

Things Are Only Impossible Until They're Not

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Nehemiah 4

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Impossibilities?

The title of this exhortation is: “Things are Only Impossible Until They're Not”. Now to all people today, there is a sense that nothing is impossible, but that there is a lot of opposition to overcome, whether that's opposing political forces or ideas, or just opposing the laws of *nature*, getting them under control, or our *own* nature, which is what *we* believe. The fight is on between a secular world view of success through technology and political progress, and the religious vision of success through moral and spiritual submission and self-effacement and success through Christ. And our talk then, looks at overcoming opposition.

Human Achievements

Now I admit that the title of my talk “things are only impossible until they're not” comes from a Sci-Fi programme, but I believe it's a biblical principle:

and the Lord said, ‘if, as one people all sharing a common language, they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be beyond them’.

That's of course, the Tower of Babel. But we *do* see a common language today, don't we, we have a near universal English language throughout the world, and in the world of IT all computers share not just one, but multiple common languages, and they all communicate and all devices communicate across the Internet using a common protocol, which is a language that the computers understand. And so I would submit that this is why we've suddenly seen the world changing under our feet in real-time as it were. Whereas in centuries long ago, nothing much changed from generation to generation, now parents have to struggle to understand what their children think and do and believe on a daily basis, and it seems to change on a yearly basis: what is and is not allowed to be believed.

Keeping up with this advance - one could characterise it as an advance in the area of science I suppose - is quite a job. In just one area of material science - battery technology - we now have all kinds of prototypes for interesting batteries that store more energy in less space,

there are some even powered by that most hated of all molecules these days, Carbon dioxide, and that's just one tiny part of one branch of physics. It is impossible to keep up with it unless you're in that field. We could talk about quantum computers or teleportation or telepathy, force fields, these are all things which are being worked and there's success in the laboratory, all things which we would have previously thought of as the realm of science fiction. It hardly seems worth mentioning things like magnetic levitation of trains, because that's so yesterday. The list of seemingly outlandish accomplishments goes on and on, and as I say this is just within Physics. We haven't mentioned Neuroscience or Mathematics or Synthetic Biology, all of which have their own hugely growing areas of advancement, and that's just still within the realm of science.

Well, this is a sort of arrogant belief. I would submit, in the advancement of humans through their own genius, through their own sense of togetherness through technology. And this vision of progress - technological progress - wasn't always shared. There was a time, not so long ago where metal ships were thought impossible, *impossible*, not unlikely; travelling over 20mph in a car was thought dangerous to your heart. I have two quotes here from some famous scientists to show what kind of things were thought at one time to be *impossible* in 1895 Lord Kelvin said that "heavier than air flying machines are impossible" only to be proved wrong eight years later by the Wright brothers. And in 1939 Einstein said, "there's not the slightest indication that nuclear energy will ever be obtainable. That would mean the atom would be shattered at will", only to be proved wrong eight years later, and three years after that, the world was shocked by the annihilation of the civilians of Hiroshima. And now, with enough cash, we can not only travel between towns, we can circumnavigate the globe in a couple of days, down from 88 days a century and a half ago. We can destroy the entire world many times over or replicate conditions that are present inside of the sun. It's just a matter of what we *plan* or decide to do, 'nothing they plan will be beyond them'.

We're living in a world swirling in its own sense of obtaining the future of their own making, and this frenetic achievement has come at the expense of purpose and human meaning. As the writer Chesterton said, 'the Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It's been found difficult and left untried.' The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting, it's been found difficult and left untried. In other words, with all the effort that the world makes into these incredible achievements and advances, *Christianity* is too hard, somehow a life in Christ *too* hard to believe, too many unanswered questions. So instead of a superficial exploration of the world around us, which is an end in itself, er, these people abandoned Christianity and focus merely on that, that's what I'm trying to say. We're no longer looking at nature in order to find the glory of the Mind behind it, but instead we just seek to understand nature in order to create for ourselves and surround ourselves with buttons and levers and switches and screens so that we can manipulate nature. We seek to empower ourselves, to turbo-charge our own abilities instead of reflecting on the Majesty and Power of God. We wonder even about ways to become trans-human - part-man, part-machine - implanting chips into our brains, creating intelligent machines and intelligent software that mimics our own intelligence. This is, to my mind, an incredible arrogance, to steal from God himself, to empower ourselves to be better animals, to create the technological world in our *own* image and to invest it with our own concepts of what a perfect world would be, it's a dystopic vision. So we've set out a godless vision here for a few minutes, what *we* will decide

to do, what *we* plan as humans.

Humans Working with God

But this is where Nehemiah four comes in, against this backdrop of the world in which we live. Nehemiah would have, I suppose, he would have *loved* some of those lessons: recent successes in science, the predictions that were impossible, because his story shows that whenever you try to do something significant for God, you will face significant opposition. In other words, if you try to live a life of obedience to Jesus and to God, *radically*, you will stand out and face opposition both from outside and inside yourself. And the lesson that comes from this chapter of Nehemiah is that, in opposition, we ought to respond with *prayer*, we ought to decide to *work*, to be *vigilant*, to *focus* on the Lord, to *pay attention* to the Lord.

Although it's in God's will that we should succeed, just as it was in Nehemiah's case in building the wall, God did not remove the opposition from him. In our case, opposition drives us to greater dependence on the Lord and to greater determination to do what he has called us to do. If we back down in the face of opposition, we'll run a slower race, in discouragement, or settle for a mediocre Christian existence.

Opposition

We're going to look at six forms of opposition from Nehemiah four. These are the types of things that set us back in our walk to the kingdom.

*** Anger**

The first is anger, the anger of others against ourselves. And these are by no means the only oppositions that we face. In verses one and seven. Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, became furious and very angry, 'burning mad' is the Hebrew translation. A secure and independent Jerusalem threatened his hold on the area and undermined his trade route. So for the time being, he dropped all of his differences with the surrounding tribes and people groups and formed a sort of alliance of enemies against this particular threat. He dropped his differences with the ammonites with the Arabs and the Philistines in other words. In anger over what Nehemiah was doing they all joined together, threatening to stop the work by violence if necessary. This new work of God threatened the lifestyles of those nations and they became angry, and we find the anger of others to try and kill our vibe of newfound joy and zeal in the case of a newly baptised member, or to try and raise questions like the serpent did in the Garden of Eden: did God really say that? Can you really be sure of X, Y and Z in the Bible? It's a constant attack really, on our faith. In the case of a teenager who grows up in a religious home, one can't imagine too much anger towards that teenager in becoming a Christian, unless it's the *wrong type* of Christian. In the case of a teenager growing up in a secular home, we might expect the parents to be happy that the teenager had become a Christian and had this newly found zeal to live a life of love for others, but not so, their parents are often angry despite their newly found joy: What do you mean you've become a Christian? We didn't raise you to be irrational and fall for all that! What's all this nonsense about being born again? And we find that people are angry, and we face

opposition because of anger, because we threaten their worldview by holding on to our own. We see that all around us. The mere mention that you hold Christian values these days evokes hostile criticism because we are somehow going to pull society back into the 'Dark Ages'. Our sister in Morocco, if you know her story, her father chased her out of the house and threw her down the stairs when she became a Christian, that was that, the door was shut behind her, that's it. And we often see the same thing when a husband and wife don't share the truth together, when one accepts the truth, the other responds in anger. It's a threat to their world view.

*** Sarcasm and Scoffing**

The second type of opposition that we face, and it's quite severe sometimes, is sarcasm, the kind of cynical scoffing and mockery that we face. We may not personally face it, but we certainly face it by proxy. We see how other Christians, if they stand up, how they are treated, and it has a chilling effect on our willingness to speak out. In verse two Sanballat gathers with like minded people within hearing distance of the wall to sarcastically ask all those questions we read earlier: What are those feeble Jews doing? Are they going to restore it for themselves? Can they offer sacrifices? He's asking whether they can really complete this project. Can they really finish in a day? Can they revive the stones from that lot of rubble? After each rhetorical question, we imagine scornful laughter coming from that group, and then finally, Tobiah throws in his measure of sarcasm: 'even if a fox jumps on it, it would break down'. We too, frequently, are ridiculed for standing up for our faith. If you become a Christian and let it be known, at work especially, your fellow workers may mock you. It seems that in a ostensibly Christian, at least an historically Christian society, Christianity is the only religion which you can mock with impunity. People don't really know what Christianity stands for, or what it's here for, so it's easy for them... again, I think Chesterton said: If you come up against a wall or a fence in a wood, it's easy to not know why it's there and just tear it down if it's in your way. It takes a certain person to look back in history and see the benefits of Christianity, but history's not taught in that way at school any more. People will wait for you to make a mistake, and then they'll exclaim: 'well, you're no different to any of the others, you're just a hypocrite like all the other Christians.' Again, your commitment to the values enshrined in Christianity threaten their godless lifestyle.

*** Intimidation and Threats**

The third threat, the third opposition, is that of threats and intimidation, and this is one which is heating up to a great degree, and the younger ones find this particularly difficult. But it was always the same, even in Nehemiah's day. Nehemiah's enemies had to be careful in opposing him because he was working under Artaxerxes' permission, they couldn't just gather together and swarm over there and march on Jerusalem, that would be a rebellion against the king's edict. But they could, and they did, use minor threats of violence, not any less serious for it, in verses eight and eleven they threatened the Jews, they circulated threats among those Jews, they picked off a few of the people working on the wall in those places where there wasn't much back up and they gathered together in order to go after the the less powerful ones, the Jews which were less powerful. Bullies in other words, but with a serious

purpose. So these renegade bands, these bands could be characterised as renegades couldn't they, oh well it wasn't us... it was just... we don't have any control over them, maybe they'd had a fight, or had an argument or something, 'meh, it happens'. And today the terrorist activity that the Jews are under (only this week) puts them under immense psychological pressure as they try to build up their country.

But there can be subtle or overt threats to us as Christians, we can face intimidation as Christians. If you don't keep quiet about the way such and such a deal was done, you know what will happen. You can't adopt children, you're too fundamental (I've heard of someone that's happened to). Raising your child as Christian is seen as child abuse and people openly say it. You know, we're reminded of Jesus prayer when he was crucified:

'Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do'.

And we see people today, completely ignorant of the principles of Christianity, exclaiming their hatred against it for the very opposite of what it represents. At university, if you write a paper defending the Christian perspective, you will fail, you will be failed. If you don't sign a diversity and inclusion declaration before you even have an interview, you may not get that interview for work, and of course, that will enshrine the latest iteration of the faux values of society, the newest type of "advance" in political philosophy, social philosophy. We do suffer, and more and more as Christ approaches, very severe um, even financial burdens as Christians. Unless you work for yourself, you're very likely to come across this in every major corporation.

*** Tiredness and Lack of Enthusiasm**

In verse ten we read about discouragement and tiredness, exhaustion, lack of enthusiasm. This is our fourth problem that we have to overcome,

'the strength of the burden bearers is failing, all this rubbish, and we ourselves are unable to rebuild the wall'

When a new project begins there's plenty of enthusiasm, "*Let's do this*", and if you get over half way and the end is in sight, there is enthusiasm there, "*We're almost there*", but right in the middle is where exhaustion and discouragement set in. Well, for us, although we can read the signs of the times, Christ seems to tarry, he seems ever present, but somehow not quite here, and we too can allow the initial zeal we had for the Truth to subside, and our enthusiasm leaves us. There was once a time, I'm sure you can remember, where every single Bible leaflet and study and book was happily devoured, and now they remain on our shelves and although we can't quite remember what was said in them, we don't feel the need, that passion isn't there to the same extent, (speaking personally, it's an issue I want to put right). We begin to grow weary, and we wonder if all of our efforts are making any difference for the cause of Christ and this leads to discouragement. You notice the things which are not done in your life, the issues which you never were able to overcome, the problems in the church, the problems and sins of yourself and of others, and this newness and enthusiasm begins to wear off.

*** Negativity**

And this leads us to our fifth problem of opposition, and that's negativity. The criticism, the scoffing, the mockery, the sarcasm came from outside, but negativity comes from inside, or can do. The people that were not involved in the work of rebuilding the wall, those were the people that lived near the enemy and were most negative. They weren't as I say, personally involved. They were just hearing negative reports and threats and they didn't really know what was going on Jerusalem and they came ten times (*over and over* in Hebrew) to Nehemiah and those working on the wall. "They'll come up against us from every place." 'There's a lion in the way', you know, there's no escape from it. And invariably, negativity in the church comes from us feeling all of the above pressures, but not necessarily being involved in the solution. And 'there are giants in the land and we're just like grasshoppers', there's no way we can go there. Nehemiah didn't ignore the very real danger that existed, but if he had listened to these prophets of doom, he would never have finished. It's crucial that we try to establish our own place in our community and find a way for others to contribute as well. I've got here a note, perhaps slightly cynical note, that retirement is something that's out in the world but perhaps not necessarily of benefit to us. It's where the wisdom lies, and the young of our culture and our community can really do with it.

*** Fear**

So lastly, then we have number six. Fear, and that's the cumulative effect of all of the other factors we've listed above. Verse fourteen: the people had seen the enemy's anger, they'd heard their mockery and threats, they were worn down through tiredness, and they repeatedly heard gloom and doom from everyone around them. Nehemiah saw their fear and told them,

'Do not be afraid'

Fear is demoralising and it stops God's people from attempting anything significant for God. Maybe it's fear of failure, fear of not being able to influence people around us to listen. I know that we have that disappointment and this feeling of despondency when we when we preach and don't receive as many people as we'd like, and so we're scared to try it again. Perhaps if we're not terribly scared, er, we will go *too* far and others around us will see us as kind of, I don't know, dogmatic or fanatical and unrealistic and stand off from us. There's all kinds of fears that exist within us, fear of conflict, erm, but if we do what God wants us to do, we will no doubt catch a lot of that flak. We'll catch gossip, will be the object of some of those fears, but we will know that we will have done the right thing. So these are just some of the ways that we're opposed, and we oppose ourselves, when we work for God in our projects. How should we, as I say, respond to such opposition? With *prayer*, with *work*, with *attention focused vigilance*. We have several options whenever we experience opposition: you can run, you could go around it or you can compromise or meet it straight on and that's the way Nehemiah approached things. They lifted their voices in *prayer*, and they put their hearts into the *work*, they kept their eyes on the enemy in *vigilance*, and they kept their minds *focused* on the task in hand. This is the way we work, these are our plans: to work with God hand in hand.

So, as we mentioned earlier, this dystopia, this godless vision that the world is in love with that's achieving more and more at a faster rate, is blind to the risks of empowering some parts of the society at the expense of leaving vast other parts of society powerless, leaving *them* behind. So in the minds of just a few very vocal people, God has been assigned to the dustbin. But all of this achievement that I say is at the expense of meaning and purpose that leaves this large group of people behind, the young ones too without a chance of owning a home and less direction towards marriage, that saddles them with debt at a young age, with less community and less trust in politics and science, this small vocal group that leaves the majority behind in this Babel-like world, means that it's actually a rather *great* time for us to be preaching. We have a lot to offer them.

God's Answers to Our Problems

Although there's prosperity as a whole, the inequality is growing, and there's a great yearning for spiritual meaning and purpose in many in our society as never before. And although church attendance is dropping, those who remain are more fervent, there is more, there's a sort of iron sharpens iron effect, we have the possibility to preach and be I think, be part of a revival in a way that perhaps we couldn't before as people were just *generally happy*. We should therefore I think, be positive and involved and aware of the fact that *we* should be getting ready to help others regain the true meaning of what it means to be here after they've been left behind by their *own* secular vision. To redirect them and steer that growing group towards of disenfranchised - the 'poor and the despised' of Jesus' time - towards God. In Jesus' time they were 'poor and despised', but today they're called 'racists' or 'populists' or 'nationalists' and 'Brexiters', there's a whole host of names which people assign to these 'deplorable' people as they're called by politicians, 'deplorable' people! - the ordinary men and women who just don't want to go along with this extreme agenda who don't feel the benefit - they're usually farmers, they're usually factory workers, the small people, the little people and the young, these people who live a life that seeks to be very stable but are not involved with the elite's 'progression of society', all those people who can't get on the ladder. These people actually are yearning for something better and don't really... Why am I here? they're asking more and more, and we have that incredible opportunity to teach them about Christianity, to at least *offer* them hope and a vision. To really see the power of our transformative message, if we're able to let go and push away those six forces that would prevent us and oppose us from doing God's work.

Have Confidence

So let's reflect on a group, rather similar to those of this world, um, they were a biblical group" - they had a lot of power over nature, - they too had lost their sense of purpose, - they too could look back on their achievements but not forward to a confident future and - their leaders too hated and despised them and - wouldn't listen to them.

And of course, we're talking about Jesus' disciples after he was crucified. They were... imagine, they were locked in that room exhausted, terrified, devastated, they had no idea what to do, they we're talking to each other, and remembering all the things they had done, "we had baptised thousands, we'd fed thousands, we had the power to heal, and Peter, you walked

on the water! what do we do now? start a church? what's our role now?" What a decision faced them, they had nothing to do and nowhere to go, no one to protect them and give them a sense of purpose and lead them, and no one to answer the hard questions from those ever present naysaying Pharisees and 'learned leaders'. They were lost in those six opposing forces that opposed Nehemiah and that oppose us, and that will always oppose God. But it was *then* that Jesus appeared and gave them back what they had thought had been taken from them. Peace be to you, he said

peace be with you

Don't worry! And that's our message for us as well. They were saying "if only Jesus were here things would be better." How do we here today overcome all the forces of opposition and do something meaningful for God given what we have been doing, given what we know, and this brothers and sisters is *our* question for today in our own lives. Our question, our exhortation therefore, is not to conquer *nature* as is going on all over the world, as if that is an aim in itself, blowing our *own* trumpet with the successes of science as it were, but to conquer *our nature* and blow *the* trumpet, the trumpet that followed Nehemiah, in a call to togetherness. Despite our fear of spiritual opposition and our doubts and our setbacks, we know it will be worth it.

After this, Jesus showed them his hands and side, and the disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord again, he said 'Peace be with you, as the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' And with that, he breathed on them and said 'receive the Holy Spirit, if you forgive anyone sins, their sins are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'

When Jesus comes, we, too will be overjoyed and overawed at his justice, at his mercy and judgement, the kingdom brothers and sisters! Will we be bothered by anger then? Or sarcasm or threats or exhaustion or discouragement or fear? No. Instead, we will finally be at peace, full of the Holy Spirit and full of calm contentment, and then we will help to create a world without misery and inhumanity and cruelty. A world glittering with a renewed purpose in a renewed earth.

The Prince of Peace has died *and* has risen. He has set us free from all concerns of opposition. Let's remember what he's done, not only now then, but as we open the door to the world outside after the meeting, let's blow the trumpet to call to our side our fellow workers who are scattered along that wall in a variety of places around the world, to focus on certain projects that we have, or that we would like to have, to encourage each other to witness together for what he's done, to work to build up the church and to encourage each other to pray and support all those who would love him (as our brother did asked us to do for Nick and Val earlier). All cultures after all, are strong if they unite in a common purpose.

So Jesus says:

'I've told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have trouble and suffering. But take courage, I have conquered the world.'

We can do all things through Christ that strengthens us.

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