Overcoming Opposition and Adversity Memory Verse: Nehemiah 4:6

Jan 28th, 2024 Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:38-42

SLIDE 1: TITLE

Have you ever heard of the entrepreneurial spirit? It’s a misnomer really. That is, it is not really a spirit at all but rather a way of thinking, a mindset. One website puts it as a way of thinking that pursues change rather than waiting for it. An entrepreneur is willing to take risks and to try new things in order to be the catalyst that creates change. I bring it up to you today by way of illustration, because I think I have an entrepreneur living in my home.

SLIDE 2: Ezra

Ever since he was a little boy, Ezra has wanted things. Toys, candy, hats, hoodies…stuff. That is to be expected of any kid I suppose, but the problem is Ezra does not accept hearing “no”. There have been so many times when he has come to my wife or myself asking or even demanding something or the money that something will cost. We have learned to be firm with this child, to not give him an inch and to weather through his badgering, even going so far as to inflict consequences when enough is enough. But when parents prove to be a dead end (and we so often are), we have found that Ezra will seek another way. He has a way of making cash. A few years ago, Ezra sold overpriced lemonade to the neighborhood with surprisingly lucrative results. And when other opposing entities honed in on his customer base, Ezra was quick to adjust strategies and decided to take orders door to door. “Good afternoon, my it must be hot in there today…could I interest you in a lovely cup of fresh lemonade?” Another time, Ezra and Silas both would make trips out to the dirt pile that sits on the outskirts of our development and collect geodes. They would then smash the rocks revealing the beautiful crystals inside. These then were sold for profit. When I asked them why they were destroying what appeared to be some very large cool looking crystals, they explained to me that smaller crystals meant more crystals which then meant more sales. Somehow or another, Ezra is able to accomplish his goals of getting the stuff he wants. I want to ask you all to join with my wife and I in prayer for this boy. We can see he has a gift, a drive to accomplish goals, so we implore the Lord that he would guide Ezra in using his entrepreneurial powers for good and not evil.

I think Scripture provides us with many examples of great leaders who had the entrepreneurial spirit. They could just not accept reality as it was, they had to change it. This is in fact a drive or a calling, from the Holy Spruit himself. We tend to think of entrepreneurs as the shark tank type.

**SLIDE 3: Shark Tank**

Savvy business people who are willing to invest in themselves. They work hard to develop their skills and eventually realize their dream. As a result, they become very wealthy. Well, a follower of the Lord, someone called by God, operates in a similar way. They must be savvy, determined, invested and willing to learn. They too must operate with a dream. The difference is, they are willing to live into God’s dream for their life. They operate with God’s vision. And sure enough, they too become wealthy, just not necessarily in the monetary sense.

I believe Nehemiah was one such character. He possessed that entrepreneurial spirit and yet was guided by the Holy Spirit. He placed all his efforts into the vision God had given him regarding this ruined city of Jerusalem. Last week we witnessed the collaboration of all the people as they pursued their shared goal of restoring Jerusalem’s broken-down walls. We saw everyone, from old to young, rich and poor, priests and merchants, each taking responsibility for a particular section of the wall and putting in the necessary work.

But worthwhile things are not usually handed to us. Just as my son Ezra would experience opposition to his acquisition goals from his mother and father, so Nehemiah and his fellow builders would experience opposition from the surrounding people. The text shows us three main antagonists.

**SLIDE 4: Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite, Geshem the Arab**

The first is Sanballat the Horonite. He was a Samaritan leader who worked for King Artaxerxes by sort of keeping tabs on what was going on in the region. Samaria would have been located north of Jerusalem. The second is Tobiah the Ammonite who hails from East of the Jordan river. Third, we have Geshem the Arab who represents his people in the south. So the text is showing us that Jerusalem is literally, geographically, surrounded by allied leaders who oppose any notion of restoration.

Open with me to Nehemiah chapter 4. READ 1-3.

**SLIDE 5: Nehemiah 4: 1-3 When Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he became angry and raged. He mocked the Jews, 2 saying in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria: “What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore things themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish it in a day? Will they revive the stones from the piles of rubble, even though they are burned?” 3 Tobiah the Ammonite, who was beside him, added: “If even a fox climbs on whatever they build, their wall of stones will crumble.”**

So we have here a lot of talk, a lot of mockery. The idea is to make out the whole goal as so ridiculous, it should not even be attempted. What they are saying is basically just a reiteration of what the Jewish people were thinking all along. They saw the destroyed walls, they knew what rubble was. It wasn’t until Nehemiah came along communicating a vision from God and stirring within the people a hope that this project could be done. So here come the mockers to dump water on that flame of hope. It's a bit of psychological warfare meant to demoralize people who were already downcast.

But we might be able to predict Nehemiah’s response. READ 4 - 6a

**SLIDE Nehemiah 4:4-6a “Listen, God; we are despised! Turn their insults to us back on their heads and make them like plunder in a captive land. Don’t forgive their iniquity or blot out their sins from your sight. They have thrown insults at the builders!” We continued to build the wall. All of it was joined together, and it reached half of its intended height because the people were eager to work.”**

Pray to God and keep pressing on. As parents, we might say to our kids, just ignore it. I know I have said that to my own kids when they encounter a bully, when they are being made fun of. “Just ignore them. What they are saying isn’t true anyway.” What does that even mean anyway. Just ignore them…you still hear the words, they still land with the intended affect… How much better to say to our kids, “Pray to God about it.” When words come flying at you, turn to God in that moment of need. I can just see Nehemiah gritting his teeth, breathing in slowly and measuredly intent on not reacting. In his anger he throws up a prayer…”Are you hearing this God? Do you know how much they hate us?” and he keeps building. Nehemiah does not simply ignore insults – He prays and keeps building.

Now we might think Nehemiah’s prayer goes a bit far. He crosses over from “Help us!” to “Get them!” He prays that his enemies would be made like captives and her asks God to not forgive them. I don’t think this type of prayer is what Jesus meant when he said to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. But maybe that is just the point: Jesus has not yet taught that ethic. Jesus’ teaching about enemies was revolutionary. In fact, it is preceded by “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for an eye and tooth for tooth.’” That is a revenge model of justice. So Nehemiah is not quite on par with Jesus twist on an old teaching, but he is close. He does not return insult for insult, rather he leaves the vengeance part up to God where it belongs. Also, keep in mind, Sanballat and his associates are not just being annoying bullies. They are setting themselves up against the divine work of God. They are not just opposing a ragtag group of Jews, they are standing against God himself.

So, the first move when faced with mockery is to turn over your anger and hurt feelings to God and keep on building. We continue READ 6-9.

**SLIDE 7: Nehemiah 4:6-9 “We continued to build the wall. All of it was joined together, and it reached half of its intended height because the people were eager to work. But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the people of Ashdod heard that the work on the walls was progressing and the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. They plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to create a disturbance in it. So we prayed to our God and set a guard as protection against them day and night.”**

So the opposition escalates. Words have turned into physical threat. But the solution is the same. Turn to prayer, set a guard and keep building.

In verse 11 we see Sanballat and company actually forming plans to stop the work by actually going in and killing the Jews.

In verse 14 Nehemiah finally speaks, but not to his enemies. Instead, he encourages his people, “Don’t be afraid of them! Remember that the LORD is great and awesome! Fight for your families, your sons, your daughters, your wives, your houses!” It’s a Braveheart moment. As far as we can tell, there was no actual warfare here. It seems that Nehemiah called their bluff. His willingness to continue to, not only build, but fight as well, let their enemies know that they had underestimated Nehemiah’s commitment to this project.

READ v. 16

**SLIDE 8: Nehemiah 4:16 “But from that day on, only half of my workers continued in the construction, while the other half held the spears, shields, bows, and body armor. Meanwhile, the leaders positioned themselves behind the whole house of Judah,”**

A new work environment had to be established. The people would have to adapt to their hostile surroundings. But to stop building was not an option! To cease what God had set in motion was not on the table.

Chapter five is a bit of a side-story that breaks from the main issue of the wall and its opponents. Instead it addresses a different type of opposition coming from within. While the people all pitched in to do the work of building, there was great injustice occurring beneath the surface. It came to Nehemiah’s attention that the Jewish officials were enacting usury upon their own people. Basically, these officials were the ones with the money, and they would lend it out to their fellow Jews who were in need, but they charging and incredible amount of interest on those loans. People were not able to pay back what they owed. In Chapter 5 verse 9, Nehemiah intervenes. He pleads with the leaders to stop their predatory practice, to pay back the interest and most importantly to “walk in the fear of God.”

**SLIDE 9: “walk in the fear of God.”**

After all, these prohibitions against usury go all the way back to Leviticus 25! The officials agreed with Nehemiah. They were convicted of their wrongdoing and vowed to set accounts right again.

Even with this internal opposition among his own people, Nehemiah is grounded in his dedication to God’s ways. The solutions he presents are not of his own making or a result of his own opinion. He is simply trying to follow the Lord’s ways and, likewise, lead others.

Chapter 6 sees the entire wall project coming to an end. The work is winding down, final details are being worked out. But Sanballat and company are not finished yet. They still have some schemes to enact. In verse 2 they send Nehemiah a message: “Come, let’s meet together in one of the villages in the plain of Ono.” Nehemiah sees through this little trick. He responds, “No, I’m busy.” They do this four times and eventually send a letter letting Nehemiah know that the prevailing story is that the Jews are getting ready to rebel. That’s why they have rebuilt their walls. And you, Nehemiah, you have fancied yourself their king. Come and talk to us or word of all this will get back to King Artaxerxes. Nehemiah is not fazed. He says, “You are simply inventing this.”

Sanballat and his cronies even go so far as to hire a man to trick Nehemiah into thinking that he is in danger of his own life and that he should flee to the temple and hide there. But Nehemiah saw through this rouse as well. “Should someone like me run away?” Not only was Nehemiah brave, but he was well aware that only priests were allowed in the temple. He was not interested in breaking God’s laws. Verse 14 shows us once again how Nehemiah handles his problems, he prays. He asks God to handle his many enemies.

And so we come to a summery statement: READ 15-16

**SLIDE 10: Nehemiah 5:15-16 “So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month of Elul. It took fifty-two days. When our enemies heard about this, all of the nations around us were afraid and their confidence was greatly shaken. They knew that this work was completed with the help of our God.”**

Fifty-two days of hard work and elbow grease, of persevering under mockery and threat, of staying motivated to finish what was believed to be God’s plan. And the wall seemed to have an effect. The surrounding nations had their confidence shaken. The downtrodden, defeated Jews had completed their goal. The underdogs had succeeded! And that wasn’t supposed to happen. They knew that the work had been completed with the help of God, and this caused the surrounding people to shallow hard and reconsider what God’s people might be capable of.

Capability…it is the very thing we prize. Capability is what we try to instill into our children, it is what we base our career on, it is how we tend to value people. Are they capable? And what are they capable of? We might also ask, do we know what we are capable of? Do we even know our limits? We are amazed by people who are extraordinarily capable or who seem to be capable despite some sort of setback or disability.

But how often, when faced with challenges in our life, do we consider what God is capable of? Now, certainly God did not need Nehemiah. God could have spoken the word and created shiny new walls out of nothing. He could have saved the people all their blood, sweat and tears, all their materials. Fifty-two days is quite a long time compared to the momentary instant that God is capable of. But, we can see that having new walls is not actually God’s purpose in this story. Nehemiah’s mission was to rebuild walls but more than that, he was meant to restore the people into a proper relationship with God, to restore within the people a proper faith in God. And as such, the physical work, the job in question, the task at hand becomes an incarnational project. By God’s design, completion of the mission will require his sovereign hand as well as our heartfelt involvement. God’s provision plus our labor equals success! It is an effort that is fully God and fully man; an incarnational project.

While I am impressed with my son’s capability to press on despite repeatedly being told “no”! I am glad for his persevering, entrepreneurial spirit, but I am aware that the majority of his endeavors at this point are not necessarily ordained by God or for the good of his kingdom. But I am fully convinced of and praying for the day when my son will receive a call from God and pursue those goals incarnationally. With all of Ezra’s mind and strength coupled with God’s sovereign hand of blessing, there is no task, no mission that could not be completed. There is no amount of opposition that could stand in the way. It’s a matter of: pray and keep on building.

**SLIDE 11: pray and keep on building**

Where is God calling for restoration in your life? It could be a relationship with another person, it could be your relationship with him. It could be restoration of a financial nature, maybe a step in further education is needed. Maybe it is a literal fix-up project that needs attending or some aspect of your surrounding neighborhood that needs attention. Where is God calling for restoration in your life? Remember, he will not snap his fingers and do all the work; our involvement is required. May we be prepared to do the work that God is calling us to complete! May we have ears open to hearing his call in our lives. May we have hearts that respond, like Nehemiah’s, hearts that weather toil and opposition in order to see through the incarnational mission that God has laid before us. We must be people of prayer who keep building! And before too long we will be able to look back and see the work completed with the help of God. Amen!