



**Saint John United Methodist Church**  
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**Message for July 10, 2022**  
**“Lessons in Leadership: Dealing with Opposition”**  
**Speaker: Pastor Tom Grieb**  
**Scripture: Nehemiah 2:19-20**

## **Smooth Sailing**

Anybody can sail when the wind is to your back. A strong tailwind makes for smooth sailing. It's when the wind dies down or even worse when there is a strong headwind that the sailing gets tough. Only those with the know-how and a degree of savvy are able to make progress.

Opposing winds are apt to blow at any time. We know that all too well from experience. Meeting out the headwinds of adverse circumstance isn't easy. Facing opposition is even worse. It is hard to make headway. Knowing how to navigate those waters is critical. That's particularly true for those in leadership.

This is not a particularly easy time to lead. The times in which we live are really quite divisive. We see that playing out politically, socially, and even religiously. The opinions are many and strongly put. That's all the more reason to remain grounded in God and his will for our lives.

## **Opposition Comes with the Territory**

One thing about building programs is that they have a way of bringing out the naysayers. I remember a building program we had at Settle Memorial in Owensboro. Aside from some basic renovation that was long overdue, we embarked on building a much-needed Family Life Center.

For the most part everyone was excited, although there were a few naysayers. Interestingly, we had a few of those when we built this room over twenty-five years ago. Those opposed to the project in Owensboro were a small minority who were quick to voice a contrary opinion. They even worked to get others to come around to their way of thinking.

We stayed the course and moved forward. The building was built and, in fact, was paid off in short order. It has served that community in a big way ever since.

I guess opposition just comes with the territory when you get into a building project. That was clearly the case when it came to the rebuilding of the walls around the city of Jerusalem under the leadership of Nehemiah.

We have been talking about Nehemiah and his leadership this summer. We have learned about the importance of seeing the need, staying close to God, being willing to ask, and casting a vision. All of these are important *Lessons in Leadership*.

Today, we talk about *Dealing with Opposition*. Nehemiah dealt with more than his share. You can read about that opposition in Nehemiah 2 and a bit later in Nehemiah, chapter 4. Let's hear this then from Nehemiah 2:19-20.

## **Nehemiah 2:19-20**

*But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. "What is this you are doing?" they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?"*

*I answered them by saying, "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it."*

### **Primary Opposition**

The primary opposition Nehemiah encountered in rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem came from some guys by the names of Sanballot, Tobiah, and Geshem. They were quick to express their displeasure with what was going on. Sanballot was the Governor of Samaria, Tobiah was an official from Ammon, and Geshem was from Arabia.

At first, they simply waged a war of words. They mocked the efforts of those rebuilding the walls. They ridiculed what was going on. They thought that if they kicked up enough dust the Jews would lose heart and not see the project through.

Despite the verbal barbs, the work continued. The people kept at it. They kept their gaze fixed on the task at hand. When it came to their vision, they turned neither to the left nor to the right. They went on about their work, all the while keeping their gaze upon the Lord. They sought his strength and protection at every turn.

### **Holding Fast with Faith**

Amid everything they faced, Nehemiah was unrelenting in calling the people of Jerusalem to put their faith in God. *"The God of heaven will give us success,"* he says in Nehemiah 2:20.

Faith in God has a way of raising our sights and keeping us on the end result. In Nehemiah 4:14 he says, *"Don't be afraid. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome."*

Remembering that God is great has a way of building our strength and giving us courage, no matter what we are facing. There is a lesson in leadership here: in staying the course, it is always good to put your faith in God, particularly when times get tough, and criticism begins to mount.

You have heard it said, *"When times get tough, the tough get going."* We might turn that just a bit by saying, *"When times get tough, those who keep themselves stayed upon God are given a toughness and resolve that will carry them through like nothing else can."*

Amid the threats and challenges of life, and let's admit it we face them all the time, we'd do well to keep our focus on God.

### **Stand Ready**

We shouldn't be surprised when opposition comes, particularly when we seek to do what we consider what God wants in the first place. The criticisms that are sometimes levied can be so hurtful that turning to God is the only solace for what ails us. Life has a way of piling up, just like the rubble strewn around Jerusalem. We figure we will never be able to overcome.

Keeping our gaze upon God though will strengthen us to deal with those things one day at a time, one stone at a time.

Nehemiah 4:10 reports that the workers were beginning to wear out. The wall had reached about half its height and the prospect of continuing began to overwhelm them. *“There is so much rubble we just can’t finish,”* they said.

To have naysayers breathing down their necks didn’t help matters much. They were threatening to kill them. I can’t blame the workers for running out of gas. Nehemiah encouraged them to stay at it. He instructed the workers to keep one hand on their load and the other on their sword. He wanted them to stand ready. That same call resounds today. Nehemiah’s call was to stand strong. That same call resounds to this day. When it comes down to it we are in a spiritual battle.

Paul writes in Ephesians 6:10-12, *“Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.”*

*For our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”*

Let’s face it, we are in that struggle and need to well-prepared to meet it.

Paul helps us along those lines when he writes in Ephesians 6:13-17, *“Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.”*

*With all these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”*

Amid the things that challenge us we’d do well to put on that same armor. By girding ourselves with God’s truth, shielding ourselves with his righteousness, and striking out with a firm assurance in the gospel of Christ we **will**. With faith as our shield, salvation as our protection, and the Holy Spirit as our defense, we will be able to stand strong in the face of the Sanballats and Tobiahs of our lives.

Only as we arm ourselves with the things of God will we be able to withstand the threats that come our way. With God as our focus, the naysayers of our lives won’t have nearly the impact they otherwise would have had. After all, *“God is our strength and refuge, a very present help in a time of trouble.”* (Psalm 46:1)

What are the threats in your life that have a way of sapping life out of you?

- Maybe there are concerns at work?
- Maybe there’s a family member whose words always seem to hurt?
- Maybe there’s a friend who acts less like a friend and more like an adversary?

Whatever the threat, resting solidly in God’s power to protect and see you through will go a long way toward helping you overcome.

## **Dealing with Conflict**

Let's face it, sometimes opposition turns into conflict. There are all sorts of ways to deal with that conflict.

We can:

- Ignore it.
- Lash out against it.
- Or deal with it responsibly.

Jesus didn't shy away from opposition, and neither should we.

I have that tendency. I'll admit it I don't like conflict but being in leadership puts me right in the middle of it sometimes. When conflict comes, I try to

- Listen carefully.
- Respond patiently
- Communicate clearly
- Forgive unflinchingly
- And love deeply.

I love the story told of two brothers who stood in opposition to one another. They farmed two adjoining pieces of property. Their conflict started with some simple ill-placed words and blossomed into them not speaking to one another or having anything to do with each other.

One brother went so far as to dig a trench between their properties which soon filled with water. The other was so upset that he decided to build a stockade fence between the properties. That brother enlisted the services of a carpenter who said he would take care of it. The brother left for town and when he came back found that the carpenter had built a bridge.

The two brothers met on the bridge and worked things out.

## **Following God's Leadership**

We've talked a lot about Nehemiah being a great leader. In the mix of all we have talked about over the past four weeks the one thing that set Nehemiah apart was his willingness to follow God's leadership. If we are to be the leaders God wants us to be, we'd do well to follow God's leadership. When we do, no matter what is thrown at us, we will be able to overcome.

Learning this lesson is the most important of all. When it comes to Christian leadership, it all comes down to letting God lead.

How is God leading you?