

Unwavering Resolve

Battling and Belonging

Nehemiah 4

June 7, 2026

Introduction

Two or three months ago, a home in our neighborhood sold. It'd taken a while, and one of the reasons why was because the front yard had not been cared for in some time. Overgrown trees and shrubs hid once well-manicured flower beds and paths; weeds dominated what was left of the yard, and so on.

In recent weeks, our very kind new owners have taken action by simply wiping the slate clean in the front yard. Every tree. Every bush. Every plant. Every shrub. All of it, removed. Recently, crews have smoothed out the lot, laid fresh bermuda sod, and even more recently, begun placing plants and ornamental trees. But what was once a semi-forested front yard with little or no grass to mow is now a treeless acre of future grass cutting.

Some say it's coming together very nicely. Yet some in the neighborhood are quite upset. Upset that their beloved neighborhood is starting to lose its tree-like charm. Upset that the environment is under attack. Upset that the HOA has long expired and they have no recourse against their neighbors other than gossip.

On and on I could go, and for the record, I abstain from comment, but the entire scenario wonderfully illustrates that **(Slide) visible progress invites resistance** from someone who sees things differently or stands to lose in some way to your progress.

Now, it may be your instinct to assume that resistance or opposition means you are doing something wrong. Humility almost requires that you at least consider the possibility. But it is often the case that opposition or resistance come because you were doing the right thing. The thing that God wants you to do. The thing that makes you more like him and makes his glory shine all around you. Enemies do not spend their energy attacking projects that are going nowhere.

Such was the case for Nehemiah. He was doing exactly what God wanted him to do, and almost immediately faced opposition or resistance. And what we learned from his story in the Bible is how God's sovereignty, God's covenant love, God's love for His glory, and God's providence inform our response to opposition and resistance. All of those things led in Nehemiah to build the wall. All of those things informed how Nehemiah went about building the wall. And all of these things inform how Nehemiah will overcome opposition and resistance.

Body

What we discover in Nehemiah 4-6 is that Nehemiah faced opposition in multiple forms. This morning, we will look at two forms of opposition in this chapter. The first is ridicule. The second is the threat of violence.

Opposition by Ridicule

Notice the ridicule that takes place in our passage. *(Slides)*

"What are these pathetic Jews doing? Can they restore it by themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they ever finish? Can they bring these burnt stones back to life from the mounds of rubble?"

"Indeed, even if a fox climbed up what they are building, it would break down their stone wall!"

Ridicule feels good because it creates a crowd. Sanballat didn't deliver his speech alone. He gathered his associates and the army of Samaria because he needed an audience. Shared laughter is one of the most powerful social bonds there is, and when you can get a group of people laughing at the same target, you have built a temporary but very real sense of community. This is why locker rooms, comment sections, and political rallies all run on the same fuel. Mockery is efficient at building loyalty by defining someone else as deserving contempt.

It also temporarily solves our insecurities. When someone else is doing something you feel threatened by, one of the easiest ways to manage that discomfort is to make their effort look foolish. Your mockery or ridicule, tears them down and makes you feel better about yourself.

It's also a great distraction. You assign a label, "fanatics," "feeble," "naive," and get the label to stick, so you never have to engage the actual substance of what someone is doing.

But here is what ridicule does not accomplish: ***(Slide) it does not engage the work, and it does not answer the idea.*** All it does is prove that the mocker is paying close attention. Sanballat named real weaknesses accurately. The Jews were feeble. The wall was enormous. The task was staggering. But naming a weakness is not the same as proving the work cannot be done. And this is where ridicule always gives itself away. You only work hard to make something look doomed when you are not entirely sure it is. So the ridicule told Nehemiah something important. The people opposing him were afraid. And afraid people mock.

And that explains Nehemiah's response. He did not retaliate or reciprocate. The easiest response to public mockery is a public counter-insult. "Sanballat, you're a petty governor of a provincial backwater." Nehemiah could have said all of that. But he would have been lowering the level of his character and removing himself from the work and into a spat, which is exactly what the ridicule was designed to accomplish.

Instead, informed by God's sovereignty, God's covenant love, God's love for his glory, and God's providence, Nehemiah prayed. What is striking about his prayer is its honesty. He told God exactly how it felt. Look at vv. 4-5. *(Slide)*

Listen, our God, for we are despised. Make their insults return on their own heads and let them be taken as plunder to a land of captivity. Do not cover their guilt or let their sin be erased from your sight, because they have angered the builders.

Now, you might hear Nehemiah's words here and assume he is cursing his enemies, calling down personal vengeance on people who hurt his feelings. That reading misses the distinction between a prayer of **imprecation** and a prayer of **vindication**. An imprecatory prayer asks God to destroy. A prayer of vindication asks God to judge, which is a different thing entirely. The ground of the prayer is the fact that these men mocked God's work and God's people. Nehemiah is essentially saying, "Lord, you see this. Do not look away from it." He is placing the matter in God's hands as the rightful judge. It's a prayer that shows Nehemiah was trusting God to be God.

The result of this prayer was that Nehemiah maintained the proper perspective about all of these things. The work was clearly God's, and so the best response to those who mocked it was to keep building it. And so they did, per v. 6. *(Slide)*

So we rebuilt the wall until the entire wall was joined together up to half its height, for the people had the will to keep working.

So the answer to ridicule is to pray it through, and get back to work.

Opposition by the Threat of Violence

The second form of opposition was more serious. Ridicule aims at your confidence. Physical threats aim at your survival. Look at vv. 7-8. *(Slide)*

When Sanballat, Tobiah, and the Arabs, Ammonites, and Ashdodites heard that the repair of Jerusalem's walls was progressing and the gaps were being closed, they became furious. They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and throw it into confusion.

Notice that the bad guys have grown their team. What started with three men now included hostile neighbors on every side, north, east, south, and west. Jerusalem was surrounded, and the threat was specific: come in without warning, kill the builders, end the project.

Three things made this opposition especially dangerous. *(Slides)*

1. **First, it arrived when the people were already exhausted.** The wall had reached half its intended height. That sounds like good news, but it also meant that the people had been at this long enough to feel it. They were halfway through a task that had already emptied them. Anyone who has been in the middle of a demanding, long-term responsibility knows this feeling. You start strong. Somewhere around the midpoint, the remaining distance looks longer than the distance you've already covered. If an additional threat arrives at that moment, the combination of physical exhaustion and external fear can stop you entirely.
2. **Second, the threat came from a genuine coalition of powerful enemies.** This was not an empty threat. These were four coordinated regional powers who together encircled the city, planning for and threatening specific violence.
3. **Third, it worked (for a time).** The people were genuinely afraid. The project was at a tipping point. Without strong leadership, the workers would have gone home.

What Nehemiah did in response was strategically brilliant because it was rooted in everything he knew to be true about God (sovereignty, covenant love, providence, and so on).

1. **He prayed and prepared.** Look at v. 9. **"But we prayed to our God and stationed a guard because of them day and night."** He prayed and he posted a guard. Faith and preparation are not in competition with each other. Nehemiah did not treat prayer as a substitute for practical action, nor did he treat practical action as a sign that prayer wasn't enough.
2. **He assessed the real threat.** Nehemiah was operating under the authority of Artaxerxes. A full military assault on Jerusalem would have been an act of defiance against the Persian king, which none of these governors could afford. So an open assault was unlikely. What was genuinely possible was a covert strike, a surprise attack that could demoralize the workforce and be plausibly denied. Nehemiah planned his response around the actual risk.
3. **He kept speaking to the people.** Nehemiah spoke with a grounded call to courage rooted in the character of God. Look at v. 14 with me.

(Slide) Don't be afraid of them. Remember the great and awe-inspiring Lord, and fight for your countrymen, your sons and daughters, your wives and homes.

That is the balance Nehemiah maintained throughout this section: honest acknowledgment of the danger, paired with genuine confidence in God's power. He did not pretend the threat was not real. He did not pretend the people were not tired. He looked at both of those things clearly and said, "God is bigger than both of them."

Conclusion/Application

(Title Slide) Now, you might be thinking, as we've studied this text today, that you are Nehemiah—or that you're one of the Jewish people rebuilding the wall—and that someone else, out there in the world, is Sanballat or Tobiah. And there's a sense in which that's true. I think it's

right and helpful for us to apply Nehemiah's story to our story as a church. We are on a mission to cultivate the unwavering hope of Jesus in every generation, and there are people who will oppose us.

But a more honest reading of this text leads us to a far more uncomfortable conclusion: we are far more like the enemies of God than we are the friends of God.

We have ridiculed Him. We have opposed Him. And the way we know this is true is not only through an honest analysis of our own lives—though that alone would be enough to convict us—but also through a reading of the Gospels.

For when God became a man and walked among us, we did not recognize Him. He came to do good, and He did only good. And we mocked Him. We committed violence against Him. We took His life. The very God we needed—the God who came to us, for us—is the God we ridiculed and killed.

So before you cast yourself as the hero of Nehemiah's story, hear this: by nature, you and I stood with Sanballat at the foot of the wall, jeering. By nature, we stood at the foot of the cross, mocking. We are not, on our own, the builders. We are the opposition.

But here is the gospel.

The God we mocked did not stay dead. Three days later, He walked out of the grave—and when He did, He did not come back for revenge. He came back with grace. The hands we pierced are the hands He stretched out to us. The God we opposed became the God who, by His own blood, made peace with His enemies and called them friends.

This is the sovereignty, the covenant love, the glory, and the providence we've been tracing all morning—not merely the force that inspired Nehemiah to build a wall, but the relentless mercy that pursued rebels and made them sons and daughters.

So when we take up this mission—when each of us finds our place, our part, and our purpose in the work—we do not build as people who have earned a spot on the wall. We build as enemies who were shown mercy, as opponents who were welcomed home. We build with the unwavering hope of Jesus precisely because the God we once mocked is the God who saved us.

And a church that knows it was once the enemy—and was loved anyway—is a church that can extend that same hope to every generation.