

HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK

Timeless Lessons on Leadership

STUDY FIVE

Knocked Down, but Not Knocked Out

Nehemiah 4:1–9

The very first thing that ought to come from criticism is prayer. I'm never more effective than when I'm on my knees. It applies to your business. It applies to your home. It applies to your school. It applies to your church.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

AWAG once said, “To avoid criticism, say nothing, do nothing, be nothing.” There will always be someone ready and eager to critique the choices and character of even the most noble of people. This philanthropist should have given to a different cause. That champion could have run the race one second faster. The previous manager would have better handled the current crisis.

We all must accept the reality that we cannot escape criticism or opposition. One strategy impels us to hide behind friendly smiles and agreeable nods. Another leads us to run to the shelters of hard work and determination. Yet criticism always finds us . . . even if it's undeserved.

If you've ever held a position of influence, you know the sting of another's nitpicking critiques. It's no fun. And at times, it feels nearly impossible to overcome.

Thankfully, the Word of God speaks to this exact predicament in the example of the builder Nehemiah. Unmerited criticism bombarded this man at every point of his journey. Yet he stood tough and kept his focus on God's provision and purpose as he watched his opposition fade in the distance.



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PREPARE YOUR HEART

“If God is for us, who can ever be against us?” (*Romans 8:31*).

Paul penned these powerful words to a community of believers enduring a season of painful suffering. Even though this world stands opposed to God and His people, these trying seasons of suffering will one day come to an end, and Jesus Christ will return to institute an eternity of abundant joy.

Pray these words as you prepare to engage with God’s Word today:

Father, every day, I face criticism, and it’s much easier to retaliate than to rest in You and Your promises. Teach me to keep my eyes focused on You and remember Your promises even when I endure great opposition. In Jesus’ strong name, amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

The beginning of Nehemiah’s leadership journey was smooth sailing. He heard about the broken-down state of Jerusalem’s walls, and he set his heart on restoring the city to its former glory. The support of the Persian king, Artaxerxes, was wind in Nehemiah’s sails. Yet it would not be long before this man of God faced some choppy waters.

Word of Nehemiah’s plan spread to the Gentiles living around Jerusalem, and these regional rivals didn’t want to see the Israelites reestablish themselves. When Nehemiah arrived at the city, he met Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arab, and they confronted him saying, “What are you doing? Are you rebelling against the king?” (*Nehemiah 2:19*). According to *Nehemiah 2:20*, how did Nehemiah respond?



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The criticism of these opponents wasn't enough to take Nehemiah off course, and in the following verses, we'll see him begin the construction project. However, these critics soon returned to shipwreck Nehemiah. Let's see how he handled the opposition in [Nehemiah 4:1–9](#).



Observation: Facing Criticism

The first step to understanding and applying the truths of Scripture is simple: read. Then reread. Make sure you have a crystal-clear vision of what the passage says.¹ Take some time now to read and make observations about [Nehemiah 4:1–9](#).

Initial Opposition and Reaction—Nehemiah 4:1–6

As Sanballat the Horonite walked around Jerusalem and surveyed the impressive progress Nehemiah and his men had made on the reconstruction of the wall, he grew very angry ([Nehemiah 4:1](#)). According to [Nehemiah 4:2](#), what did he say to his fellow naysayers? What quip did Tobiah the Ammonite add in [4:3](#)?

In your own words, summarize Nehemiah's prayer of response in [4:4–5](#).



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Despite the opposition, Nehemiah and the other workers pressed on. According to [Nehemiah 4:6](#), what did they accomplish even as they overheard the jeers of their detractors?

What was Nehemiah doing? He was doing the will of God. He was building a wall around the city. His critics didn't like it. So opposition broke out. But never did Nehemiah become a bitter, angry man. He never lost his cool. He just stayed at the task.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Intensified Opposition and Reaction—Nehemiah 4:7–9

Despite Nehemiah's faithfulness to God and despite the progress on the wall, the opposition didn't let up. In fact, it intensified. According to [Nehemiah 4:7](#), who did Sanballat and Tobiah add to their ranks? According to [4:8](#), what did this group of critics intend to do?



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According to [Nehemiah 4:9](#), how did Nehemiah react to the intensified opposition? What did he do similarly when he faced the previous wave of opposition? What did he do differently?

Critics demoralize! Leaders encourage! —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: Discerning Criticism

There is a difference between personal attacks and constructive criticism. It takes wisdom to know the difference. Thankfully, Nehemiah knew that his opponents' complaints had no merit. How did he know? Include some details from the passage in your answer. For some help, check out [Constable's Notes](#) available for free online at netbible.org.



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The words of Nehemiah’s prayer may seem harsh, but they represent a type of prayer common in the psalms. They’re called *imprecatory psalms*. They sound almost vindictive, but they represent the speaker’s deep trust in God. Read the article, “*What are the imprecatory psalms?*” at gotquestions.com and summarize what you learn. How did Nehemiah demonstrate his faith in God through his prayer?

Using the following template, write two or three timeless truths based on this passage: *A godly leader can endure criticism and opposition by . . .*

Not all criticism is of the devil. Not all criticism is destructive criticism. But every leader has to measure whether a criticism is worth listening to. You have to determine the source plus the motive of the source. You have to listen with discernment. Sometimes, criticism is the very best thing you can respond to. Sometimes, it is to be completely ignored.

—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



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Correlation: Enduring Criticism

Nehemiah's experience is common for any leader, but Christian leaders, in their mission to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to the whole world, will face a unique kind of opposition—the same kind of opposition that ultimately crucified Jesus and beheaded Paul.

Paul knew of Jesus' death, and he likely knew he was bound to face the same outcome. Yet he persevered through the resistance. In [2 Corinthians 4:8–9](#), he explained the mind-set that allowed him to withstand such intense resistance. Based on these verses, fill in the spaces below that reflect Paul's attitude worth modeling.

We are: _____

But not: _____

We are: _____

But not: _____

We are: _____

But not: _____

We are: _____

But not: _____

According to [4:10](#), what is a key result of Christian suffering? How does this truth offer encouragement amid seasons of opposition?



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Later in Paul's life, he went to Rome—the city where he would later die—as a prisoner. During this season, he practiced what he preached in 2 Corinthians as death loomed ever closer. According to [Acts 28:20](#), what reason did Paul give for his imprisonment?

“I believe that the hope of Israel—the Messiah—has already come.” For Paul, the hope of Jesus Christ eclipsed any human opposition he would face in this life. Those who hold fast to this truth as Paul did will be prepared to endure any criticism or opposition.



Application: Applying Criticism

Maintaining a vibrant relationship with God is essential to enduring criticism. Yet criticism will still come, and when it does, pause and follow these three steps Pastor Chuck Swindoll developed based on Nehemiah's example.

1. *Realize that it is impossible to lead without facing opposition or criticism.*
2. *Respond to opposition and criticism by praying first.*
3. *Recognize that you may need to follow prayer with decisive action.*



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Each person has a different impulse when met with criticism. Some tend to completely reject the criticism along with the critic who offered it, while others try to change the critic's opinion by transforming into a people pleaser or by getting lost in their own work. Have you ever acted in these ways? Why are these kinds of behaviors tempting, but unfruitful?

How do you practically discern empty complaints from constructive criticism? How can you prepare to emulate Nehemiah the next time you face criticism or opposition?

Nehemiah didn't just pray. He prayed *and* acted. How do you sense the Holy Spirit urging you to act prayerfully on some criticism or opposition you may have recently received?



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Criticism is inevitable. So don't spend precious time considering how you can avoid it. Instead, focus on how you will respond *when*—not *if*—the opposition comes. Trust God. Pray to Him. And follow His leading. When you do so, you may occasionally be knocked down, but you will never be knocked out of serving Him and His purpose.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, give me the peace to accept that I will face criticism for my words, actions, and character. But also give me the wisdom to discern constructive criticism from undeserved opposition so I can grow to be a better disciple of Jesus Christ. Help me always to look to You—whether I face smooth sailing or choppy waters. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. To learn about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)."

