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SERMON TITLE: **Overcoming Persistent Opposition**

Rebuilding a City: Trusting God & Each Other

SCRIPTURE: **Nehemiah 6:1-16**

DATE: **June 14, 2020**

View online service at www.fpcd.org/live-stream

Read first the Luke & John references below.

☞ I have always wondered about statements about how Jesus would say something, it would be interpreted as controversial, people would want to attack him, drive him out of town, over a cliff, or be so angry to plan his demise. And then Jesus would simply “walk right through them.” How did he do that?

I’ve never really understood it. But in reading about Nehemiah’s continued problems with opposers, something clicked. READ Neh. 6:1-16

The Valley of Ono was in the northwestern corner of Israel’s territory, bordering Samaria and Ashdod. Those villages had not helped in the rebuilding. In fact, it was from there that enemies had come to attack the people when they were building the wall. The plan behind the letter was clear: Nehemiah’s enemies would lure him to that unsafe place and extinguish him.

These people would never give up. Sanballat, Tobiah, and Gesham, along with other enemy leaders were going to do everything they could to prevent Nehemiah’s success. How do you overcome persistent opposition? The answer is: *with God*. That’s the simple answer. Now let’s see how we navigate through opposers like Jesus did.

You have to understand the enemy. The enemy is, well . . . your enemy!

- ✓ The enemy will intimidate you to stop your work.
- ✓ The enemy is not above making false claims against you.
- ✓ The enemy, seeking to gain power over you, will try to control you by fear.
- ✓ The enemy will try to draw you away from doing God’s work.

But, with your full-hearted commitment to God and to your call, no intimidation, no maligning of you, no unjust accusations, no attempt to frighten you will be greater than the power of God within you. For “Greater is the Spirit that is in you than he who is in the world! (1 John 4:4) **You, as a child of God and believer in Christ can win**, even in face of persistent oppression!

But you must be a person of moral integrity, like Nehemiah. He did not fight on the level of these enemies. The person “in the spirit of the world” fights like this:

- Retaliation
- Unforgiveness
- Immorality and injustice
- Not praying for your enemy
- Taking matters into your own hands
- Loss of faith in God’s ability to handle your enemy

Are you caught in a bad habit with people you don’t like? Perhaps you have let a wedge of unforgiveness or retaliation build in you. Instead, let’s humble ourselves before the One who will honor us when we stay true to Him. Ask the Lord to help you change. Lay down the resentment so that you can be free. Then we protect our hearts and stay the course, and receive God’s favor, like the Psalmist (71:3-5):

LORD, give the order to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress. My God, rescue me from the power of the wicked, from the clutches of cruel oppressors for you alone are my hope. I’ve trusted you, O LORD, from childhood.

Engaging in a fight with your enemy on the world’s level brings you loss. Nehemiah’s model brings strength!

Did you notice that Nehemiah was in constant prayer? He teaches us:

- Keep your relationship with God vibrant and strong
- Think of God’s work as “Great Work”
- Maintain a strong will and determination for the goal
- Do not be intimidated
- Speak the truth and stand on it
- Don’t believe the negative—be careful who you listen to
- Remember past victories¹

Do you recognize the people God has placed in your life who God is working through? We are vital to each other. In the stories I tell you, listen for the people God placed around them to help. Ask God to help you discern others God has placed in your path. If someone’s advice is for you to follow a cowardly act, like Shemaiah, that person is not from God.

God helps us overcome opposition when we give ourselves to him. Jesus came into the midst of a world who opposed him. (The Bible says, “He came into the very world he created, but . . . His own did not receive him” John 1:10-11.) **Expect persistent opposition**. But also expect God’s unshakable power to move you right through the opposition to gain the goal!

Let’s look at the story of two believers who experienced persistent opposition and how they came through it. One man and one woman. Ladies first.

Bridget “Biddy” Mason was born into slavery in 1818, She was given to the Smith family. Biddy cared for Mrs. Smith, whose health was poor. She developed great skill as a nurse and midwife. The family joined the Mormon church and in 1848,

¹ Nehemiah had the king’s approval, support, funding. The people said yes, had a heart for work, came together in unity, and defeated the enemy.

moved from Mississippi to Utah, and later to San Bernardino, California. Along the way Bidy crossed paths with free black people who informed her that California had outlawed slavery. Along that road, her oldest daughter met and would later marry the son of a successful black rancher named Robert Owens.

After a while, pressure mounted for Mr. Smith to free his slaves so he hid them and planned to move to Texas where he could sell them. That's the ugly, greedy truth. But Robert Owens alerted the Los Angeles sheriff who chased him down with a posse and took all fourteen of his slaves. But at the emancipation trial, Bidy's lawyer did not show up because Smith paid him off. Being black, according to California law Bidy was not allowed to testify in the courtroom. However, the judge took her into his office where he listened to her story and ruled to set her and Smith's 14 enslaved people free.

Do you see the people God positioned along the way to help her because she believed in God. Who has God put in your life to help you?

Because of her valuable medical skills, she went to work for Dr. John Griffin. She saved her earnings and in 1866 bought her first piece of land in downtown Los Angeles. She became a real estate investor and her wealth grew. She used her wealth to found a daycare, a school for black children, and a traveler's aid center. She visited people in prison and donated to the poor. She had a lifestyle of generosity and people everywhere knew her. She and her son-in-law began a church in her home, the first African Methodist Episcopal church in Los Angeles, later donating the land for them to build. When Bridget died in 1891, she was the most well-known, richest philanthropist in Los Angeles, with holding worth \$300,000, equivalent to \$6 million today.

She could not read or write. But Bridget Mason knew God, followed God's ways, and overcame persistent opposition, walking right through slavery to freedom, success, and honor because of her faith and God's power. Is there some persistent opposition you would like to walk through?

Eric Liddell ran in the 1924 Olympics in Paris. You may have seen the movie, "Chariots of Fire." He was a devout Christian who planned to be a missionary in China. But he had this gift—he could run. He joined his college athletic program in Scotland and was very successful; an Olympic hopeful. When he became nationally known, people invited him to speak publicly.

He always shared with these crowds who were unlikely to attend church, how he believed in Jesus and accepted whatever came. Many people were deeply moved. Now he knew why God had given him the athletic gift he had.

He made the Olympic team for Great Britain. Scotland had never had a winner in the games. But, when he learned that his race, the 100 meter, would take place on a Sunday, he refused to run. All hell broke loose. It wasn't that he didn't feel God's call to run. But that closeness to God also compelled him to honor the Sabbath, even though both the Prince of Wales and the British Olympic Committee accused him of betraying his country. *Forget*

the Sabbath, they said, and run the race. But, even in the face of national pressure he refused to compromise.

In 2012, David Brooks wrote in the *New York Times* that serious faith hinders athletes because the charitable aspect of the Christian faith is at odds with the killer instinct needed for victory in athletics.² There lies the undercurrent of resistance. Opposition to faith in athletics begins in youth sports and carries forward, because there's no respect for honoring the Sabbath (Sunday). Youths who refuse to play on Sundays will not succeed in athletics. **Few resist it.**³

But God was with Eric Liddell in this opposition. Harold Abrahams, who ran the 400 meter, proposed that he and Eric switch races, since the 400 meter was to be held on Tuesday. Eric was not expected to win – how could he win? It wasn't what he had trained for. He had tried it before, and lost. He even drew the worst lane, the outside, which is farthest forward where he could not see the other runners. But as he headed to the starting block an American masseur slipped a piece of paper in his hand with a Bible verse: "Those who honor me I will honor." (1 Sam 2:30) Liddell ran with that piece of paper in his hand.

As he began the race, he set a blistering pace because he could not see the other runners. Mr. Abrahams, watching from the stands, immediately realized *he'll never make it*. But halfway through the race, Eric is still ahead by three meters. He makes the last turn and speeds up, increasing his lead. It's incredible. He wins the gold by five meters, breaking the world record.⁴

The next Sunday, the 4x100-meter relay and the 4x400-relay were run. Eric Liddell was nowhere to be found. He was in the pulpit at the Scots Church in Paris, preaching to a large, enthusiastic crowd.

As you stay the course during opposition, don't miss the most important steps:

- Put your life on the line (commit yourself to the labor)
- Expect God to follow through
- Give God the glory!

The wall that Nehemiah had a dream to rebuild was completed October 2, 445 B.C., just 52 days after it was begun, a few days after he was challenged by opposers.

Opposition, so overwhelming to us, is child's play in God's hands. Have you put yourself in those strong, powerful, righteous loving hands? Are you following his ways, not giving in to the ways of the world—ways of anger, resentment, retaliation, and self-direction? Walk in the lasting hope of the Spirit Jesus put within you and you will walk right through in triumph.

AMEN

² Article referenced in *Seven Men: And the Secret of Their Greatness* by Eric Metaxas, p. 65.

³ My three sons were in organized sports from age five to college. In all that time, I knew of only one player whose parents refused to allow him to play on Sundays.

LUKE & JOHN REFERENCES, various:

Luke 4:28-30 ²⁸ When they heard this, the people in the synagogue were furious. ²⁹ Jumping up, they mobbed him and forced him to the edge of the hill on which the town was built. They intended to push him over the cliff, ³⁰ but he passed right through the crowd and went on his way.

Luke 19:47-48 ⁴⁷ Every day he was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him. ⁴⁸ Yet they could not find any way to do it, because all the people hung on his words.

John 7:28-30 ²⁸ Then Jesus, still teaching in the temple courts, cried out, "Yes, you know me, and you know where I am from. I am not here on my own, but he who sent me is true. You do not know him, ²⁹ but I know him because I am from him and he sent me." ³⁰ At this they tried to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his time had not yet come.

John 8:58-59 ⁵⁸ "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" ⁵⁹ At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.

John 10:37-39 ³⁷ Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. ³⁸ But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father." ³⁹ Again they tried to seize him, but he escaped their grasp.

1 John 4:4 ⁴ Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.

NEHEMIAH 6:1-16 ^{NLT}

Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab, and the rest of our enemies found out that I had finished rebuilding the wall and that no gaps remained-- though we had not yet set up the doors in the gates. ² So Sanballat and Geshem sent a message asking me to meet them at one of the villages in the plain of Ono. But I realized they were plotting to harm me, ³ 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?" ⁴ Four times they sent the same message, and each time I gave the same reply. ⁵ The fifth time, Sanballat's servant came with an open letter in his hand, ⁶ and this is what it said: "There is a rumor among the surrounding nations, and Geshem tells me it is true, that you and the Jews are planning to rebel and that is why you are building the wall. According to his reports, you plan to be their king. ⁷ He also reports that you have appointed prophets in Jerusalem to proclaim about you, 'Look! There is a king in Judah!' "You can be very sure that this report will get back to the king, so I suggest that you come and talk it over with me."

⁸ I replied, "There is no truth in any part of your story. You are making up the whole thing."

⁹ They were just trying to intimidate us, imagining that they could discourage us and stop the work. So I continued the work with even greater determination. ¹⁰ Later I went to visit Shemaiah son of Delaiah and grandson of Mehetabel, who was confined to his home. He said, "Let us meet together inside the Temple of God and bolt the doors shut. Your enemies are coming to kill you tonight." ¹¹ But I replied, "Should someone in my position run from danger? Should someone in my position enter the Temple to save his life? No, I won't do it!" ¹² I realized that God had not spoken to him, but that he had uttered this prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. ¹³ They were hoping to intimidate me and make me sin. Then they would be able to accuse and discredit me. ¹⁴ Remember, O my God, all the evil things that Tobiah and Sanballat have done. And remember Noadiah the prophet and all the prophets like her who have tried to intimidate me. ¹⁵ So on October 2 the wall was finished-- just fifty-two days after we had begun. ¹⁶ When our enemies and the surrounding nations heard about it, they were frightened and humiliated. They realized this work had been done with the help of our God.