

HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK: TIMELESS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP

Knocked Down, but Not Knocked Out

Nehemiah 4:1–9



LET'S BEGIN HERE

As soon as Nehemiah and his crew began to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, opposition and criticism broke out and constantly bombarded them from all sides. Yet through Nehemiah's response, we discover how a leader should handle the inevitable and unavoidable criticism that comes from the outside. Nehemiah's example teaches us that it is possible not only to stay at our task regardless of the opposition but also to do it in a way that deepens our walk with God. Criticism may knock us down, but it doesn't have to knock us out!



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Introduction: New Testament Promise (2 Corinthians 4:7–10)

Of all the New Testament books Paul wrote, 2 Corinthians is one of the most autobiographical. In it Paul provided some honest admissions about ministry. Consider his words in chapter 4: "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves" (2 Corinthians 4:7). Paul admitted his human frailty and recognized that his ministry's power did not come from himself but from the Lord.

Paul reminds us that God loves to use ordinary, humble individuals to display His glory. But at the same time, Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 4:8–10 contain an implicit promise . . . but not the kind we like to hear: *opposition is inevitable*. And yet to counter the discouragement that follows opposition comes radiant, God-given hope: we may be knocked down, but we're not knocked out!



Quotable

The first response to opposition must be prayer. It's the most overlooked discipline among leaders.

— Charles R. Swindoll



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2. Illustration: Old Testament Example (Nehemiah 4:1–9)

When we left Nehemiah, he was just getting ready to start building the wall around Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:20). As we join him now, he is already in the thick of the work (4:1). We've skipped over Nehemiah 3, in which Nehemiah appoints various workmen for different parts of the job.

The rebuilding project got off to a good start. Nehemiah's boss, King Artaxerxes, had not only given him time off to oversee the project but also provided some needed materials and secured Nehemiah's safe passage to Jerusalem. Even the people of Jerusalem willingly came alongside Nehemiah and began working diligently, and they faced only a few hints at opposition (2:10, 19) . . . until now.

Enter again Sanballat and Tobiah: critics extraordinaire. Sanballat and Tobiah's dialogue sounded more like that of junior high kids sitting on the sidelines snickering at another school's football team and less like the words of powerful leaders. Like most habitual critics, they felt threatened by the thought of change and saw it as something to be resisted. Also, like most critics, they looked at the situation from only their human point of view; they didn't consider God's plan.

Every group—including every church or ministry—has its Sanballats and Tobiahs. So how do we handle them? Let's look at Nehemiah's response to negative, destructive criticism.

Often our first reaction to criticism is a quick retort. But Nehemiah kept his cool. *His first response was to talk to God.* Notice a second thing about Nehemiah's response to Sanballat's criticism—*Nehemiah stayed at the task.*

Critics demoralize; leaders encourage. We know from verse 5 that Sanballat's barbs had pricked a hole in the people's enthusiasm, but Nehemiah kept them focused on the task and encouraged them to work with renewed determination. We can imagine him standing up after his time of prayer and shouting, "Keep pouring that mortar! Bring on those stones! Keep going, and God's going to help us build this wall!"

Nothing riles critics more than having their criticism result in further progress. The sight of those Jews slathering on that mortar and hauling in those stones made Sanballat and his cohorts more furious than ever. So instead of backing off, they strengthened their attack.



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A CLOSER LOOK

Responding to Criticism

When critics spoke against the Jews' good work, God's people felt demoralized. But Nehemiah urged them to continue—as a result, they made tremendous progress. Intensified opposition against the will of God calls for an intensified response. Nehemiah not only heard the opposition, but he also analyzed available data, prayed, and took decisive, practical action. If we fear that someone might break into our homes, certainly we should trust God. But we should also lock our doors. If we're out of a job, we should pray. But we should also seek opportunities, send out our resumés, and make contacts. It's easier to steer a moving vehicle than one that is stopped. When opposition grows, we should couple prayer with common sense—and act.



LET'S LIVE IT

No one has ever been able to completely avoid criticism. Yes, it can be demoralizing, discouraging, and incite us to do or say things we later regret. We've all been there, and we will be again. But what worked in Nehemiah's situation centuries ago can work just as well in our lives today.

First, *realize that it is impossible to lead without facing criticism*. Whether you're the CEO of a Fortune 500 company or the president of the PTA—if you lead, you will hear complaints from jealous and jeering outsiders or competitors. You can count on it. And if you don't actually hear them, you might as well assume somebody is criticizing in private. So refuse to view criticism as a sign of failure; recognize it as a part of the fallen world we live in.

Second, *it is essential that your first response to opposition be prayer*. There's no better place to cool your anger and gain perspective on your actions than on your knees. Once again, Nehemiah illustrated this principle well.

Third, *prayer may not be all that is necessary if opposition intensifies*. If you notice a fire blazing in your kitchen, you need to pray for God to save you—but you also need to start spraying some water! God gave us minds and bodies so that we may take practical action when it's needed. Prayer should always be the preface to action.

If you're being harangued by criticism, take some time to think through the following questions.

How does this particular criticism make you feel—hurt, angry, or frightened? What does the Bible say about how to deal with these emotions?



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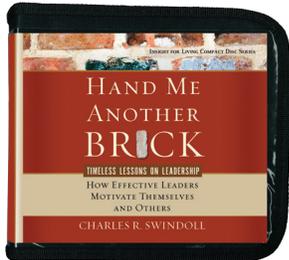
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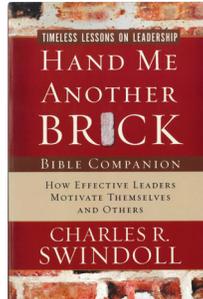
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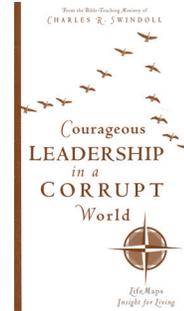
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