

BaptistWay Bible Series for April 19: Don't let the critics get you down

April 9, 2009

"The worst thing that happens to you may be the best thing for you if you don't let it get the best of you."—Will Rogers

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me."—Traditional American children's saying

"Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things."—The Apostle Paul, writing in Philippians 4:8 (NASB)

Destructive criticism

When [Thomas Edison](#) started school at age 7, it took his teacher just 12 weeks of little Thomas's hyperactive behavior and constant questions to pronounce his brain "addled." When she heard the teacher's diagnosis, Thomas' mother withdrew him from classes and homeschooled him. She had faith in her son's intelligence and saw a much different future for him.

We know what his future held. He invented the first viable system of centrally generating and distributing electric light, heat and power, the first practical battery, dictaphone, mimeograph and vitascope—an invention that would lead to motion pictures. Called "the father of the electrical age" during his lifetime, he is popularly known best for inventing the light bulb—which he didn't invent, he just made better.

Perhaps more than anyone, Thomas Edison, the little boy called “addled” by his teacher, ushered in the modern age and many of the luxuries we take for granted.

But what if he or his mother had believed the discouraging or destructive criticism of that teacher? What would the world be like if Thomas Edison didn’t believe he could invent? Would our technology be 10 years behind? Thirty?

Destructive criticism hurts. It hurts those who are targeted by critics and it hurts those surrounding the target. If you have a moment, view this short Bluefish TV [video](#) on tangle.com about how other world changers met and overcame destructive criticism.

That same kind of criticism was used as a weapon against Nehemiah and the other rebuilders of the Jerusalem wall, but as we’ll see in Chapters 3-4, criticism can’t stop people who persist in working hard together toward an important goal, trusting God all the while.

Context

We’ve been doing a good job over the past few weeks of maintaining a fix on where we are chronologically and within the historical scope of the post-exilic Jews. If you want to review, go back to the first two lessons in Nehemiah as a refresher. This week, let’s take a moment to look back at where we are within the context of our lessons and the goals of our Bible studies.

We’re in the middle of a spring series that includes the books Ezra, Haggai, Zechariah, Nehemiah and Malachi and chronicles the history of the Jewish people after they are freed from a long Babylonian captivity by the Persians. The series is titled “Restoring the Future” and explores how the Jews, by restoring their spiritual focus and recommitting their lives to God after straying from worshiping him, are ensuring their future as a people

chosen by God to do his will.

We're in the fourth unit of the series, "Getting Things Done," a great title for the study of Nehemiah, a layman who has acted as a prophet and spokesman for God—and as a catalyst for the Jews to restore Jerusalem's walls, which represent the city's defenses and dignity.

The power of God's people at work (Nehemiah 3)

At first, it appears our focal verses in Chapter 3 are a static listing of the repairs to the walls. It would make sense if that were all this section of verses was: Nehemiah, as a royal assistant to the Persian King Artaxerxes, most probably would have had a long history of writing reports as part of his civil service. He also was participating in the work on time and with materials granted to him by Artaxerxes. Chronicling his efforts in an orderly manner would have been expected.

But out of the sterile listings of verses 1-12, other information shines like gold.

For one, Nehemiah lists Eliashib, the high priest, as leader of the first group (of brother-priests) who completed work on their section of the wall, including the Sheep Gate and parts of the wall (v. 1). It is of note that the religious leadership not only led in the support of the reconstruction, but performed the work themselves.

Also of note is the consecration of the section of the wall and the gate by the priests, reflecting the belief that this was no mere construction job, but a spiritual experience for a nation reconnecting to its spiritual source and restoring its future as a nation of God-worshippers.

Second, these 12 focal verses show that those who participated in the work represented a broad expression of the Jewish tribes and cities. Workers from different areas are noted, including builders from Gibeon, Mizpah and

Tekoa (who even worked despite Tekoan leaders' wishes to the contrary).

And third, those involved in the building represented people from an incredibly broad range of professions, and not one worker listed in the first 14 verses was listed as having any experience with large-scale construction. In addition to the priests, it appears Uzziel was a goldsmith; Hananiah was a perfumer; and Shallum was a high-ranking politician who brought his daughters to participate in the work. Malchijah, another important politico, took on one of the lowliest of tasks: he rebuilt the Refuse Gate (v. 14), also known as the Dung Gate, where the waste of the city exited to the dump.

The lesson learned: When God has a task for us, we can all pitch in, regardless of our experience, gender, abilities or position in life, to complete God's vision.

Resisting the power of criticism (Nehemiah 4)

While the verses of chapter 3 ring with unity, working toward a common goal and the power of God's people at work, what follows shows the power of destructive criticism in the hands—or in this case, mouths—of those who opposed the work.

We've already been introduced to the opposing team (Nehemiah 2:10,14) and like a bad penny, they've turned back up. The ringleaders are two regional governors: Sanballat the Horonite (or "worshipper of Horon") and Tobiah, the governor of the Ammonites, a Samaritan group.

When faced with the strength of the Jewish people unified spiritually and with a purpose to rebuild their city, Sanballat and Tobiah do what any modern-day sports team would do against its opposition. In today's vernacular, they talk smack.

Sanballat launches an angry tirade in a gathering of family and wealthy

friends, casting doubt on the Jews' ability to complete the work. Tobiah, shaping up like a reflective toady with a mean streak of comedic criticism adds, "Even what they are building—if a fox should jump on it, he would break their stone wall down!" (v. 3). It was probably funnier to an ancient Middle East audience.

But the angry insults and ridicule aren't just meant for entertainment. They were meant to discourage in a real way. Whenever those in authority say things among peers of power, those words take on the authority of the speaker and have a way of disseminating to the public. Their words were meant to stop the building.

One of the greatest lessons we can learn from this passage, though, comes from the lips of Nehemiah. What would we do if such insult and ridicule were said about you or me about our spiritual beliefs or the work we do for God? What would our response be?

Hearing of the ridicule of Sanballat and Tobiah, Nehemiah models a God-inspired response to these damaging words from hateful speakers. He could have played the same game played by his opponents, returning insult for insult, turning a spiritual work into a political fight.

Instead, he gives the fight over to God in verses 4-5, asking God to hear the words of opposition and "let not their sin be blotted out before Thee, for they have demoralized the builders" (v. 5).

Instead of taking the job of passing words of hate and insult back and forth and letting them detract from the work on the walls, Nehemiah goes to God to pass judgment on their tormentors and, in verse 6, returns to the work on the wall.

It is a great lesson for those of us who hear words of criticism—words that are meant to wound—a lesson to let God deal with our opposition and to continue serving him.

Questions to explore

- *What opposition have you experienced in your life that has come in the form of destructive criticism or gossip?*
- In chapter 3, Nehemiah paints a picture of unified work among the Jews. What work is God calling you and your church to work together on for His glory?
- If today you hear one word of criticism and 100 words of praise, which are you most likely to remember tonight? Why?
- God called a group of Jews to work outside their “comfort zones” on a task they may not have felt equipped or that they may have felt was beneath them. What task is God calling you to do that is outside your “comfort zone,” that might require getting your hands dirty?