

# Winning in Spite of the Critic

## Nehemiah 4-7

**INTRODUCTION:** Thus far in our study of this old testament book we have seen Nehemiah display remarkable leadership.

- He influenced the King of Persia to finance a building project for a foreign power.
- He rallied a group of Amateurs to volunteer for a massive building project.
- He leveraged momentum to complete a project in record time.

But now he faces a test that every true leader must face. He has to progress and persevere through the pain of criticism.

When studying the Bible, we must recognize the Law of Proportion. The ancient languages had no visual markups, no punctuation, no all caps. If they wanted to draw your attention to something they would use repetition and proportion.

So for example in Isaiah 6 the Angel declares God, “Holy, Holy, Holy!”.

Well here in Isaiah we see another use of the Law of Proportion. When it comes to the plan of Nehemiah to rebuild the walls, the Holy Spirit gives us about 8 verses. But when it come to the attacks of his enemies, we see FOUR CHAPTERS.

Why do you think that is?

Well it’s because, critical attacks are something every leader will face, repeatedly. There is an old saying, “Nothing is certain but death and taxes” I would add to that criticism.

- Some of you have had your spiritual or emotional growth stunted because of critical parents.
- Some of you have experienced the misery of life with a critical spouse.
- Some have the misfortune of a working for a critical boss.
- Some have fallen victim to those who cowardly hide behind private social media accounts and lob fiery arrows at you day and night.
- Others have fallen victim to an organized attempt to discredit you.

Well this sermon is for you. I call it - Winning in Spite of the Critic

### **TEXT: Nehemiah 4:1–3 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. <sup>2</sup> And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, “What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones

out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?”<sup>3</sup> Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, “Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!”

Here we see Sanballat and Tobiah, names that will live in infamy throughout eternity.

Misery loves company, so do critics.

A critic is absolutely nothing without an audience. Now there are three groups within every group:

- a. **The builders** - those are the ones who are contributing constructively to a corporate vision. They are helping, building.
- b. **The critics** (Sanballat) - those are the ones who aren't doing anything significant themselves but they love tearing down what others are doing. Every church has them.

Some people seem to have the spiritual gift of criticism. There are some folks I wouldn't ask to lead in silent prayer.

- c. **The Listeners** (Tobiah) - I had a man in my last church who said, “I just don't understand it... every time someone is upset about something they come to me, and I wind up in the middle of it”. Friend, that's because we all know where to take garbage.

The critics and their companions gather together and gripe about what the builders are doing. Now sometimes critique is necessary and even helpful - but I have learned that you have to always check the resume. Don't subject yourself to criticism from the armchair quarterback. The wannabe, the wish I was... listen, pay attention to those who have done more, accomplish better, achieved greater than you have. They can help you. You need their critique.

**ILLUSTRATION:** We went through a season in my last church where we were baptizing a lot of people, leading folks to Jesus. Another church in the area became very critical - they didn't think we were doing it the “right way”. They on the other hand, weren't reaching anybody with the Gospel. I said, *“I like how we ARE doing it better than how they AREN'T Doing it”*.

Some of you have heard it said, “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never harm me”. That's a lie. Words can kill.

**Proverbs 18:21 (ESV)** <sup>21</sup> Death and life are in the power of the tongue.

**ILLUSTRATION:** Scientists tell us that once a sound wave is set in motion, it continues on a never-ending journey, and that, if we had sophisticated enough instruments, each wave could be captured and reproduced at any time. If that is true, every word spoken by any person who has ever lived could be retrieved!

- There are words that were spoken to some of you as a child that are still killing you to this day. You can't forget them.
- For some of you LABELS were spoken over you as a teenager that you carry to this day - maybe good, maybe bad.

We are told in this text that Sanballat and Tobiah were **jeering** at Nehemiah and the Jews. That is an interesting word in the Hebrew. It means to make fun of, to laugh at, it is typically used for those you care nothing about and do not see as a threat. But in this case - WORDS are militarized and fired at the builders.

**I wrote this several years ago and I have revisited it several times throughout my life** - The only time the mediocre will become passionate is when he is attempting to stop another from attempting greatness. At that point the mediocre will pull out his entire arsenal of ridicule, contempt, gossip, slander and make a valiant effort to pull the extraordinary back into the ranks of the common. Too often the attacks are successful and a person's journey to greatness is cut short. The brave soldier falls back into the midst of the mundane.

But occasionally, a person hears a distant call. It is faint but unmistakable. "Come and follow me", it says. The words fall with power on the heart of the average for they are the words of one who created them for more. "Come and follow me", the heart beats faster and suddenly, passionately the choice is made and the chains fall off. The crowd of the common calls out in disgust for they have yet to hear the voice. Yet the extraordinary fixes his attention so fiercely on the voice of He who is calling that the screaming masses grow silent. He can think of nothing else but progress.

## 1. Pray

### Nehemiah 4:4-5 (ESV)

<sup>4</sup> Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. <sup>5</sup> Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders.

Nehemiah went to the WAR ROOM of the believer.

There is no greater resource, no greater weapon, no greater hope in the arsenal of believer than making your appeal before a Holy God.

**ILLUSTRATION:** Mary Stuart, also known as Mary Queen of Scots who was persecuting Protestant Christians all across Scotland once said , "I fear the prayers of John Knox's more than an army of ten thousand men."

**ILLUSTRATION:** Percy Ray was a Pastor in rural Mississippi. He was known by many as God's spoiled child. It was said that he got everything he asked for in prayer.

The story is told of a young Pastor who came to Percy Ray telling him of a particular Church member who did nothing but cause trouble. He was threatening the Pastor, disrupting the service, the Church had done everything in their ability to quiet the man to no avail. Finally, the young Pastor went to Percy Ray and told him of the trouble the man had caused. Percy Ray bowed down on the spot and prayed, "Dear God, bring this man to repentance or kill him." The story goes that as they were praying a man lost control of his automobile and crashed into the home of this troublesome church member putting an end to his life.

**Adrian Rogers said,** *"There are a lot of people I want praying for me, but Percy Ray is one I don't want praying against me".*

Friend, be careful who you pick on. Be careful who you attack. When the WEAKEST SAINT kneels in prayer her voice echoes in the throne room of heaven and her redeemer will most certainly rise and vindicate her.

Dear friend - call on the name of the Lord when you are attacked. Lay your case before Him.

If you are fighting His battle and living for His Glory - He is bound by honor to come to your defense, and He will every single time.

## 2. Prepare

### **Nehemiah 4:6-14 (ESV)**

<sup>6</sup> So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work. <sup>7</sup> But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry. <sup>8</sup> And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. <sup>9</sup> And we **prayed** to our God and set a guard as a **protection** against them day and night.

<sup>13</sup> So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. <sup>14</sup> And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes."

Nehemiah prepared for a battle. He armed the builders.

Listen we live in a dangerous time. This is a day where each man does that which is right in his own eyes.

When I preached this same text 20 years ago, this was all metaphorical but today it's very literal. This is a day where it is not uncommon for someone to walk into places of safety like a school or church and open fire.

You better believe at this church we are prepared. We have a safety and security team who are armed in case the enemy attacks. We have off duty officers who are stationed at every service.

- Jesus said, "A strong man ARMED keepeth his house".
- One one occasion Jesus said, "Sell your cloak and buy a sword".
- Obviously, Simon Peter, one of the disciples was armed because he cut off the ear of Malcus.
- The wisest man who ever lived said, "There is a time for war, and a time for peace".

Now we don't have any record of one drop of blood being spilled during the reconstruction of this wall. Why? The best offense is sometimes a good defense.

They were prepared for the fight.

Whether it is a literal attack or a verbal attack - are you prepared? Does the enemy know it? What is your plan if they come after you?

I'm afraid too often Christians are unprepared and even load the enemies gun.

**ILLUSTRATION:** We have seen in recent days the behavior of the president of Liberty University. While I hurt for his family and his father's legacy - he most certainly loaded the enemies gun by foolish behavior, and he shouldn't be surprised when it was fired against him.

Don't do that - don't load the enemies gun. Don't sharpen his sword.

Live a life that is above reproach so that accusations do not not stick.

You see, there is nothing you can do to stop people from accusing you of something. But there is a lot you can do to keep the people around you from taking it seriously.

### **3. Proceed - Nehemiah 4:15-23 (ESV)**

<sup>15</sup> When our enemies heard that it was known to us and that God had frustrated their plan, we all returned to the wall, each to his work. <sup>16</sup> From that day on, half of my servants worked on construction, and half held the spears, shields, bows, and coats of mail. And the leaders stood behind the whole house of Judah, <sup>17</sup> who were building on the wall. Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other. <sup>18</sup> And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built. The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me. <sup>19</sup> And I said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, "The work is great and widely spread, and we are separated on the wall, far from one another. <sup>20</sup> In the place where you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us." <sup>21</sup> So we labored at the work, and half of them held the spears from the break of dawn until the stars came out. <sup>22</sup> I also said to the people at that time, "Let every man and his servant pass the night within Jerusalem, that they may be a guard for us by night and may labor by day." <sup>23</sup> So neither I nor my brothers nor my servants nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us took off our clothes; each kept his weapon at his right hand.

When you have prayed, and when you have prepared for the worst... you must get back to work, you must proceed.

What would cause Nehemiah and his team to proceed against fearful odds? Remember - they were building this wall for a reason. They knew that Jerusalem had to be restored before Messiah would arrive. In a sense - they were building it so that you could be saved.

Through one of the very gates Nehemiah's team was building, Jesus was soon ride on a colt - to lay down his life for you.

### **CONCLUSION/INVITATION:**

**ILLUSTRATION:** Alexander Solzhenitsyn leaned on his shovel and watched the gray clouds drag across the sky. All of his bones and muscles ached. Hunger gnawed at his stomach. Years of hard labor in the Siberian Gulag had ruined his health and stripped his hope. He could endure it no longer. He dropped his shovel, left the work gang and sat on a bench nearby. Soon he knew that a guard would tell him to go back to work. When he would refuse the guard would beat him to death. He thought, "A quick, bloody death today, would be better than a slow death in a bleak empty future." As he stared at the ground waiting for the guard, he heard footsteps and braced himself. But when he looked up it was an old prisoner standing before him. He said nothing, but knelt down in front of him and with a stick scratched the sign of the cross in the dirt. He then went back to work.

As he stared at the Cross drawn in the dirt his entire perspective changed. He knew he was only one man against the all-powerful Soviet empire. Yet he knew there was something greater than the evil he saw in the prison camp, something greater than the Soviet Union. He knew that hope for all people was represented by that simple Cross.

Through the power of the Cross, anything was possible. He slowly rose to his feet, picked up his shovel, and went back to work. Outwardly, nothing had changed. Inside, he had received hope.

Maybe today you are tempted to surrender, to give up... look with me at the cross. Remember one who for the joy set before him... endured... the cross... despised the shame... and now is seated at the right hand of God Almighty.

*Maybe today Jesus is saying to you - You've rested long enough. Yes you were hurt, yes, so was I. You were offended, I know how that feels - but now it's time to arise and build.*