

When The Naysayers Come

Nehemiah 4

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Bellevue Baptist Church

Please open your Bible to Nehemiah 4.

If you have seen National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation, you remember the scene where Clark Griswold strings up 20,000 Italian twinkling lights, scattered across his roof like a massive fishing net. When he finally gets the electricity going, and the glory of his creation shines forth, his father-in-law steps in and says, "The little lights aren't twinkling." Clark responds, "I know, Art, and thanks for noticing." Do you have an Art in your life? If this person is sitting next to you, not a good time to turn your head. Eyes on me.

Art is what I call a naysayer, a person who likes to say nay. Nope. Ain't gonna work. It's a little off. He tastes your best recipe and says, "It's missin' a little somethin'." You will know a Naysayer is near when no matter what you do, your grade won't go up.

Jesus said, "The poor you will always have with you." And if Jesus had asked me, I would have added the word "nit-picking." The poor and the nit-picking—you will always have with you.

The Apostle Paul—I wonder if he had a never-relenting naysayer in his life. In 2 Corinthians, Paul confesses that in order to keep him from being conceited, in order to keep his ego cut down to size, the Lord assigned to him a thorn in his flesh—some kind of annoying, uncomfortable problem that kept him dependent on God.

We are never told what that thorn in his flesh was. Perhaps it was Art. He had a naysayer that wouldn't go away, like a fly that kept landing on his face.

What should you do when a cynical person keeps popping your balloons? How should a Christian respond when small minded people throw rocks at whatever they do? In the story of Nehemiah, we learn valuable lessons from this ancient leader. Let me show you what I'm talking about.

Today we are in chapter 4, but to catch you up quickly, the book begins in chapter 1, when Nehemiah is told that his homeland lies in ruins. The city of his forefathers, Jerusalem, is in desperate need of repair. In chapter 2, God moves in the heart of the Babylonian king to release him to go, and to fulfill his dream of restoring the wall around the city.

If you were to read chapter 3, you'd see that Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, surveyed the damage, and called the people to action. This whole project is going much smoother than he had even hoped for. The wall is being rebuilt and morale among the people is high. It's too good to be true.

But then, we get to chapter 4, and guess who shows up? Art and Art's brother. Naysayer 1 and Naysayer 2. Their names are Sanballat and Tobiah.

Let me read the first six verses...

When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious. He mocked the Jews 2 before his colleagues and the powerful men of Samaria and said, "What are these pathetic Jews doing? Can they restore it by themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they ever finish it? Can they bring these burnt stones back to life from the mounds of rubble?" 3 Then Tobiah the Ammonite, who was beside him, said, "Indeed, even if a fox climbed up what they are building, he would break down their stone wall!"

4 Listen, our God, for we are despised. Make their insults return on their own heads and let them be taken as plunder to a land of captivity. 5 Do not cover their guilt or let their sin be erased from your sight, because they have angered the builders.

6 So we rebuilt the wall until the entire wall was joined together up to half its height, for the people had the will to keep working.

V.1, notice that Nehemiah catches flack as soon as his project has the possibility of success. The Scripture reads, "When Sanballat heard that they were rebuilding the wall, he became furious."

One translation says he was "greatly incensed," which means he had inward heat. Sanballat began to burn inside, like a fire stoked with a stick. What should you do when we people like this come along? First...

When Naysayers Come

1. Remind yourself that success stirs up opposition.

Jesus said, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you" (Luke 6:26). Fulfilling the will of God will make you a target of spiritual warfare. The Master said, "Beware, there is an Enemy who seeks to do three things: steal, kill, and destroy." Just as 2 Chron. 16:9 says that the eyes of the Lord range throughout the Earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully His, the Scripture also says: Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

If you are doing the will of God, and it's working, then you should have your eyes wide open, expecting resistance—someone or something will try to slow you down.

In v.1, it says that Sanballat was stirred up once he saw that the project was actually underway. Why are some people threatened by the success of others? I think we know the answer because the truth is—we all have a slice of Sanballat in our lives.

Anne Lamotte, in her famous book on writing, *Bird by Bird*, warns young authors about the green-eyed monster that every writer can become, if they aren't careful. At some point, another aspiring author will get the opportunity that YOU wanted—and it will hurt the worst when it's someone that you have been secretly competing with. That writer will have a breakthrough book, and then:

The writer you most admire in the world will give that person rave reviews in the Times, or blurbs for the paperback edition. They will buy houses, big houses, or second houses that are actually nice, or nicer, than the first ones. And you are going to want to throw yourself down the back stairs, especially if the person is a friend. —Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*

A more authentic description of envy has never been written! We all have some Sanballat within us. Without the Holy Spirit, we look at the wins of others as losses for us.

- In middle school, a boy inwardly wonders, “Why does everyone think Luke is so funny?”
- In high school, that same boy says: “Why does David get more playing time on the basketball court than I do?”
- In college, he says, “Why does that guy always get the girl?”
- In adulthood, he says, “How could they give that job to him—I thought I was next in line!”

So, when the tables are turned, and you are on the receiving end of success—it was you this time, who got the promotion, you who were handpicked by your boss, you who had the breakthrough book with a blurbs on the back by Big Deal people—just be aware that envy is always alive in others. And the Devil uses it. Many of the hit pieces published online today have more to do with jealousy than they do principle.

**Anger is cruel and fury overwhelming,
but who can stand before jealousy? Prov. 27:4**

Nehemiah was opposed because God was doing something special in his life.

Now, one of the things that is particularly interesting about naysayers is that, like a high-powered vacuum, they can suck other small-minded people into their comments section. Fleshy people are attracted to fleshy people.

In v. 3, it says Tobiah the Ammonite adds his voice to the mockery. When Sanballat mocks the work of the Nehemiah's team...v.3...

Then Tobiah the Ammonite, who was beside him, said, “Indeed, even if a fox climbed up what they are building, he would break down their stone wall!”

Here we have Principle 2, When Naysayers come....

2. Do not return evil for evil.

Nehemiah does not take a swing at his enemies. He does feel some toxic emotions, and he takes those immediately to the Lord. Look at his prayer. In v. 4...

4 Listen, our God, for we are despised. Make their insults return on their own heads and let them be taken as plunder to a land of captivity.

Notice he takes his hard feelings to God rather than speaking them publicly.

He could have done some mud-slinging? After all, the Bible tells us that Sanballat ruled over real estate that nobody else wanted. That little remote area called Samaria was considered the armpit of the region. He could've set out to belittle Sanballat.

And Tobiah ruled over an area mostly desert. He could have said, "Tobiah, you only make fun of our wall because you spend all your time in the sand. You're just jealous-you sit out there in the sun and bake all day, and it's fried your brain."

I can assure you, if Nehemiah had taken that approach, there would have been some in his circle that said, "You tell him, brother. That-a-way. Fight fire with fire."

But the Bible calls us as Christians to take the high road, to refuse to get down in the mud.

In the Message paraphrase, I like the way Romans 12 is rendered. V. 17...

Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."

Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.

Romans 12:17-21 The Message

When you examine the lives of great people in Scripture, you see this principle applied over and over again:

- Joseph, in jail, refused to hate the soldiers. He played by the rules and became powerful in the prison because he rejected all bitterness.
- David refused to resent King Saul, but said in his heart, "I will not lift my hand against the Lord's anointed." As Saul continued his murderous antics, David kept a soft heart toward his enemies.
- And of course, the Lord Jesus, whom the prophet Isaiah says, "He was led like a lamb to

the slaughter house but remained silent. When his enemies hurled insults, he would not retaliate.

Nehemiah flew above the fray, and refused to return evil for evil. Why? Because he believed that God sees everything and settles all accounts. That doesn't mean he wasn't human. I think his prayer in V.5 is anything but holy.

He prays:

5 Do not cover their guilt or let their sin be erased from your sight, because they have angered the builders.

Nehemiah goes unfiltered with God, which is the best way to pray. "God, I hope you NEVER forgive them, that you never erase their sin, because they are trying to hard to make our lives more difficult.

I don't think this prayer is recorded to model a Christlike attitude. I think it's there to remind us that raw emotions are best given to God, rather than people. Let the Lord, through prayer, cool down your heart before you fire off emails.

Jesus said, "whoever puts his hand to the plow and looks back, is not fit for service in the kingdom of God." The same goes for side-to-side. Whatever wall God calls you to build, just build it, and don't let other people siphon off your energy.

Which leads us to our third point...

3. Unless the criticism is valid, resume the work.

Notice what Nehemiah does after he goes to God with his anger, then regains his composure. He gives the critics all the time they deserve. V. 6...

6 So we rebuilt the wall until the entire wall was joined together up to half its height, for the people had the will to keep working.

I had a wise business man give me a piece of advice that I try to remember when people not-filled-with-the-Spirit start commenting on my life. He said, "The best response to criticism is results." You can waste your energy trying to convince your opponents they are wrong, or you can devote that energy to doing what you believe is right. One is a better investment than the other.

Now, a quick disclaimer is in order. There is such a thing as constructive criticism and history is

full of people who refused to listen to constructive criticism.

A fool's way is right in his own eyes, but whoever listens to counsel is wise. Prov. 12:15

A rebuke cuts into a perceptive person, more than a hundred lashes into a fool. Prov. 17:10

The ability to take advice and correction is considered a *mark* of the wise.

No wonder David exclaims in Psalm 141:

Let the righteous one strike me—it is an act of faithful love; let him rebuke me—it is oil for my head; let me not refuse it. Psalm 141:5

All these verses say the same thing, and there are so many others. This is why it's vital that we pray through criticism, because often the tone of the person is wrong, but there's a shred of truth in what they are saying.

Nehemiah must have prayed through it and felt the opposite—that these men were a tool of the Enemy, not messengers from God. He would not be distracted by the mouths of mocking men.

So, there you have the three principles of what to do when the Naysayers come. Now let me put these cookies on the bottom shelf. Here are the...

Takeaways From This Text

1. Expect opposition when you walk in the will of God.

Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble, but take heart, I have overcome the world." Brace for resistance. If God has called you to make a difference in the world, be ready to play some defense.

2. Refuse to play petty tit-for-tat games.

One of the greatest ways to respond to a fool is silence.

Don't respond to the stupidity of a fool; you'll only look foolish yourself. Prov. 26:4

We are about to turn the common cold into cancer.

3. Remain focused on your assignment.

At the end of your life, you will not answer to your critics. Or to members of your family. Or to your friends.

You will answer to God. He will say "What did you do with what I gave you?"

No matter how powerful an opponent may be, that person is merely dust and returns to dust.

Isaiah 40: All flesh is like grass, and its glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever. 1 Peter 1:24

Now, with my time remaining, let me see if I can spur you onto love and good deeds, by raising questions you may feel need answered.

A Seasoned Christian Asks:

How do I stay tenderhearted after years of being criticized?

Years ago, when I was brand new in ministry, an older pastor took me under his wing. His name was Pastor Phil. He gave me the job of Assistant to the Pastor, and I took all kinds of things off of his plate. One of the perks of the position is that I received many hours of on-the-job training, like a medical resident following a real doctor around.

Phil invited me into meetings that I honestly had no business being in at that age. One day, several members of the custodial staff demanded to meet with him—they were upset about something—and Phil asked me to sit in the room. One of the men began berating him. Words that should never be spoken anywhere, especially inside a church, were flying from this man's mouth and a river of rage spilled out on Phil.

When the man finally ran out of words, Phil responded. Calmly, he looked him in the eyes and said, "I want you to know that I will not take this same spirit toward you."

His gentle answer turned away wrath. The meeting ended much better than it started. And I learned more in those three minutes watching Phil, than I did in a full semester at seminary.

Staying tenderhearted toward unkind people is a personal choice. Stephen, a Spirit-filled follower of Jesus is stoned to death in the book of Acts. The Word says:

⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep. Acts 7:59-60

What made this man special was not how much he was hated. What makes him memorable was his commitment to respond to hard feelings with soft ones.

How do you stay tenderhearted? By giving your toxic feelings to God, and ask Him to replace hard feelings with soft ones. Stephen proves it's possible.

A Good-Hearted Skeptic Asks:

If Christians are supposed to be loving people, why are some of the most critical people I've met religious?

I am sad to say that my experience matches this skeptic's observations. Some of the harshest, meanest, most unkind comments I have ever received have come from people who profess to be Christians.

I don't know how some people can call themselves Christians when they consistently take a hateful tone. But I will say this to you, my skeptical friends. Jesus warned that some who flash the badge of Christianity are posers.

In Matthew 7, Jesus said:

Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!"

What does that suggest? There will always be some people who attend church, learn Christian language, run in Christian circles, but do not possess a genuine faith.

The Bible says genuine faith produces visible fruit.

Galatians 5:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control... Gal. 5:22

At the very front of the list is love and joy.

You cannot call yourself a Christian and find fulfillment in constantly criticizing other Christians.

So to the skeptic, I would say: do not assume that everyone who claims to speak for Christ has been truly born of the spirit. Pattern your life after the best Christ-followers—and how will you recognize them. So much love, and joy, and peace...

A Student Asks:

What do I do when I feel called to something big, but everybody around me thinks it's unrealistic?

If you study history, you'll discover that nearly every person who achieved something significant was told at some point, "Get real." The eye-rolls of a mocker can be painful.

Now, there are moments in life when we must accept certain limitations. For example, I was once thoroughly convinced I was headed to the NBA—that God had put me on the planet to set records for three-point shots. Somewhere along the way, reality tapped me on the shoulder and the Lord said, 'Ben...you're slow and can't jump.' So yes, sometimes wisdom means adjusting expectations.

But to any young person I would say, “Be careful who you share your dreams with.” Dreams are fragile and most people won’t be as passionate about your big ideas as you are. In that case, I would encourage you to share your dreams with those few people who have a history of believing in you. Feed your dream by telling the ones you trust. And when small-minded people try to mock the wall you’re building, use that anger produced in you to feed your work ethic.

Dreams tend to happen after hours of unseen work.

In his famous book, *Outliers*, author Malcolm Gladwell studied stories of extraordinary success. He wanted to know why some people become standouts while others get the grade of satisfactory.

What he found was fascinating. Yes, there was always an element of luck, or what Christians would call Divine Intervention. But when that open door swung wide, the sensational story happened for the person who put in the sweat equity.

There was a study done of young violinists. Researchers wanted to know why some in the gifted category became elite, world-class performers while others plateaued. Gladwell writes:

The students who would end up the best in their class began to practice more than everyone else: six hours a week by age nine, eight hours a week by age twelve, sixteen hours a week by age fourteen, and up and up, until by the age of twenty they were practicing well over thirty hours a week. In fact, by the age of twenty, the elite performers had each totaled 10,000 hours of practice. –Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers*

From Gladwell’s book, the concept of the “10,000 Hour Rule” was popularized.

And so much has been written about this today.

If God has placed a dream in your heart, go after it. As the old saying goes: Pray like it all depends on God, and work like it all depends on you.

Prepare for the opportunity, expecting it to come, until the Lord tells you otherwise.

Study. Practice. Improve. Stay focused.

I’m not much of a horse person, but years ago, I saw one pulling a carriage through a town. It seemed obvious to me that horses are easily distracted creatures, because on the side of their face, blinders were installed.

These leather pieces strategically placed on the sides of the head help the horse focus on what is in front of them, not the people shouting beside them. The horse needs to focus on the path.

When I think back to my teenage years, or even my twenties, I could have used some of these.

What do you do when the Naysayers come?

Stay tenderhearted, and keep building that dream. So long as you know—God put it in you.