

knock down that wall." But remember, they were now outside the wall shouting over it.

As Nehemiah led the others in building the wall, he had his eyes on the baton of the Director.

Do you realize you can have your eyes in various directions in the Christian life? You can have your eyes glued on *some other person*. If you do, before long you will be disappointed or even disillusioned because that person will fail. Never set your eyes on some church staff member or church officer or another friend. That's the best way I know of crippling your walk. Instead, steady your focus on God.

You can have your eyes on your own situation and become absorbed in self-pity, or you can get your eyes on *yourself* and be puffed with pride or demoralized by insecurity. With your eyes on yourself, you are constantly comparing your life with someone else's. You will never stay balanced while fighting the comparison battle.

The choice is yours. You can permit your eyes to wander aimlessly, or you can simply look up and fix your eyes on the *Director*. Though you might have what you call an insignificant part in the total orchestration, you will never miss your cue.

## 5

### **KNOCKED DOWN, BUT NOT KNOCKED OUT**

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.<sup>9</sup>

Anyone who steps into the arena of leadership must be prepared to pay a 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 may sound, you haven't really led until you have become familiar with the stinging barbs of the critic. Good leaders must have thick skin.

We left Nehemiah on the dart board at the close of the last chapter. It was intentional. Knowing that his critics were not through, I chose to deal with them at length in this chapter, rather than attempt a brief and hurried analysis earlier. However, before we delve into the growing problem of opposition faced by Nehemiah, let's look at an unusual promise found in 2 Corinthians 4.

Anyone who is serious about serving God as a leader in the church of Jesus Christ should make a serious study of Paul the apostle. Paul's life is something of a pattern that people in leadership should follow. Second Corinthians is a key book for study because he talks more about himself in this book than in any of his others.

We should not be surprised to read an honest admission about the toll of the ministry in Paul's life in 2 Corinthians 4:7:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves.

"We have this treasure in earthen vessels" refers to an earthenware jar, a clay pot. He was describing the treasure of the gospel, saying that it is housed in a clay jar, meaning our humanity. "We have this treasure [the gospel] in earthen vessels [our frail human bodies] that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves." There is no power or strength in a clay pot. It is fragile and ugly. It often leaks. The passing of time only makes the vessel weaker. Paul was saying that any manifestation of power comes not from the pot, but rather from what the pot contains.

Next, Paul described what the life of a pot was like:

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body (2 Cor. 4:8-10).

*Always* is the key word in verse 10. Here, Paul described the life of the 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 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 also in using the pot itself. God doesn't declare abstract truth from the lips of an angel; He puts truth in real life. Then He brings that life before people, whether it is in business, a Bible class, a group of

disciples, a growing Christian school, a mission organization, or a church. He uses imperfect people—clay pots—to display the glory of God. It is also emphasized in this passage that opposition is inevitable. A godly leader always carries about the telltale marks of death.

I love the way J. B. Phillips puts the same verse together in his *Letters to Young Churches*. He writes:

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!<sup>10</sup>

### THE PRESENCE OF OPPOSITION

As we look again at Nehemiah, keep in mind that for the leader opposition is inevitable. Nehemiah had one task, and that was to build a wall around the city of Jerusalem. It doesn't sound very spiritual, but it was God's will for his life.

In the process of that task, Nehemiah was led by God to appoint workmen for various parts of the project. Some were to build certain gates; some, a section of the wall. Some were to build in the south; others, up north of the city. But everybody had a job to do. The delegation of labor is described in elaborate detail in chapter 3 of the Book of Nehemiah.

Shortly thereafter, we read about the opposition that Nehemiah faced while the wall was being built. *God's will didn't allow the wall to be built without opposition*. It was before the wall was half finished that the workers began to be bombarded with the sarcastic words of the critics.

Now it came about that when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious . . . (4:1).

What prompted the opposition was the progress in the construction project. One would think that seeing this

small band of people succeeding in a massive project would evoke admiration. But this was not so. You see, the heart of the habitual critic resists change. To him, change is a threat. In any organization, those who are most critical of change are those who are most inflexible. They resist change, and they become especially suspicious of changes that lead to progress and growth.

It was the change—the growth—that incited Sanballat's anger. Notice also the others involved in the opposition. Sanballat heard about rebuilding the wall in verse 1. "He spoke in the presence of his brothers and the wealthy men of Samaria . . ." (v. 2); and "Tobiah the Ammonite was near him . . ." (v. 3). I point this out to emphasize something that is usually true: Critics run with critics. And obviously while not all criticism is of the devil, this criticism was. It was destructive and disturbing.

Every leader must develop the ability to measure the value or worth of criticism. He has to determine the source and the motive, and he has to listen with discernment. Sometimes the best course of action is to respond to criticism and learn from it. Other times, it must be completely ignored.

Nehemiah's critics were constantly with one another and their reaction was not a quiet, mildly disinterested one. No, they were angry! They became sarcastic. Look at the sarcasm in verse 3. It makes one chuckle.

Now Tobiah the Ammonite was near him [Sanballat] and he said, "Even what they are building—if a fox should jump on it, he would break their stone wall down!"

Can you imagine a comment like that? But Tobiah made a crucial mistake. He claimed that a mere fox "would break their stone wall down." That was not "their" stone wall. *God designed the wall.* He happened to use Nehemiah as the superintendent, but the Designer was God. Just as Jesus said, ". . . I will build My church;

and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it." (Matt. 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, their plans, their procedure, their arrangement. They don't stop to think that they may be criticizing God's project.

Just like Nehemiah's critics, today's world is so mesmerized with "splash," "size," and "tangible security" that it cannot fathom God's doing an impossible thing among an insignificant bunch of people.

People who look at life from the human point of view have problems with projects that require giant steps of faith. We as Christians need to say to ourselves, "Am I really looking to God for vision, for growth, and for direction, or am I sitting back and saying, 'Oh, let's just maintain?'" We who would seek God's best for our lives must learn to keep our eyes open and our attitudes positive—not lacking in discernment, but positive. And we must never forget there will always, *always* be opposition from those who are, by nature, negative and critical. But the work must go on. Progress should not stop because a few are critical of the plan. Remember that!

## FACING CRITICISM SQUARELY

Nehemiah was faced with opposition—those sidewalk supervisors who would have had him discontinue building the Jerusalem wall. He did two significant things in response to the criticism: He prayed and he persisted. First, in verses 4 and 5, *he talked to God about the criticism.* He prayed:

Hear, O our God, how we are despised!

The next part of the prayer may surprise you because it is rather unusual.

Return their reproach on their own heads and give them up for plunder in a land of captivity. Do not forgive their iniquity. . . .

Would you look at that? It's rare! The Bible is filled with "forgive our iniquities," "forgive us of our sins," "relieve us of our transgressions," "cover over our transgressions"; but Nehemiah said, "*Don't* forgive their iniquities."

. . . let not their sin be blotted out before Thee, for they have demoralized the builders.

Nehemiah fought his battles through prayer. We have seen it numerous times in his life. Through the therapeutic process of time on his knees, he laid out his concerns before God. It is common knowledge that the first thing most leaders will do when attacked is retaliate. Leaders are often people of very strong wills. It took a get-tough mind-set to build a wall around Jerusalem and to face opposition like this. It would have been quite human for Nehemiah to punch out their lights. But he didn't.

Remember what David said before he took the stone and sling in hand with which to slay the Philistine giant Goliath? He said,

For the battle is the Lord's and He will give you into our hands (1 Sam. 17:47).

That must have sounded rather strange to Goliath. Here was this little tiny runt coming toward him with a sling, mumbling something about the battle being the Lord's. It put him down, and Goliath must have wondered, "What kind of a fellow is this?" Then all of a sudden it was over—smack! He was hit right between the running lights! Goliath was defeated. The Lord won His battle.

Take a glimpse of Daniel, who when commanded to worship the image of Nebuchadnezzar didn't say, "Let

me at him!" Instead, Daniel slipped upstairs to his room, and as he had done at previous times fell before the Father and prayed.

You are never more successful than when you are on your knees in prayer. The saint who advances on his knees need never retreat because prayer provides an invincible shield!

A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger (Prov. 15:1).

What do we do when a harsh word is spoken to us? We usually shout louder. The recent argument in your home lasted as long as it did because one of you kept yelling. Arguments are never a one-way street. They run in twos; sometimes in packs. If you want to stop an argument, close your mouth. The other person will usually just run down. If you want to keep the argument going, answer the complaint or criticism in a harsh way. Look at verses 28 and 29 in the same chapter of Proverbs:

The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer [Lord, how should I answer this situation? You have to find that out through prayer.]

But the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things. The Lord is far from the wicked.

But He hears the prayer of the righteous.

If you want wisdom in knowing how to handle any problem, drop to your knees. James 1:5 says if you need wisdom, ask God for it.

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

One of the knottiest situations a pastor can put himself into is personal retaliation. He is going to be criticized by some, no matter what. The worst thing he can do is fight every critic, one by one.

When I was serving the Lord in a church in Waltham, Massachusetts, there was a church in the same area that had an amazing history. One of its pastors inherited a terrible mess when he first went to the church. Attendance was down, and those who did attend sat in the back three pews. On this pastor's first Sunday there he picked up the pulpit and literally carried it down the aisle, placing it near the people. I was told that Sunday after Sunday he kept having to move the pulpit back toward the front of the sanctuary until finally he was almost perched in the choir loft! Ultimately, the place was filled each Sunday morning. He preached the Word, walked with God, and faithfully labored in spite of opposition. Eventually, God chose to call him to a school that has consistently moved ahead under his guidance.

He was followed by a retaliatory man, a fighter. This man held several graduate degrees; he was brilliant. He had traveled and was an experienced leader of people. He seemingly possessed a lot more experience and brains than the first fellow. Like his predecessor, this pastor experienced criticism and hostility on the part of certain segments of the church membership; and week by week, through one public argument and retaliatory action after another, the church systematically emptied. Sure, he won the arguments, but he lost the battle. Both pastors were criticized, but what a difference in their responses! One man fought on his knees, the other on his feet.

The very first thing that ought to result from criticism is prayer. This principle should be applied in business, at home, and at school, as well as at church. Never am I used of God more significantly than when I am praying for my critics.

### THE NEED FOR COMMON SENSE

Nehemiah approached opposition in two ways. First, he took his setbacks to God in prayer; and second, *he*

*stayed at the task.* He persisted. I love what Nehemiah wrote in chapter 4, verse 6:

So we built the wall . . .

I can just feel it. "Keep mixing the mortar and hand me another brick!"

So we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

Critics demoralize. Leaders encourage. When the critics spoke, the workmen heard them and were demoralized. But when the capable leader stepped up and said, "Let's look at it God's way; stay at the job," the crew members were back in there with those trowels and wheelbarrows, putting together the stone and the mortar, the gates and the hinges.

Nothing excites Satan or the critic more than for his negativism to result in a slowdown of progress. The easiest thing to do when one is criticized is to give up.

Nehemiah said, "Stay at the task. Don't give up. Keep building." You could hear the workmen day and night, splashing on that mortar, putting the stones into place. That productive activity should have assaulted the hearts of Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem—but that's not the case. In fact, the size of their group grew. Verses 7 and 8 tell us that Sanballat and Tobiah were joined by the Ammonites and the Ashodites; and they even added some Arabs! They intensified the opposition. And when they

. . . heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem went on, and that the breaches began to be closed, they were very angry. . . . they conspired together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it.

There are times when criticism doesn't die down—it intensifies. Not only did the critics expand their troops,

but they also added an intensity in the opposition. They planned a conspiracy and arranged to cause a disturbance.

What did Nehemiah do when confronted with continued harassment? As was his custom, he intensified his prayer.

But we prayed to our God, and because of them we set up a guard against them day and night (4:9).

The intensified opposition might have knocked him down, but it was a long way from knocking him out.

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. He said, "Let's set up a guard against them." That was a common-sense response. He persisted by taking up arms.

Occasionally, persistence in the form of common sense must prevail. Do you fear that someone is going to break into your home? Certainly, you should trust God, but don't forget to lock the doors. Don't just pray about it. It is foolish to leave doors unlocked when you are praying that your home will not be burglarized.

Out of a job? Pray! But hit the road too. Fill out the résumé. 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.

We will read more about Nehemiah's common sense in the next chapter, but before we do I don't want us to miss three very practical truths that can be gleaned from Nehemiah 4.

1. It is impossible to lead anyone without facing opposition. The leader must learn to take the heat. He will face opposition—it's an occupational hazard of every leader. Darts will be thrown.

2. It is essential to face opposition in prayer. The first response to opposition must be prayer. Prayer is the single, most-often-overlooked discipline in the Christian life among leaders.

3. Prayer is not all that is necessary if opposition grows. That was true of David. He prayed when Saul was after him, but he also ran like mad! When opposition intensified, he ran faster. When it got worse, he hid in more obscure places. In most cases, the critic isn't worth the worry. But if the leader has prayed and yet finds himself facing intensified opposition, common sense must be employed.

A number of months ago I became discouraged because of criticism. My optimism eroded as a lengthy chain of events led me into "the pits." Knowing of my need for encouragement, my wife searched for a way to lift my spirits. She found a hand-lettered statement written by a statesman I have always admired, used it to make a wooden decoupage plaque, and gave it to me as a gift. What an encouragement it is! I often read it when opposition abounds and my shoulders start to droop—when I am knocked down and feel like I am about to be knocked out. It reads:

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 checkered by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much because they live in the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat.<sup>11</sup>

I repeat the opening statement of this chapter: No leader is exempt from criticism. Don't expect to be. But when it comes, be ready to battle against discouragement, which is poised and ready to strike on the heels of criticism. You can count on it!

## **DISCOURAGEMENT: ITS CAUSE AND CURE**

A funny thing happened in Darlington, Maryland, several years ago. Edith, a mother of eight, was coming home from a neighbor's house one Saturday afternoon. As she walked into the house, she saw five of her youngest children huddled together, concentrating with intense interest on something. As she slipped near them, trying to discover the center of attraction, she couldn't believe her eyes. Smack dab in the middle of the circle were several baby skunks. She screamed at the top of her voice, "Children, run!" *Each kid grabbed a skunk and ran!*

When I first read that true story in John Haggai's *How to Win Over Worry*,<sup>12</sup> I thought of Nehemiah. Like that mother, he had no idea how complicated life could get. He took on a project that had all the appearance of being harmless, innocent, and rather simple. After all, what could be very difficult about building a wall around a city? It seemed that Nehemiah would be able to have that wall completed in just a few weeks; then he would go back to Persia and take up where he left off. But not so!

He looked over the shoulders of those workmen, and it was like suddenly confronting a living room full of skunks! In fact, the more he tried to alleviate the problem, the greater it became. First there was sarcasm. Then there was mockery, which led to open opposition, criti-