# Sermon Script : Nehemiah 4: ‘Opposition’

[Song: ‘Give me vision to see things like you do’]

We’re in a series called, ‘The Time Is Now’, on the book of Nehemiah

* Today’s title is ‘Opposition’
* The story so far reads like this:

*In Exile, Nehemiah discovers the shocking state of Jerusalem,*

*despite many Jews having returned there. He gains permission*

*from the Persian King to return & rebuild his homeland. He*

*arrives in Jerusalem as an unknown newcomer with no rank, title*

*or authority, yet very quickly gets Israel's leaders & then all it's*

*people involved in his rebuilding vision.*

* The couch has been our metaphor for ‘inaction’, so far in this series
  + But one really interesting thing to note with this couch, both here, and on the screen

... is that ***this couch is outside the house***

* + Why would that be?
  + Hmmm...

We’ve been singing about vision just now

* So let me ask you this:
* If one aspect of our vision it to really understand and connect with the many cultures in our church

... what might stand in the way of it?

* And if we also - as per last Member Meeting - have a vision to increase the reach and effectiveness of our Alpha course

... what might stand in the way of that?

I’ve been thinking this week...

... about how hard it is to really change the culture of a place

* Here or anywhere, bringing real change is hard
  + And more often than not, it doesn’t happen, despite best intentions
* It’s as if - whenever steps are made towards change in a group of people

... there’s a magnetic force that pulls any group of people back towards the way they used to be

... and denies the chance of real change

* Like a rubber band, it stretches for a bit but it wants to come back to it’s relaxed default setting

And you see this everywhere

* + *'I left that job because of the culture ... it'll never change'*
  + *'That church are so stuck in their ways .. they'll never change'*
  + *'My family will never accept that ... it's just the way they are'*
  + *'That hospital...*
  + *'That school...*
  + *‘That friend group...’*
  + *‘That playcentre...’*
  + *'The government...*

Tell me you’ve never made a comment like those!

We all get frustrated

... when we’ve hoped and invested in some kind of change, but it doesn’t come to be

You could ask this guy here all about it

* This is Barack Obama before he was first elected US President
  + ‘Change We Can Believe In’, say the banners
* It all seems simple on the campaign trail
  + But I reckon he’d say now, It was really hard to bring the genuine changes that he had hoped for back then

And if Obama’s campaign was about change

... then all the more so was the more recent campaign of Donald Trump

* And whatever you say or feel about Donald Trump

... he is an incredibly determined man who is not at all content with just the status quo

* Yet even in these opening weeks you can see how hard it is to bring the change he campaigned for
  + His immigration ban held up by the federal court
  + The blow out of costs for his Wall on the Mexican border
* If he is finding change hard to bring about with the power he has at his disposal as President

... then it’s not surprising it’s also hard in our schools, workplaces and churches

And this is where we land in Nehemiah chapter 4

* Nehemiah had done everything right in ch 2 & 3
  + - As a complete newcomer to town, he had miraculously it seems, got the whole town on board with his vision

... and into action actually doing it

* His leadership is faultless - a blueprint from which you can write leadership books

Yet here in chapter 4...

... the whole operation hangs in the balance

* + This rebuild of the Wall is faltering, like all the attempts before it

Why?

* How can that happen when it was set up so perfectly?
  + - What can we learn that might help us with the change we hope for at MABC?

... and in all the contexts of our lives where change seems impossible

Let’s turn to Nehemiah chapter 4

While you’re looking that up, note that...

... these two unsavoury characters that we heard about last week

... Sanballat and Tobiah - are not just annoying individuals

* But very powerful and influencial Governors of neighbouring territories
* They’ve been given their power by the Persian rulers
* So if Judah starts to rise up and to flourish again they are going to lose a lot of their influence in the region

**Nehemiah 4**

Enemies Oppose the Rebuilding

4 Sanballat was very angry when he learned that we were rebuilding the wall. He flew into a rage and mocked the Jews, 2 saying in front of his friends and the Samarian army officers, “What does this bunch of poor, feeble Jews think they’re doing? Do they think they can build the wall in a single day by just offering a few sacrifices? Do they actually think they can make something of stones from a rubbish heap—and charred ones at that?”

3 Tobiah the Ammonite, who was standing beside him, remarked, “That stone wall would collapse if even a fox walked along the top of it!”

4 Then I prayed, “Hear us, our God, for we are being mocked. May their scoffing fall back on their own heads, and may they themselves become captives in a foreign land! 5 Do not ignore their guilt. Do not blot out their sins, for they have provoked you to anger here in front of the builders.”

6 At last the wall was completed to half its height around the entire city, for the people had worked with enthusiasm.

7 But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs, Ammonites, and Ashdodites heard that the work was going ahead and that the gaps in the wall of Jerusalem were being repaired, they were furious. 8 They all made plans to come and fight against Jerusalem and throw us into confusion. 9 But we prayed to our God and guarded the city day and night to protect ourselves.

10 Then the people of Judah began to complain, “The workers are getting tired, and there is so much rubble to be moved. We will never be able to build the wall by ourselves.”

11 Meanwhile, our enemies were saying, “Before they know what’s happening, we will swoop down on them and kill them and end their work.”

12 The Jews who lived near the enemy came and told us again and again, “They will come from all directions and attack us!” 13 So I placed armed guards behind the lowest parts of the wall in the exposed areas. I stationed the people to stand guard by families, armed with swords, spears, and bows.

14 Then as I looked over the situation, I called together the nobles and the rest of the people and said to them, “Don’t be afraid of the enemy! Remember the Lord, who is great and glorious, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes!”

15 When our enemies heard that we knew of their plans and that God had frustrated them, we all returned to our work on the wall. 16 But from then on, only half my men worked while the other half stood guard with spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail. The leaders stationed themselves behind the people of Judah 17 who were building the wall. The laborers carried on their work with one hand supporting their load and one hand holding a weapon. 18 All the builders had a sword belted to their side. The trumpeter stayed with me to sound the alarm.

19 Then I explained to the nobles and officials and all the people, “The work is very spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. 20 When you hear the blast of the trumpet, rush to wherever it is sounding. Then our God will fight for us!”

21 We worked early and late, from sunrise to sunset. And half the men were always on guard. 22 I also told everyone living outside the walls to stay in Jerusalem. That way they and their servants could help with guard duty at night and work during the day. 23 During this time, none of us—not I, nor my relatives, nor my servants, nor the guards who were with me—ever took off our clothes. We carried our weapons with us at all times, even when we went for water.

**PRAYER**

So what in this chapter were the obstacles to change?

... and are they anything like what we deal with?

* Picking out verse 10, you find something that I think is pretty universal:

*Then the people of Judah began to complain, “The workers are getting tired, and there is so much rubble to be moved. We will never be able to build the wall by ourselves.”*

* How many times have you seen that scenario
  + Starting out with a hiss and a roar; everyone’s into it
  + But then reality sets in
    - *17 hour days - I didn’t sign up for this!*
    - *We need more people!*
    - *There’s so much to do!*

The couch calls out to us again

* ‘Come back to me here, where things are easy!’
  + Our commitment gets tested
* And there’s an almost magnetic pull that wants to take us back to the status quo

[Examples: Young kids - learning a musical instrument?]

If that’s an Internal challenge the workers are facing

... the much bigger challenge is the External one

* The world’s two biggest pains in the neck: Sanballat and Tobiah

Whatever change you’d love to see, they will stand in the way of it

... and they will have a detailed and organised plan to get in the way of it

* + Do you know any Sanballat’s or Tobiah’s?

Take a look at this

* Firstly they ***voice their displeasure***
* How flipping annoying is it, when you are trying to do something worthwhile and someone starts voicing their displeasure?
  + Sometimes that on its own is enough to knock you off your stride
    - Particularly if they are important and powerful people who are voicing their displeasure
  + In this case they are the Governors of Samaria and Ammon which are neighbours to Judah
    - And they have been placed in those positions by the Persian authorities

Then there’s ***scoffing***

* How does it feel to have people laughing at you when you’re giving everything for a good cause?
* Then there’s that patronising voice that says: *Wait till the boss hears about what you’re doing. It’s not going to be pretty*

... threatening a backlash from the authorities

And because Nehemiah and co, managed their way through that rubbish...

... they ramp it up with the really nasty stuff

* ***Verbal attacks***
  + You guys are two weak to do this - I mean look at you!
  + Have you stopped to even look at how big the job is?
  + You think your acts of worship will make a difference (that’s because Nehemiah and co made sacrifices to God to honour him with what they’re doing)
    - But you know - does killing some goat make this God you worship care about you more?
    - And you prayers - do you think they actually go anywhere?
  + And look at what it is you’re building with
* Your materials are pathetic - you don’t have the proper gear
  + Making a Wall out of that!!!
* Look at this work you’ve done so far
  + It’s unstable - it’s going to fall down

When I wrote this up ...

... I realised where I’ve heard those kind of voices before

* It’s when I had depression
  + There was an inner voice that was telling me all those same things
* Steve, you’re too weak
  + You’re inadequate to do a job as big as pastoring
  + You think your acts of worship will make a difference
  + The material you work with as a pastor is inadequate - and that’s your fault because you’re the leader
  + Even the work you’ve done so far is unstable - it doesn’t matter; it didn’t achieve anything

Maybe you’ve heard those voices of Sanballat and Tobiah also

* Maybe it was actual people saying those things

... or maybe it was your own self talk

* + - It hardly matters
* The Devil will use whatever serves his purpose to stop you bringing positive change into the world

It’s like this couch over here, that’s been left outside the house

* The weather is going to slowly tear away at it
  + Rain and wind will slowly work the threads apart
    - *A storm along the way*
    - *Some searing hot weather thrown in*
    - *Rips here and there*
* And more than that,
  + left outside here bugs and insects will crawl over it, bore into it
  + The wood will eventually rot
    - It’s just a matter of time before it no longer functions as a couch

...or even looks like one

And this isn’t even the end of what Sanballat and Tobiah do in this chapter

* They plan to cause physical harm & sew confusion
  + They make plans to kill the workers and their family members who are left at home while they do the work
* And even when those are thwarted, there are
  + Ongoing attacks to slow the work, tire the workers & lower morale (4:16-18)
    - There’s targeting vulnerable areas (4:19-20)
      * And the workers are kept constantly on edge, unable to relax (4:21-23)

I was in Australia last week...

... where I got to speak at a conference for an amazing organisation called Christians Against Poverty

* These are people who help poor folk get out of debt

... and run courses to help people out of drug and alcohol addictions

* They asked me to do my talk on The Wall
  + After my talk a lot of conference folk came to tell me about their experience of The Wall

One guy - who I’ll call David - told me...

... when he was at school a girl told him: ***You will never ever amount to anything***

* So he did what many of us did when we heard something like that early in life
  + He did absolutely everything he could to prove that girl wrong

But when - as a pastor and CAP worker...

... he hit The Wall around the age of 40 it was that girl’s voice he was still hearing

* *You will never amount to anything*
* *You’re too weak*
* *You haven’t go what it takes*
* *Even the best you could do, would be pathetic, unstable*

And during that time of depression...

... he said he would even get on a plane and fly all the way to Sydney

... just to hear a good friend tell him he was okay

* How desperately he needed to hear that

It took him a long time - there at The Wall...

.. to realise he’d allowed that girl back at school to shape his life

* All those years through his 20’s and 30’s if he were failing or if he were succeeding

... he was doing so in relation to what that girl had said

... And then finally in his 40’s what seemed a realisation that all along she had been completely and undeniably right

Instead of letting the words of Christ shape his life

* Words like Come to Me - My yoke is easy; my burden is light

And I looked at this guy now...

... who seems to have found his way through The Wall

* I think of the tireless work he would do as a pastor
* And more than that, I think of what he does as a CAP worker
  + Helping drug addicts, alcoholics

... and people who have had bad luck in life, out of poverty,

* + - and telling them about a God who loves them
* I don’t know if I can think of any more worthwhile thing to do on the planet
  + And I hope those awful words spoken over his life are gone forever

So what we do with this problem of bringing hope and change?

* It’s so hard, it makes us tired
  + *And the Devil runs rampant*
  + *Wearing away at us like rain, wind and insects on a couch left outside*
* Is that just something we have to accept?

Are our hopes of being culturally integrated as a church

... or of bringing Alpha in to the heart of who we are

... just too hard, and destined to fail

**No. And failure is not what happens in this passage**

From the people’s point of view...

... there are three crucial things to hang on to in this passage

1. The first one is Prayer

* ‘Hear us Oh God, for we are being mocked’ - Nehemiah prays in verse 4
  + It always comes back to prayer for him
* But not only him, when physical violence is threatened, all the people gather together in verse 9: ‘We prayed to our God’

As a pastor I’m well aware...

... of how busy people’s lives are

* And I’m also aware that for church to be more than just a Sunday show, we need Life Groups, and Ministries and Outreaches
* So I realise it’s unrealistic to expect a whole congregation to also show up at a weekly prayer meeting
  + But I do think there are times - like in this chapter here - where for particular reasons we do need to gather together and pray

And in this series...

... we’ve talked about the state of New Zealand Christianity

... what it would take to change it

* We’ve talked about realising our dreams

... and the concept - which comes up in the book of Nehemiah - of revival

* No revival in the history of christianity has happened without prayer

We can dream as big as we like for the Kingdom of God, and for MABC

... but nothing significant is going to happen without prayer

What if prayer were something we were...

... excited about as a church?

1. The second thing is Unity

* The whole second half of this chapter shows that despite how they felt, and despite the opposition, they hung together
  + Even if the progress slowed down
  + Even if some had to bring their families into Jerusalem for safety
  + Even if they had to carry a sword in one hand and a shovel in the other

... which leads into the final area which is

1. Sacrifice

* *“We worked early and late, from sunset to sunrise*
  + *We never took off our clothes*
  + *We carried weapons with us at all times*
  + *Even when we went for water”*
* Despite everything, they recommitted to the task

Whatever change you’re desperate to see...

... in your life, in your home, or your workplace

* I think those same three things are worth committing to
* Whatever change we want to see in MABC

... and whatever dreams we have to impact our community and beyond

... those same things are worth committing to

Why?

* Because the combined might and power of the armies of Sanballat and Tobiah
  + - Plus the influence of that school girl over the guy I called Dave
    - And all the negative thoughts that plague you, should they issue even from the Devil himself

... are miniscule in the face of Almighty God

* They are no greater than a speck of sand before a roaring ocean

* They are la mouse trying to threaten a lion

Our God is the Creator and Sustainer of the world

* Who spun galaxies
  + And birthed supernovas
* Evil may hold sway for a time
* It may even make life incredibly hard
* But don’t credit it with more power than it has

Each of us has access to incredible power for change

* + In the name of Jesus
    - Who himself, is the greatest change maker our world has seen

PRAYER