

## “A Mind to Work”

*Nehemiah 4:1-23*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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Movies can have a way of touching on our emotions, creating a connection with something deep down inside us. Some use comedy. Some tell a heartwarming story. Or a heartbreaking story. But there's one cinematic technique that gets me every time. It probably gets you, too, especially the guys. It's the inspirational speech. You know what I'm talking about. It comes at a critical point in the movie where the good guys are about to be crushed by the bad guys. It looks hopeless. And then the hero makes a moving, passionate speech that rallies everyone to sacrifice self for the bigger picture, to overcome evil with good. This happens in all kinds of movie genres – war movies, westerns, romantic chick flicks (OK, I don't actually know about those) – but one genre stands out. Probably every sports movie ever made has a motivational speech in it.

Since it's football season, let's take a look at a clip from the movie *Facing the Giants*. The movie is about a small Christian high school, Shiloh Academy, and its head football coach. The team has had six losing seasons in a row when Coach Taylor decides they are going to play for God's glory instead of their own, which transforms the attitude of the team and the families. By the end of the season, Shiloh finds itself miraculously playing in the state championship against a bigger, better, meaner team. That's when the coach gives them the inspirational speech.

I think we find something similar in chapter 4 of Nehemiah. As we saw before, the Jews had begun to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. Nehemiah had divided them up so that each family worked on a small part of the wall, many of them working on the part that was next to their own home. This is something that many of them have wanted to do for a long time and they were excited to do it. They were doing God's work and Nehemiah had initially motivated them by showing them all the ways God had worked to make it possible.

But they hadn't been working on the wall very long when they ran into trouble. Doing God's work always brings opposition. It was true in Nehemiah's day and it's just as true today. If we are doing the work of building God's Kingdom, there will always be those who oppose it.

We don't know exactly how long they had been working before the opposition started, but probably less than two weeks. As we'll see in a few weeks, the entire wall was finished in 52 days. Chapter 4 begins, “Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews.” Not only did he insult them but he went and recruited other enemies of the Jews to get involved. They didn't want Jerusalem to become a viable city again. Verse 7 mentions Sanballat, Tobiah and the Ammonites, the Arabs, and the Ashdodites. Sanballat was governor of Samaria to the north. Tobiah was governor of Ammon, which is modern day Jordan to the east, the Arabs were to the south, and Ashdod was to the west. In other words, Jerusalem was surrounded by its enemies.

This chapter makes it clear that there are two kinds of opposition to God's work. The first is what I would call “external” opposition. The enemies of the Jews tried to make them stop their work on the wall. They began by trying to ridicule them, hoping to get the Jews to give up. Sanballat comes to Jerusalem with Tobiah and some others and starts making fun of them. He says, “What are these feeble Jews doing? They don't really think they can rebuild this wall. Look at this mess. What a joke.” Tobiah gets in on it, too. He says, “Yeah, they're doing such a bad job if a little fox jumps on it the whole thing will come down.” You can almost hear them laughing at their own jokes.

When insults and ridicule don't stop the work, they do what most bullies do. They threaten. Verse 8 says, “they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to

cause confusion in it.” Verse 11 is even more graphic: “And our enemies said, “They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.”

A third kind of external opposition would be actual violence against them. There’s no mention in this passage of any attacks. Nehemiah took measures to protect the people and discourage their enemies from attacking. But it’s also important to remember that Nehemiah had the permission of the emperor. An attack against him probably would have provoked a reaction from Persia. Sanballat and the others hoped that their threats would be enough to stop the work on the wall.

And they certainly seemed to have an effect, which brings us to the other kind of opposition – internal. Internal opposition would be the ways we tend to defeat ourselves. What we find is that the people were tired and afraid and overwhelmed and discouraged. They felt inadequate and they began to complain. Look at 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 ones who lived on the farms surrounding Jerusalem began to complain, too. Their husbands and sons and brothers who were coming to help build the wall were being threatened every day. They began to worry about their homes and land and safety.

When we’re doing God’s work we should expect both kinds of opposition as well. Those who hate God will be angry and try to stop us. More Christians are persecuted for their faith now than at any time in history. But we also need to watch out for the internal opposition. It’s easy to get discouraged doing God’s work, especially when we don’t see any progress but we do experience opposition.

So how do we respond to opposition? How did Nehemiah respond? Well first of all he responded the way we have come to expect from him. He responded with *prayer*. “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.” That may seem like a harsh prayer but it’s certainly an honest one. In the face of great opposition, twice in this chapter Nehemiah immediately turns to prayer. I think too often, even as Christians, our first response is not prayer. If we’re insulted we insult back; if we’re threatened we threaten. But if we really believe that God is in control, our first response will be prayer.

The second thing we can learn is Nehemiah’s *preparation*. He wasn’t idle. Praying does not excuse us from acting responsibly. Verse 9 says, “we prayed to our God *and* set a guard as a protection against them day and night.” Nehemiah armed the people so they could defend themselves and he worked out a plan so that the building could continue. In the same way we must be prepared to carry out God’s work in the face of opposition.

Third, we see their *perspective*. Perspective is the way we see the world. In the end, thanks to Nehemiah’s leadership and inspiration, the people trusted God. This is where Nehemiah gave his motivational speech in verse 14: “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.” Later on he says, “Our God will fight for us.” A big part of overcoming opposition is mental. It’s your attitude. Nehemiah was confident that God would act. He encouraged the people to remember how God had worked to get them to this point and to trust that He would keep working. If we want to experience the Holy Spirit working in our lives and in our church we should expect it. As the saying goes, if you’re praying for rain you should be carrying an umbrella.

The fourth thing to see in this chapter is their *passion*. In verse 6, Nehemiah says, “So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.” They worked hard, from the

first light in the morning until the stars came out in the evening. Nehemiah had those who lived outside Jerusalem stay in the city at night and they all slept with their clothes on. They were ready to work and ready to fight. In other words, every person did whatever needed to be done to accomplish the mission.

It's the same for us today. When we looked at chapter 3 we talked about the wall that God is calling us to build. Building the wall is a metaphor for building God's kingdom. We are called to build God's kingdom together by making disciples of Jesus. That's our mission and we need everyone to do whatever is needed to accomplish the mission. But as we do that we will face opposition. Some will be external threats. Our culture is increasingly opposed to

our mission and sometimes hostile. But we will also face internal threats. We'll get tired. We'll think the job is too big. You will think it's someone else's turn or that you're not qualified.

Our response needs to begin with prayer. Every one of us should be praying for our church and praying that God would show us people in our life that we can help learn to love and follow Jesus. But we need to be people of action through preparation. We need to see people through Jesus' perspective. And we need passion. Passion to worship, passion to learn, and passion to serve. When we do we'll see that nothing is impossible with God.

*Amen.*