

LEADERSHIP BEGINS ON YOUR KNEES

Nehemiah 1

INTRODUCTION

There is a great need for leadership today. I googled the phrase, “The need for leadership”, and came up with almost 900 million hits. What does that tell you about the topic of leadership?

Leadership has been a hot topic for 40 years, and has only become more and more crucial in our present world. This is true not only in business, but also in society, in schools, in churches, and especially in our families.

There are times when God works alone to accomplish some task. But I would say most of the time God works through a person to accomplish his work. Such was the case of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah became the key person through whom God worked to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. The walls of a city, back in his time, were essential for defense and protection. After the Babylonian army destroyed Jerusalem and tore down the walls in 586 B.C., the walls had been left in ruin. Cyrus allowed the first wave of Jews to go back to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel 70 years later. This group eventually was only able to rebuild the temple. The walls remained destroyed. If Jerusalem was ever going to become strong again, the walls needed to be rebuilt.

This is where Nehemiah enters. Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the king. This meant that he tasted all the food and drink before the king did to make sure they weren't poisoned. But the cupbearer was usually also a confidant of the king, and had an extremely close relationship with him. This gave him much influence with the king.

As we finish our series on Prayers of the O.T., I want us to look at Nehemiah and how Nehemiah became a key leader for the Jews. But I want to also have us look at leadership roles we play in life.

Do you think of yourself as a leader? Many of you would probably say, no. You may not think of yourself as a leader nor feel that you have a position of leadership, but I want to convince you otherwise. Most all of us, are, to some degree, a leader. Let me give you two definitions of leadership.

The more traditional definition of leadership is to lead a group of people to accomplish a task. You see something that needs to be done, and you get others to join you in achieving the task.

The other popular definition by leadership guru John Maxwell, is that leadership is influencing others. When you influence others, you are demonstrating leadership. When people follow you, you are a leader because you are influencing them in a direction.

Besides CEOs, presidents and other top management people, let me give you some ordinary people who have the position of a leader.

Are you a parent of children or youth? Then you are a leader. You have a tremendous task of influencing and raising your child to become a spiritual, responsible

adult.

Are you a teacher, whether in public school or in church? You have a tremendous opportunity to influence those you teach.

Are you a husband, or a husband and father? God has placed you in the weighty position of being the spiritual leader in the home.

Are you a part of a group of people, at school or at church who have a task to do? You have the opportunity to lead.

You can see, that most all of are in some kind of leadership position. How then can you be an effective leader? How can God help you to be the kind of leader God wants you to be? That's what we can learn from Nehemiah.

So let's see how you can be an effective leader by looking at Nehemiah and seeing how he prayed as the beginning point of his leadership.

Setting

Time: Dec, 445 BC. It's been almost 150 years since Jerusalem was destroyed and the wall was broken down.

How did Nehemiah show his leadership? How can we show leadership in our families, or at work, or in a group at school?

The first task of leadership is to:

1. DEFINE AND FACE REALITY

The book of Nehemiah opens this way:

The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, ² Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire." Nehemiah 1:1-3 ^{NIV}

One prominent leader has said that the first task of leadership is to define reality (Max Dupree). I would add it is also face reality. You have to know what reality is and what you are facing before you can do anything that is going to help.

Nehemiah got a clear picture of the reality facing the Jews back in Jerusalem. The wall was still broken down, and the gates had remained burned.

One of the questions a leader needs to ask is, "How are we doing?" That's a question that makes us face reality.

E.g. John and Elizabeth. Had only one son, but as he got into his teen years, Mike began to get into more and more trouble, including doing drugs. You could project a path that he was going to take that was worse and worse unless the parents did something. But often, they would say, "Well, that's Rob." It's like they didn't want to face reality.

Good, bad, or otherwise, a leader always defines and faces reality so they know what the situation is. It may be hard to hear or face, but you can't effectively do anything good unless you know how things really are.

This is true in your family, in your marriage, and in your class at school.

That leads us to a second response of a leader:

2. BE CONCERNED ABOUT THE NEED

Nehemiah 1:4 When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

After becoming aware of the situation, a leader then needs to have a concern about the situation. Notice how when Nehemiah heard the news, he wept and mourned and fasted for days. He was concerned to the point that it greatly impacted him.

Why this is important is because unless there is a concern about the need, a person will see the situation, but have no motivation to do anything. They won't want to get involved.

Thirdly,

3. BEFORE YOU DO ANYTHING, PRAY

Before Nehemiah rushed in to see the king, he went to God and prayed. You first need God's guidance and help as you move forward. Let's go through the prayer.

Nehemiah began his prayer:

Then I said:

"LORD, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God..." Nehemiah 1:5^{NIV}

He first exalted God: *"LORD, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God."* We have seen this before as a pattern with others when they prayed. We first focus on the glory and majesty of God. When we see the greatness of God, whatever situation we are facing is put in perspective. Nothing is impossible for God. God can handle anything. Seeing the greatness of God builds our faith and confidence in God.

Then Nehemiah says:

"who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments..." Nehemiah 1:5^{NIV}

Nehemiah affirmed God's care and relationship with him. Nehemiah could go to God and know that God cared for him and would listen to him because of his relationship with God.

God keeps his covenant of love with us. Today we might say, once you become a child of God, God will always be your heavenly Father. You can always come to him.

A third aspect of Nehemiah's prayer was to identify with the situation. He said:

"I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have

committed against you.

⁷ *We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.*” ⁸ *Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations...’”*

Nehemiah 1:6-8 ^{NIV}

Jerusalem had been destroyed and the Jews carted off to Babylon because they had rebelled against God and had not kept God’s commands that he had given the Jews when Moses was their leader. God had said he would do this, and he did it. In one sense, Nehemiah was not part of the reason he and his fellow Jews were in a foreign country. It was a previous generation of Jews who had rebelled against God. But Nehemiah was identifying with the problem. He wanted to make sure that he was not a continuing part of the problem.

It is so easy to look at others as the problem and fail to see how we have contributed to it. Maybe we have not caused the problem, but we need to be open to considering we may have been part of the problem.

But Nehemiah also saw hope when he quoted God:

but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.’ ¹⁰ *They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand.”* *Nehemiah 1:9-10* ^{NIV}

Nehemiah knew God wanted to give the Jews a new future. God had promised to regather the dispersed Jews if they returned to him. And Nehemiah latched onto that promise of God.

When we face a difficult situation, what we need is hope. And God is full of hope to give to us. That’s what we need to do as well. We latch on to a promise of God because God always keeps his promises.

After Nehemiah prayed, it was time to take action. The final point is we need to:

4. MAKE YOURSELF AVAILABLE TO MEET THE NEED

*Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of **this man**.”* *Nehemiah 1:11*

Nehemiah wanted to be part of the solution and made himself available for God to use him. Nehemiah’s relationship and influence with the king gave him a tremendous opportunity. Of all the people who could have approached the king to do something about the walls, Nehemiah was the first and most obvious choice.

Notice as Nehemiah finished his prayer, he asked God for success. As he had been praying and fasting, God had put into his mind and heart a plan for what needed to be done and how Nehemiah could help. Plus, note how Nehemiah referred to the king: *this*

man. He didn't even call him the king. Nehemiah knew that any earthly king was just a man; God was the King, and God could do anything he wanted. It reminds me of the scripture that says:

*The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD;
he turns it wherever he will. Proverbs 21:1^{ESV}*

An effective leader acts. He or she does what is necessary to bring a solution.

Nehemiah was ready to take the next step to help rebuild the wall, and with his position, that meant that he was going to ask the king for help. He had formulated a plan so that when the time was right, he would ask the king for what he needed to go back to Jerusalem.

Shortly thereafter, God opened the door for Nehemiah to share his plan with the king. He requested and got what he asked for. And God subsequently used him to go back to Jerusalem and to rebuild the wall. Without the leadership of Nehemiah, the wall wouldn't have been rebuilt for who knows how much longer.

Next Steps

Are you facing a situation or problem that you can do something about? Maybe it has to do with your kids. Maybe it has to do with your marriage. Maybe it has to do with something at work or school. If you are facing a problem, and are concerned about it, maybe God has you there to do something about it. You may not think of yourself as a leader, but with God's help, you can influence others and help to bring about a solution.