

Scripture: Ezra 4:1-7; Nehemiah 4:1-9, 6:1-14
Message: "If God Is For Us..."
November 12, 2017; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON
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This Sunday has been set aside as a day of prayer for the persecuted church. This morning we will look at the theme of opposition to God's people. We will not sensationalize it. We also realize that not all opposition is persecution. We will look at what opposition looks like and how we can respond.

In chapters 4-6 of Ezra and chapters 4 and 6 of Nehemiah we find themes related to the challenges that God's people face in history, and in our world today.

(Ezra 4:1-7) As Ezra is encouraging the people to begin rebuilding the temple, the people around them (v.4) "set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building." It is easy to become discouraged. If other people criticize what you are doing or question your motive or challenge the possibility of your success, you begin to question whether to continue or not.

"I don't know if you should try that." "Do you really think that will work?" "Do you really believe that?" Discouragement undermines confidence.

Then in v.5 we read that "they hired counsellors to work against them and frustrate their plans." This was not just a bunch of people being a general nuisance. They *hired* people who could devote their time to opposing the rebuilding project. These counsellors could focus all their efforts and energies to work against the Jews. They may have been specialists in the field, people who were very good at finding ways and means to cause discouragement.

Then in v.6 we are told that they lodged a formal accusation against the people of Judah and Jerusalem, probably forwarding it to the king himself. In that accusation, they tell the king to check the records: (v.15) "In these records you will find that this city is a rebellious city, troublesome to kings and provinces, a place of rebellion from ancient times. That is why this city was destroyed." Well, that's not the whole story. But if the partial truth works, why bother with all the details?

Opposition or persecution comes in the form of general discouragement or from professional counsellors, or it may be an opposition expressed through government powers. It is a challenge to actions that are based on one's beliefs.

At another stage in the history of the returned exiles, that is, after Nehemiah arrives, there is another wave of opposition to the Jews. In the time of Ezra, the neighbours opposed the rebuilding of the temple. In the time of Nehemiah, they are opposing the rebuilding of the

walls of Jerusalem.

(Nehemiah 4:1-9) The opposition is expressed in the form of ridicule and insults. "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?" 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!"

When a person does not have a solid argument to make or a qualified discussion to be involved in, it is easy to resort to attacks on the person. Unfortunately we see this becoming more and more a part of our political campaigns or public discourse. Instead of debating the issues, there are repeated references to the ability of the other person to lead. Instead of a discussion of the concerns, there are flagrant attacks on the character of the leaders. Ridicule and insult does nothing to resolve differences or clarify positions. It polarizes people into extreme positions.

When that didn't seem to work, the opponents began to plot together to fight against the Jews. When the psychological opposition does not work, there may be steps to physical opposition. This is often the process in countries where believers face persecution. There may be government decisions and actions that work to undermine the authority or reputation of believers. When that does not stop the practice or witness of the believers, there is the step of physical opposition, imprisonment, or burning places of worship.

(Nehemiah 6:1-4) Another attempt to stop the work was a subtle scheme to draw Nehemiah away from the workers. We find this described in Nehemiah 6. But Nehemiah was a wise and perceptive man. He saw through the plot and recognized the scheming that they were doing.

(Nehemiah 6:5-14) Then Sanballat takes another step. He begins a rumour designed to undermine Nehemiah's credibility(6:6-7): "It is reported among the nations—and Geshem says it is true—that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: 'There is a king in Judah!' Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us confer together."

We see here a new development in the opposition that the Jews were facing. What began as a challenge to the work and to the people in general, has now become a direct attack on the leader. When you can take the leader away, the people may quickly lose heart. In the days of early warfare, the enemy would try to take out the general or commander. If the

leader was not present to give orders, to set direction, to provide encouragement, the people may quickly disperse. If you can undermine the leader's authority and credibility, even if it is a false rumour, the people will not trust their leader and they will no longer listen to him or her.

That is why, in countries where there is persecution, those in prison are so often the pastors and leaders of the churches. The governments assume that if the pastor is out of the scene, the people will be afraid and be lost and no longer express their faith.

The themes and expressions of opposition found in these chapters in Ezra and Nehemiah find parallel expression in our world today. Those who oppose expression of people of faith also use discouragement, hired specialists, false accusations, ridicule, insult, attack, discrediting leaders. How are we to respond?

Again, we can see the response of Ezra and Nehemiah. In Ezra 4:24 we find that the opposition was effective in halting the building of the tabernacle. However, some time later, under the leadership of Haggai and Zechariah (see Ezra 5) the opposition is challenged. King Darius does a search of the historical records and discovers that the Jews were actually granted permission to rebuild the temple and construction continues.

One response to opposition is to submit. Another response is to challenge the accusations and set the record straight. It is important that Christians have a clear understanding of our faith and the basis of our faith. There are historical and archeological records that can verify the stories in Scripture.

When people undermine Christian faith as something made up in the minds of deluded people, we can challenge that by showing the truth and viability of the historical record. That means we need to know what is available. We need to know what we believe and be competent in expressing it. Study, read, practice with each other. Get a study group going to learn together and help each other express or defend what we believe.

In Nehemiah 4 we find some other responses. One repeated theme from Nehemiah is prayer. Before he spoke to the king he prayed. After the ridicule and insults we read (vv.5-6), "Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. 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." This is also the response in v.9, "But we prayed to our God."

There is a point of recognizing that the Lord is part of this battle. In fact, the battle is the Lord's. It is a battle between two kingdoms, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. We are on the Lord's side. But we do not fight alone. Prayer is an important reminder that the Lord is part of what is going on. It is an important reminder of trust in his work and power.

It is a surrender to his leading and wisdom in our continued response.

That leads to another important point, stated most succinctly in v.9, "But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat." The prayer is followed by action. Nehemiah 4 describes in further detail the defensive strategy that was adopted. The builders carried weapons. They had a signal system in place to be able to help each other if attacked. Prayer was followed by distinct action steps.

Nehemiah also spoke words of encouragement to the people, reminding them of the basic truths and principles of their faith(4:14,20): "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome...Our God will fight for us!" In Christ, we are more than conquerors. If God is for us, who can be against us? (see Romans 8:31-39)

Along with this reminder of God's greatness and presence is the invitation to come together to support each other. There is an emphasis on the communal responsibility. We are not in this battle alone. We are brothers and sisters in Christ and work and fight together. That is the one comment that is repeatedly heard from Christians who are persecuted. They are so encouraged to know that other Christians who live in freedom are caring and praying and acting on their behalf. If you face opposition to your faith, a particular challenge at school or work or home, don't try to resolve it or fight it alone. We are a family of God, here together to help one another.

Until the day Jesus comes again, there will be opposition to those who claim to be followers of Jesus. It will take many forms. It may include a more extreme expression that we may label as persecution. Recognize it for what it is, an opposition to the work of God in this world. Respond to it with integrity and confidence. Do not resort to insults or ridicule or attacks. Live your faith confidently, defending it with integrity, working for justice. God is for us, but not as a club to beat others. He gives confidence, peace of mind, courage to stand firm and defend our faith.

Remember our brothers and sisters who are being persecuted for their faith. May the Lord give them the strength to testify with confidence to his power and rule.

Live in the trust in God's presence and victory. Jesus, our Saviour and Lord, died for sin and rose again. Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:39).

Amen.