

Nehemiah: Leadership in the Contemporary Church Opposition & Defence

Nehemiah 4:1-23

No leader is exempt from criticism and his humility will nowhere be seen more clearly than in the manner in which he accepts and reacts to it. Anyone who steps into the arena of leadership must be prepared to pay the price. True leadership exacts a heavy toll on the whole person - and the more effective the leadership, the higher the price! The leader must soon face the fact that he will be the target of critical darts. Unpleasant though it might sound, you haven't really led until you have become familiar with the stinging barbs of the critic. Good and godly leaders must have thick skin! (Sadly, often the worse criticism comes from those inside the Body of Christ!) Before we look at N's growing problem with opposition let's look at an unusual promise in 2 Corinthians 4:7f. Paul is clearly another template for Godly leadership. Here he admits the toll ministry and leadership is taking: "We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us". So the treasure of the gospel is housed in tatty old pots (our humanity). There is no power in a clay pot: fragile and ugly and often leaking. The passing of time only makes the pot weaker. Paul was saying that any manifestation of power comes not from the pot but rather what the pot contains! Paul goes on to describe what the life of a pot was like: v8-10.

Always is the key word here in v10. Paul describes the life of a spiritual leader as "always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus." The marks of death are always on the lives of people God uses most. These marks of death are especially evident in the lives of God's leaders because God wants to display the life of Jesus in the pot. You see, God is interested not only in blessing that which is in the pot but in using the pot itself. God doesn't declare abstract truth from the life of an angel; He puts truth into real life. Then He brings that life before

people: He uses imperfect people - clay pots - to display the glory of God. So opposition is inevitable as J B Phillips translates these verses: We are handicapped on all sides, but we are never frustrated; we are puzzled, but never in despair. We are persecuted, but we never have to stand it alone: we may be knocked down but we are never knocked out!

So to N and Chapter 4: Opposition & Defence. 3 methods of opposition are used against the workers: Ridicule, Anger & Discouragement. Each point of opposition was met with prayer: intercession, faith and hard work. Ultimately Spiritual Victory comes through Faith that God fights for us. The first six verses show us that we can ignore the reproaches and insults of those who oppose our pursuit of Gods will and trust Gods justice and faithfulness. The final six verses help us to realise that all spiritual ministry involves spiritual warfare and that we need to be prepared for battle, and quick to aid those who are under spiritual attack.

So God's will didn't allow the Wall to be rebuilt without opposition. Before it was half finished the workers started to be bombarded with sarcastic words from the critics. Cue the Unholy Trinity again: Sanballat became furious! Surely a small band of people succeeding in a massive project would evoke admiration: but this was no so! The heart of the habitual critic resists change: it's a threat, especially change that leads to progress and growth. It was the change - the growth - that incited Sanballat's anger. Oh and notice that Critics run with critics: v2 his associates and the army of Samaria, and v 3 and Tobiah were at his side! Obviously while not all criticism is of the devil, this was. It was destructive and disturbing. As a leader you need to learn to measure the value and worth of criticism. The gift of discernment is crucial: determining the source and motive. Sometimes one should receive it and learn from it, others times it must be completely ignored.

Sarcasm is readily there in Tobiah's comment: What they are building - if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down

their wall of stones! Can you imagine a comment like that? But Tobiah made a crucial mistake. He claimed a mere fox "would break their stone wall down". But it was not "their" stone wall. God designed the wall. He happened to use N as the superintendent, but the Designer was God. Just as Jesus said: I will build my Church and the gates of Hades shall not overcome it (Matthew 16:18), so the wall would be built because God desired for it to be. Critics constantly look at situations from a human point of view - their walls, plans, procedure, and arrangements. They don't stop to think that they might be criticising God's project.

So N was faced with Opposition - those back seat supervisors who would have had him discontinue building the Jerusalem wall. In response he does two significant things: he prays and he persists.

First he talks to God about the criticism: the first part is expected: Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. The next part may surprise you: Read! You see N fought his battles through prayer: we have seen it numerous times in his life. He was a leader from the knees up. So when N was attacked he laid his concerns before God and did not punch someone's lights out!

Think of David & Goliath as David took the stones: For the battle is the Lords and He will give you into our hands (1 Samuel 17:47) Think of Daniel commanded to worship of image of Nebuchadnezzar (he doesn't say: let me at him!). Instead he slipped upstairs to his room and fell before the Father and prayed. You are never more successful than when you are on your knees in prayer. "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Proverbs 15:1).

Before N ever said a word to the critic, he talked with God. He refused to retaliate even through others might have encouraged him to do so.

N approached opposition in two ways: first as we have seen he took his setbacks to God in prayer; and second, he stayed at

the task. He persisted. . I love what N wrote in 4:6, "so we built the wall". I can just feel it "keep mixing the mortar and hand me another brick!" Read v 6. Critic's demoralise. Leaders encourage. When the critics spoke, the workmen heard them and were demoralised but when the capable leaders stepped up and said: " Lets look at it God's way; stay with the job," the crew members were back there with those trowels and wheelbarrows, putting together the stone and mortar, the gates and hinges.

Nothing excites Satan or the critic more than for his negativism to result in slowdown of progress. The easiest thing to do when one is criticised is to give up. N said: Stay at the task, don't give up. Keep building. You could hear the workmen day and night splashing on the mortar, putting the stones in place. That productive activity should have assaulted the ears of the hearts of the Unholy Trinity (S, T & G) - but that's not the case. In fact their group grow. They were joined by Ammonites, Ashdodites and even some Arabs and the opposition intensified: v7/8.

There are times when criticism does not die down - it intensifies! Not only did the critics expand their troops, but they also added an intensity to the opposition. They planned a conspiracy and arranged to cause a disturbance.

What did N do: he intensified his prayer (But we prayed to our God and because of them we set up a guard against them day and night v9). The intensified opposition might have knocked him down but it was a long way off knocking him out! N analysed the data, prayed, and took decisive practical action. Let's set a guard against them: common sense dictated that he persist by taking up arms. Do you fear that someone is going to break into your home? Certainly you should trust God, but don't forget to lock your doors. Don't just pray about it. It is foolish to leave doors unlocked when you are praying that your home will not be burgled. Out of work? Pray! But hit the road too. Fill out those applications. Make contacts. Get in touch with as many

opportunities as possible The Lord doesn't have any trouble hitting a moving target: in fact, it's easier to steer a moving vehicle than one that is immobile.

So three practical truths are given to us through the first half of this chapter:

1. It is impossible to lead anyone without facing opposition
2. It is essential to face opposition in prayer.
3. Prayer is not all that is necessary if opposition grows (common sense can be deployed)

Theodore Roosevelt once said: "It is not the critic who counts: not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; who does actually try to do the deed; who knows the great enthusiasm, the great devotion and spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly. Far better it is to dare mighty things. To win glorious triumphs even though chequered by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much because they live in the grey twilight that knows neither victory or defeat."

Discouragement comes when:

1. **A loss of physical strength v 10 halfway weariness! St Andrews you have come a long way: don't weary now!**
2. **A Loss of Vision v10 focusing on the rubbish! St Andrews don't let anyone or anything take your eyes off Christ!**
3. **A Loss of Confidence v10 can't finish the wall. St Andrews unity under God has got us thus far - we can go much further!**
4. **A Loss of Security v11 enemy is getting closer. St Andrews our hope and security are in God. He is Sovereign! But Faith flows when we prioritise:**
 1. **Unity of effort towards the Goal v13 Sabbath & Family.**

2. Eyes back on the Lord v14 come to the Table! Remember me!
3. Clear Defence against the Enemy v15-18 Trowel & Sword. Armour of God: physical and spiritual.
4. Rallying Point: v19 Trumpet: Our God will fight for us. Trusting God alone!
- 5 Develop a "Serving Others" Ministry v21-23 One Body! Covering each other's backs!

Pastor David
June 30th 2013