

An Ugly Word

by Teresa Hampton

Criticism. It sounds ugly. Sometimes it is ugly, but it is part of life. It certainly became a daily part of the life of Nehemiah, the cup bearer of King Artaxerxes in Persia. He heard about the distress of his brethren in Jerusalem—in particular, the broken wall and gates (Nehemiah 1:4). He wept, then went to God in prayer, confessed the sins of the people and asked for guidance when he served the king. The king noticed his sadness and questioned him. After hearing of Nehemiah's passionate concern for the city, he sent him to Jerusalem to supervise the reconstruction of the walls.

When Nehemiah arrived, he surveyed the broken wall and called the leaders of the Jews together. He asked them to join with him to rebuild the wall, that they *may no longer be a reproach* (Nehemiah 2:17-18). The men eagerly said, *Let us rise up and build*. Construction assignments were made to each family and the work began. But when foreigners Sanballat and Tobiah heard they were rebuilding the wall, the two became furious and mocked the Jews. They threw out biting questions laced with sarcasm, intending to frustrate them.

How did Nehemiah react? He went to God in prayer and continued the reconstruction. When his enemies saw that mockery did not work, they conspired to attack Jerusalem and create confusion (4:7-9). However, under Nehemiah's leadership, the people set a watch by day and night. Reconstruction continued.

Not to be undone, Sanballat and Tobiah conspired to kill Nehemiah. They tried to lure him out of the city four times to do him harm (6:2-4). He refused to leave the work. The fifth time they said if he did not meet with them, they would send a letter to King Artaxerxes saying Nehemiah had ulterior motives, that he wanted to be the king (6:4-8). Nehemiah still refused to meet with them. Reconstruction continued.

Finally they sent a prophet to tell Nehemiah his enemies were coming to kill him (6:10-13). The *false* prophet asked Nehemiah to go with him into the temple for refuge. He refused, knowing it would be a violation of God's law for him to enter the temple. Again, he prayed, and after fifty two days of uninterrupted work, the wall was completed!

Nehemiah's approach to criticism is worth imitating! When you are involved in a good work, you may hear biting words, "Yeah, we tried that and it failed." Critics may cast doubt on the outcome, "That goal is simply unrealistic!" When the work is going well, jealousy may prompt them to start circulating unjustified rumors about your motives like, "He just wants to be in charge," or, "She wants to have her way all the time," or, "He must be trying to "check off" how many works are credited to his account."

Nehemiah and the Lord provided a workable plan to deal with naysayers:

- Do not let critics discourage you—take it to the Lord in prayer.
- Do not leave the work—continue serving God. *This is a faithful saying...those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works* (Titus 3:8).
- Do not waste time reasoning with critics—they are bent on being divisive. God will deal with them.
- Do not listen to anyone, even a good friend, who might try to halt the work—Peter tried to dissuade Jesus from the cross. Jesus reply? *Get behind me Satan* (Matthew 16:22-23).

Don't let Satan win! Life is too short and the work too important to be sidetracked. Focus on Christ. Teach his message. Love one another, and humbly serve others!

Today's Verse: *I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God...and the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books* (Revelation 20:12).