaces to love your neighbor and protect yourself

OR praying and posting a guard might mean something different and more proactive

It might mean that you apply for everything job in sight AND you network with other people

Posting a guard might mean you initiate a hard conversation with a family member or boss or co-worker and tell them that what's happening right now is not right, something needs to change

Posting a guard means in the face of opposition you wisely take action to propel or protect your rebuilding project

BUT PRAYER COMES FIRST

if all you're doing is racing out to post a guard and you're not praying, not surrendering, not entrusting yourself and your fears into God's hands

Then all we're doing is the same thing everyone else is doing.

There's nothing faithful about posting a guard if we haven't first entrusted ourselves into the hands of the one who is LORD over both our guards and our opposition.

It's so easy in our flesh to get freaked out or anxious and go and do something motivated by fear and a desire for control or protection and we end up as functional atheists.

BUT God says, "No no no. Don't go acting out of your flesh and fear. Come to God first! Come to God with your fears and anxieties, look to God for comfort and direction and wisdom"

Surrender yourself, your fears, and your thoughts about what kind of guard you want to post to God first and foremost

AND THEN, by all means, in faith, hope, love, wisdom and courage, post your guard—but not in fear, not in anxiety, not in control or anger.

My friends, as you're working to build or rebuild something that matters there will most likely come a point when you hit some sort of opposition

Opposition often echoes back our own worst fears so FIRST pray and THEN post a guard and see what God will do.

Right now, many people are more disconnected from God and from each other than ever

One person told me last week that she actually had more time than she used to have to be in prayer and Scripture on her own

but without the structure of the commute and the workday and getting the kids off to school, she was as out of practice spiritually as she had been in her adult life.

Our current opposition is a global pandemic warring against us connecting to God and to each other and we're doing everything we can to build and rebuild our church community

And so as church leaders, we're praying and posting a guard

We're praying for you, I'm praying for you.

I'm praying that God might cut through the anxiety and the lethargy to help you to hear his voice, to turn towards God for strength and energy in this season

I'm praying that you understand God and God's power and the power of the gospel is not just another thing on your to-do list that you can put on the shelf when things get crazy busy

NOW is not the time to check-out on God or kick a relationship with God to the margins!

NOW is the time to double down on a relationship with God!

Now is the time to know the power of the Spirit, the peace of the Spirit, to ask for wisdom and strength and to draw on God not as something to shelve but as a relationship that will fuel all those other things and put them in perspective

So, I'm praying all that and more for you.

AND, we're posting a guard. We're doing some tangible, tactical things to create opportunities for you to connect with God and with each other AND to keep everyone safe while we do so

First, it's small group open enrollment season. Today, right now, there's an open invitation: if you've not yet taken advantage of the opportunity to connect in a small group, today's your day.

We're putting an opportunity right in front of you today, in a time where more of us are disconnected from God and from each other than ever before, to make that connection more viable and more concrete and tangible

And to keep small groups safe, most of our small groups aren't just praying nobody gets sick, they're posting a Zoom guard—we're almost all meeting online.

Today, if you're not yet connected to a small group. You need to do that.

And we're also rolling out our Sunday's Together initiative.

Today, at a half-dozen sites across the county, we've got people meeting in backyards or front porches to watch the service together and to worship together

And to keep those safe, we're not just praying nobody gets sick, we've got protocols in place—wear a mask, sit by families, we're providing pre-packaged snacks

And to combat the isolation people are feeling, we're shortening the service a bit to make room for discussion at each site

and we're going to invite everyone who's not at a live site to hop on a Zoom call to increase our connection with each other

We're in one of the most difficult seasons to build a church community that anyone's ever experienced in our country—our opposition is not a person but a global pandemic!

So we're PRAYING for everyone to be healthy and safe and for you to grow in your connection with God and with others but we're not just praying that happens.

We're also posting a guard by opening up small groups and launching smaller Sunday morning gathering events

while we also post a guard against germs by our live gathering protocols and by moving things to Zoom and YouTube and other virtual platforms

That's what it's looking like for us to pray and post a guard as a church in this season.

Today's Take-WITH:

Opposition often echoes back our own worst fears so FIRST pray and THEN post a guard and see what God will do.

What does it mean for you to actively pray AND post a guard in your rebuilding project?

When you're facing opposition, emotions can so easily get out of control and anxiety can run the show

But when fear is driving the bus is most often drives you into the land called regret

So pray first, surrender those fears, let go of your anxiety, let God be the one to be driving the bus, faith, hope, love, wisdom, courage

and THEN post your guard, that wise next step that protects or propels your rebuilding project.

Like I said, we're going to shorten the service and move now to a time of discussion

In just a minute I'm going to post a few questions up for you to discuss at the live gathering sites

And if you're not at a live gathering site, there's going to be a live Zoom call and that link is going to pop up in the chat in just a minute

So if you're not on a computer, if you're watching on a tv, go ahead and get your computer out so that you can join us on the live Zoom call for discussion

Again, the problem we're trying to solve here is this pandemic of disconnection from each other and from God

Here are some discussion questions for you:

- 1. What are the fears being voiced by others around you that echo and therefore AMPLIFY your own fears?**
- 2. How do we pray in such a way that it more actively brings God in to limit the power of fear?** Remember: when fear is driving the bus of our lives it almost always leads us into the land of regret!
- 3. Posting a guard means taking wise action in faith, hope, and love to propel or protect your rebuilding project. What forms might that take for you right now?**