

Operation Intimidation—Overcoming opposition Nehemiah 4:1-23

Intro: Wherever great leaders arise and great followers follow, you can expect Satan to appear to bring to an end to efforts intended to glorify God. And so it was when Nehemiah and his fellow-Jews began the work of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. Satan sought to lead a counter-campaign against the great work God had inspired through Nehemiah. He found a few men he could use to marshal opposition to the cause of God. He might have called it “Operation Intimidation”.

We can learn a lot from a study of this chapter about opposition; because whenever and wherever God’s people agree to work together to accomplish good, Satan will also be seeking to oppose it. And we can learn a lot about how Satan seeks to prevent God’s work from being done!

Let’s read Nehemiah 4.

Satan through the provincial rulers marshaled three powerful forces against the people of God!

Doubt, v. 1-3

We are not surprised to read about the efforts of Sanballat and Tobiah.

Someone had come to seek the welfare of Israel—2:10

They had already tried to intimidate Nehemiah with the suggestion that his actions were disloyal to the Persian government (2:19).

But now they angrily step up their opposition and their primary weapon was doubt.

They cast doubt on the strength of the people! “What are these feeble Jews doing?”

They cast doubt on their motivations! “Are they going to restore it for themselves?”

They cast doubt on their ability to fulfill their purposes! “Can they offer sacrifices?”

They cast doubt on their commitment! “Can they finish in a day?”

They even cast doubt on the qualities of the materials used! “Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble even the burned ones?” (Burned limestone becomes unstable and unusable).

And Tobiah chimed in with his own sarcastic words of doubt as he questioned the competence of their work!

“Even what they are building—if a fox should jump on it, he would break their wall down”.

All of these comments were intended to break down the faith of Nehemiah and his followers.

And notice a couple of things about sideline critics and enemies of the cause of God.

They are cowards who love to criticize among sympathetic hearers and not to the faces of those they criticize! “He spoke in the presence of his brothers and the wealthy men of Samaria”. Tobiah was “near him”.

They love for the word to get passed through someone else! They knew that their criticisms behind the scenes would make their way to the right people and they wouldn’t have to say a word directly to anybody!

Fear, v. 8

When the enemies could not succeed through verbal intimidation, they threatened physical action, v. 8. (Whether they would have followed through is uncertain, since they would have been in defiance of Artaxerxes’ orders).

So, perhaps they were hoping to instill fear through bluff. They continued the propaganda campaign again through the Jews themselves, v. 12. (Let me emphasize here an important lesson in passing: Don’t let yourself become a carrier of a spiritual propagandist. Some of the Jews allowed themselves to be used as carriers for the devil’s messages! And when we allow ourselves to become the handler of someone else’s criticisms or juicy bit of gossip, we are playing into Satan’s hands as well.)

In it all, there is no doubt what Satan has hoped to achieve—scare God’s people into inactivity. Paralyze them with fear!

But, there was one more powerful force that came from within the hearts of the people themselves.

Discouragement, v. 10

When God’s people are discouraged they loose four things:

The loss of strength

The loss of vision

The loss of confidence

The loss of security

This verse is in the form of a song or poem. People started singing the “discouragement song”. It has three verses! 1) We’re running out; 2) There’s too much; 3) We are unable

We’re running out of strength...

There’s too much rubbish...

We are unable to build.

Discouragement always results when we start thinking success depends upon us!

Most people are great starters and poor finishers. We are often defeated because we don’t have staying power to keep on when the going gets tough!

Discouragement is caused by looking at too much rubbish rather than available building material!

All of a sudden the people could not see bricks or what had already been done (half already built). They could only see garbage, too much to move.

Discouragement always results when we start looking at ourselves rather than God. We are unable to finish!

Satan uses these three powerful weapons again and again against the people of God! Doubt and fear assail our faith and our focus is shifted to ourselves and we want to quit! But Nehemiah provided for the people, with God's help, three powerful counter-measures against Satan's weapons.

God through Nehemiah provided five powerful counter-measures against Satan's attacks!

Keep focusing on God! (Praying)

Nehemiah pulled out the believer's "secret weapon" in spiritual warfare!—prayer! He started praying and he got the people praying! By praying they started believing and their doubts began to fade.

Nehemiah's prayer appealed to the care of God. "Hear how we are despised", v. 4

Nehemiah's prayer appealed to the justice of God. "Return their iniquity... and do not let their sin be blotted out!" (v. 4-5).

Nehemiah pointed to the greatness of God! (v. 14).

We will always be defeated when we get our minds on ourselves and not on God! Self-pity will move in where there was once self-confidence based on God's presence and help.

Remember what's important!

Nehemiah appealed to the best spiritual instincts of the people! "Fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives and your houses". (v. 14)

Sometimes we need someone to remind us of what is really important and how that it is too precious to just stand by and watch it slip away!

We need to think about our children and our grandchildren and ask ourselves, "Will there be a strong church for us and for them?"

Keep watching!

Nehemiah made wise provisions in anticipation of attack. He provided for the defense of the people.

Put guards and soldiers in the breaks (v. 13).

Equipped the people for warfare as well as building (v. 16-18).

Created an alarm system that rallied everyone to the point of conflict (v. 19)

God's people need to open their eyes up to the real enemies around them. We need to be prepared to defend ourselves from attack in whatever ways Satan seeks to work; but we need to remember that no army can win fighting a defensive war!

Keep working!

The easiest thing to do in times of doubt and fear and discouragement is just quit. The right thing to do is get back to work! Notice how Nehemiah kept the people working!

4:6

4:15

4:17

God's people must not ever let their doubts, fears and discouragement lead them to quit doing God's work. To do so is to let the devil win!

Consider this quote by Teddy Roosevelt: "It is not the critic who counts: not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled or where the doer of deed could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, and comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; who does actually try to do the deed; who knows the great enthusiasm, the great devotion and spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly.

Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs even though checkered by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much because they live in the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat."

Keep trusting in God's help!

"Our God will fight for us!" (v. 20)

It is clear that God was already providing victory for the Lord's people. (v. 15)

We have to keep believing that faithfulness will result in the successful accomplishment of God's work.

Conclusion: God's people can always overcome Satan's attacks! But we must use the weapons at our disposal and engage in spiritual warfare with him. Do you have doubts, fears, discouragement? Nehemiah has shown us the road to faith, courage, and encouragement again! Will we take the road?