



Then and Now: Leadership in the Church and the World Advent Study

Day 1

Read: Matthew 20:25-28

Introduction to Nehemiah

Nehemiah, the sixteenth book of the Bible, is a continuation of the history of the Jewish people as recorded in 1 and 2 Chronicles and in Ezra. It is believed to have been written or compiled by the author or authors of those books. Nehemiah is the political leader for whom the book is named; he shares with his contemporary, Ezra the priest, credit for the reconstruction of Jerusalem and the revival of Judaism after the Babylonian Exile.

While in exile, Nehemiah became the cupbearer of Artaxerxes, king of Persia. Realizing Nehemiah's sorrow over the needs of his people, the king made him governor of Judah in approximately 445 BC. Nehemiah is remembered for his achievement in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and for his reforms aimed at establishing strict observance of the Mosaic Law and the sacredness of temple worship.

The book is arranged in three sections: the rebuilding and dedication of the walls, the reading of the Law to the people and the signing of a new covenant with God, and the redistribution of the population and various reforms.

The story of Nehemiah is primarily an illustration of leadership. Perhaps as much as anyone in the Bible, Nehemiah exhibited many characteristics of leadership. In this Advent season, as we prepare once again for the incarnation of our Lord, it is a time to look at ourselves in order to discover those characteristics of Christian leadership God would choose to exercise through us in the days ahead.

R&D What would be your definition of leadership?

Prayer: Lord, help me to be the leader You call me to be.

Day 2

Read: Ephesians 4:10-13

Introduction to the Theme

Our theme for Advent is "Then and Now: Leadership in the Church and World." In pursuing that theme, we will draw mainly upon the book of Nehemiah. As we have already seen, Nehemiah is one of the Bible's primary examples of leadership. What we can learn from his life can be invaluable to us in seeing how God would have us function as Christian leaders today. However, we will supplement our studies in Nehemiah with illustrative passages elsewhere in the Bible in order, among other things, to see New Testament illustrations of the Old Testament principles revealed in the book of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah was, in his day, “a man for all seasons.” If we are honest about the kind of world in which we live today, and the kind of Church we are, in relation to that world, we can see that we need some Nehemiahs.

We need only pick up our newspapers, reflect on what our neighbors and friends are facing, or look within ourselves to see the chaos of life today. We are a world out of control. Drugs, crime, pornography, abortion as a means of birth control, corruption in government, destruction of the family system—the list of problems we face seems endless. We are people in desperate need of a Savior.

As Christians, we know that Savior, and we are called to carry his message in word and deed to this needful world around us. Yet, in so many ways, we are a Church in disarray. In our part of the world, Christian churches continue to decline in membership.

Nehemiah also lived in troubled times. He was surrounded by enemies, and his own people were selfish and demoralized. By the grace of God, he did something about the situation then; what would God have us do now?

R&D If you had the ability to do something about it, what problem in the world or Church would you tackle today?

Prayer: Call forth spiritual leaders to meet the needs of this needy world, Lord.

Day 3

Read: Nehemiah 1:1-4, 11b

Sensitivity

To be cupbearer to the king might sound like a menial task to us today. Nehemiah’s position, however, involved a great deal more responsibility and influence than a present-day butler. The office of cupbearer came into existence in ancient societies because of the danger of the king being poisoned. The cupbearer, then, was a highly trusted individual chosen to care for and taste the wine to make sure it was safe before serving it to the king.

Because of his constant access to the king, the cupbearer became influential far beyond what normally would have been expected for such an office. A parallel in our day is the personal secretary of the chief executive officer of a large corporation; having been in industry for a number of years, I can attest to the amount of power and influence they wield! In such a position, many people would be content simply to do their job and enjoy the benefits of such close contact with the “center of power.” Nehemiah shows his leadership qualities precisely at this point.

Rather than being content with his fortune in life, Nehemiah is overcome with grief when he learns of the catastrophe that has struck his fellow Jews who remained in Jerusalem. Nehemiah has been called “a leader from the knees up,” and he immediately is “brought to his knees” by the news. Sensitivity to the needs of others—especially those for whom one feels some responsibility—is the mark of a true leader. Nehemiah’s genuine concern for his brothers and sisters far away clearly reveals this attribute of leadership.

R&D Why, in your opinion, was Nehemiah so affected by the news from Jerusalem?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, give Christian leaders a heart for those under their care.

Day 4

Read: Luke 19:41-44

Are We Sensitive?

In this passage, we see the sensitivity of Jesus for Jerusalem. Descending from the Mount of Olives, there is a magnificent view of the city. As Jesus reached this point, he stopped and wept over Jerusalem.

As Nehemiah had wept over the Jerusalem that had been, Jesus weeps over the Jerusalem that is, but is soon to be destroyed. He knew what was going to happen to the city. The seeds of disaster were already being sown as the Jews embarked on political manipulation and intrigue that would lead to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. The tragedy is that, if they had abandoned their dreams of political power and followed Christ, the results would have been very different—for the whole world.

Jesus' tears are the tears of God. It breaks the heart of God to see the needless pain and suffering that we inflict upon ourselves because of going our own way and doing our own thing rather than submitting our lives to His will for us.

Our hearts should be breaking for the world around us. As Jesus said from the cross (Luke 23:34), "Father, forgive them; they just don't understand." A first step in being used by God to lead others to Him is a sensitivity to the lonely desperation of those who just don't understand. Such sensitivity is a characteristic of Christian leadership.

R&D *To whom are you not being sufficiently sensitive?*

Prayer: *Guide my heart and guide my tongue, Blessed Lord, that I may say and do as You would have me say and do.*

Day 5

Read: Nehemiah 1:4-11

Godliness

Having received the dreaded news of what has happened to Jerusalem, Nehemiah apparently senses that God is calling him to do something about the situation. Only this can explain the sudden purposefulness that overcomes him, the strong sense of identity with his people and the determination which he will show in the face of overwhelming odds. Nehemiah first answers this call, not with action, but with prayer.

Nehemiah's reliance upon God, as evidenced by his prayer, manifests another characteristic of his leadership: godliness.

Nehemiah's prayer is a classic. In it, he ACTS (the acrostic for prayer so familiar to people of our day: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication). "O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of love..." (NIV). In adoration, Nehemiah acknowledges God's sovereignty and love. Identifying with his people, Nehemiah then confesses their sin: disobedience. A great leader never points his finger at others, but takes responsibility upon himself. Thanksgiving is shown in mentioning that God has redeemed His people by His great strength and mighty hand. The supplication comes in the form of asking God to hear his prayer and to grant him success (and mercy!) in dealing with Artaxerxes.

Nehemiah also demonstrates perseverance in prayer. If we look forward to the first verse of chapter 2, we see that his praying got results in the month of *Nisan* (our March/April), four or

five months after the news concerning Jerusalem had first been brought to him (the month of *Chislev*, our November/December). Nehemiah was a godly leader.

R&D *How can you use Nehemiah's prayer as a model for your own prayer life?*

Prayer: *Lord, teach us to pray.*

Day 6

Read: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22

Are We Godly?

As Paul nears the end of his first letter to the church at Thessalonica, he gives some specific instructions about godly living. His initial point is about leadership. The one who would lead must be one who respects those who are over him. (We will see, in our next passage from Nehemiah, his respect for the king.)

“Be at peace.” In a church meeting discussing a very controversial subject just last night, the plea was, “However much we may disagree, let us not forget that, first of all, we are a family of God, people who love one another.” The gospel of love cannot be preached in an atmosphere poisoned by hate.

Many other pieces of good advice are given by Paul: be conscious of, and properly respond to, those with particular problems or needs (vv.14-15); be open to the spiritual gifts imparted to the faithful that we may receive and learn from one another (vv.19-20); but test all things, do good and avoid evil (vv.21-22).

In the midst of all of this good advice, we get back to the subject of prayer (vv.16-18). If we are to be the Christian leaders God calls us to be, we will reflect an atmosphere of joy (the light of Christ shining forth from within us) which comes from the prayer relationship with God. With Nehemiah as our example, we are to be persistent in our prayers. Being confident in the providence of God, we are thankful in all circumstances, knowing that God can even use our failures for good if we are in relationship with Him. That is what godliness is all about.

R&D *Who is your living example of a godly person? Why?*

Prayer: *Draw us closer to you, Lord Jesus, because you are our model of godliness.*

Day 7

Read: Nehemiah 2:1-8

Vulnerability

Faced with the situation that was before Nehemiah, perhaps most people—in his time or today—would begin scheming. What arguments can I use that will dazzle the king and win him over? I'd better keep up my best front. How can I outsmart him?

Nehemiah, instead, exhibited vulnerability. He let his honest feelings show, despite the awkward position in which that might place him. Although done with some “fear and trembling”—who knew how a powerful figure like Artaxerxes might react?—Nehemiah paid the king the highest compliment by being willing to let his personal feelings show. He was rewarded by the king's sensitive response (heart speaking to heart), “This is nothing else but a sadness of the heart” (v.2b).

The vulnerability of Nehemiah was further exhibited by his reactions to the king's response. He could have "run for cover" and plotted his next step if he were that kind of person. Instead, he stated clearly what his concern was, but he did so from a standpoint of personal feelings ("the place of my fathers' sepulchers lies waste") rather than political strategy. Then he offers a solution: "Send me." He is about as far out on a limb as a person can be. But vulnerability is a prime characteristic of effective leadership.

Being vulnerable means being "out there" where you are exposed, letting your feelings show, and being willing to risk. But it does not mean putting your brain in neutral. Nehemiah had succeeded with the king by his prayerful, vulnerable, honest approach. But, when things got down to specifics, Nehemiah showed that he knew how to use his brain as well (vv.7-8).

R&D When was the last time you were vulnerable?

Prayer: Lord, it takes a lot of confidence in You to be completely vulnerable in our world today.

Day 8

Read: Matthew 10:16-22

Are We Vulnerable?

To go out as sheep in the midst of wolves, wise as serpents and innocent as doves, is a call to vulnerable living. Jesus was clear about the trials and tribulations that would be faced by his followers. Here, he speaks specifically about opposition from the government, from the church, and from family.

They would be brought before governing bodies (councils, kings, and governors). We of the western world can be thankful that we live in freedom and under democratic forms of government. However, the Christian who does not find that he is at variance with some of the practices of the governing bodies under which he functions may well question whether he understands what is going on in the world around him. Our institutions have become very secularized and their policies, if known, are often contrary to Christian belief. What are we doing to stand up for our faith?

The early Christians were, of course, also persecuted by church bodies. To the Jews of their day they were ones who would turn the world upside down (Acts 17:6), and they were scourged in the synagogues. But, within the Christian Church itself, we certainly don't look for opposition today; yet, too often, it is there. Why else do we have so many denominations within Christianity and why do we continue to lose members rather than grow? Are we willing to stand up for what we believe even in the face of disagreement within the Body of Christ?

Acceptance of Christianity also separated families in the early days of the Church. If we are honest, it also does today. Are we willing to choose obedience to Christ over family and friends? These are the marks of vulnerability that confront us as Christians today. The good news is that God, through His Holy Spirit, will guide us in what to say and do in our moments of testing (v.19) as He did for Nehemiah when he sent an "arrow prayer" toward God in the time of his testing by Artaxerxes (2:4 in our last lesson).

R&D When has God guided you in what to say and/or do in a vulnerable situation?

Prayer: May my tongue not get ahead of my heart or of my guidance from You, Lord.

Day 9

Read: Nehemiah 2:9-16

A Planner

The next attribute of leadership demonstrated by Nehemiah is that of planning. Nehemiah was a great planner. In his book *Nehemiah: Learning to Lead*, James Montgomery Boice notes that Nehemiah followed three crucial steps in planning: gathering information, conceptualizing how to proceed, and implementing the resulting plan.

If Nehemiah had been a prideful man, he might have ridden into Jerusalem with some “pomp and circumstance” to exhibit his power as governor. Instead, he appears to have kept a very low profile. The first three days he was probably absorbing information, and then he quietly rides out in the secrecy of night to inspect the walls and gates. Those accompanying Nehemiah were seeing nothing new, but he was forming a plan to reconstruct the walls.

To formulate a plan, it is not necessary to have all of the information, but it is necessary to have the essential information. Nehemiah had not, as a result of his “midnight ride,” learned all he would need to know about the walls and how to rebuild them. But he had learned enough to conceive a feasibility plan sufficiently developed to be able (as we shall see) to present it in a challenging way to the people and to move forward with it.

In order for a plan to work, there must often be a “plan behind the plan,” such as a psychological plan for motivating others to undertake the primary plan. Nehemiah was about to make an appeal for a major commitment from the people of Judah; it was necessary for him to understand exactly what he would be asking them to do, and how to go about that in the most effective manner. A leader who does not plan to succeed, plans to fail.

R&D What is an important plan that you had to devise, and did you have to have a “plan behind the plan?”

Prayer: No plan is the right plan unless it is in accordance with Your will, Lord.

Day 10

Read: 1 Corinthians 16:1-4

Do We Plan?

Typical of Paul is the abrupt shifting of emphasis between chapters 15 and 16 of his first letter to the church in Corinth. He has just been engaging in the loftiest of thoughts and theology. Now he deals with practical things in a practical way. Paul may have been a great visionary, but he also knew how to plan.

In our passage for today, Paul lays down the plan for collecting funds for the poor Christian brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. In the ancient world, there was concern for the welfare of others. Both the Greeks and the Jews followed this practice. There were synagogue officials whose job it was to collect from those who had in order to share with those who had not. Paul would not let the Christians be behind the Jewish and the heathen world in their generosity.

The collection for the poor in Jerusalem was more important than that, however. First of all, there were Christian brothers and sisters who needed help. But the plan for the collection on behalf of these people was also a way to demonstrate the unity of the Church. It was a way to show the scattered congregations that they were really a part of something much greater, a fellowship of love for, and responsibility to, other believers. Furthermore, it was a way to put into practice the teachings of the Church, a practical example of what it means to love one another.

And so Paul, like Nehemiah, not only had a plan, but there was a plan behind his plan. A leader who knows how to plan can also use that plan as a device to teach others.

R&D What plan is needed to provide something that is lacking in your church or community?

Prayer: Keep us focused, Lord, on the priorities You have for us at any given time.

Day 11

Read: Nehemiah 2:17—3:1

A Motivator

Nehemiah's leadership gift of motivating others is demonstrated by his ability to get people involved, keep them informed, and use good judgment.

Verse 17 tells us what Nehemiah said "to them." In verse 16, there had been a list of Jews, priests, nobles, officials, and the rest who were to do the work. We can, therefore, conclude that Nehemiah was addressing all of those who would be involved in rebuilding the walls, and was addressing them directly. He challenged everyone directly; there was to be no hearsay or misinterpretation.

Nehemiah identifies with the people in the task. "Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer disgrace." He is also taking the people into his confidence. He tells them how he sensed the hand of God upon him and what the king had said. And, he appeals to their nobler instincts of patriotism.

In addition to everything else, Nehemiah uses good old common sense. As you will see if you glance through chapter 3 (no need to read it in detail), Nehemiah's gift for planning resulted in each group of people being responsible for a portion of the work; each unit was assigned only the amount of work its people could handle. But, perhaps more importantly, groups appear to have been assigned those portions of the work nearest where they lived or concerning which they had special responsibility (see, for instance, v.10a). Nehemiah was clearly a leader who knew how to motivate people to carry out a worthwhile task, no matter how overwhelming (v.19) it might seem.

R&D When have you had to motivate people toward a challenging goal, and what were the results? What might you learn from Nehemiah?

Prayer: Being honest in communicating with others, Lord God, is the way You always have worked.

Day 12

Read: Matthew 5:13-16

Do We Motivate?

Jesus calls us to be salt and light. Let's look first at what it means to be "light."

The Christian's light is reflected light; it shows forth Jesus (John 9:5) from within the Christian. It represents, among other things, inspiration from God (as experienced by Nehemiah at 2:4-5 and 18a). A light is also something used to provide guidance, direction, to show the way. And, a light is to be seen, not just in church but in the ordinary activities of the world around us. Salt, on the other hand, is more of a "down to earth" sort of thing. It represents utility. In the ancient world, salt was the most common preservative; it kept things from going bad. Today, salt is used on icy streets to help prevent accidents. And, of course, salt adds flavor to food.

To be a good leader, we need to be able to motivate others. What good are our visions if no one will follow? Jesus' teaching on light and salt may help us here. Our lives need to show the balance of light (inspiration) and salt (utility). To be a leader who can motivate, we must be in touch with God and able to receive His divine guidance in what we do; but we must also be willing to roll up our sleeves and get about the work He gives us. As we reflect this balance of inspiration and utility—as Nehemiah did—others will join us in God's work.

R&D *What other images of salt and light help you to see how to motivate others?*

Prayer: *Help us, Lord, to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.*

Day 13

Read: Nehemiah 4:1-15

Courageous

The enemies of Judah attacked the work in two primary ways—by ridicule and by threat of force. The ridicule was in the form of taunts (“What are these feeble Jews doing?” “If a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!”). There are several reasons why people ridicule others: it is easy to do, it can be terribly demoralizing, and it is frequently effective.

When surrounded by a superior force, however, the threat of violence can be even more intimidating. Sanballat is “greatly enraged” and the circle of enemies seems to be expanding. The Ashdodites (occupying former Philistine territory on Judah's western side) had joined the alliance; the Ammonites (on the east) are no longer represented by Tobiah alone; and, with the Samaritans on the north and the Arabs on the south, the conspiracy looks powerful indeed.

The people begin to buckle in the face of such opposition (vv.10 and 12). Nehemiah, the courageous leader, responds on the basis of word, prayer, and action. There is a saying that the Lord and I are a majority of one. Nehemiah says, “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord...” He not only speaks boldly of help from God, however; he prays (v.9a). And, again, being a practical man as well as a spiritual one, he sets a guard (v.9b).

As James Montgomery Boice says of Nehemiah in this instance, “What a pattern for us when we are faced with opposition: prayer and persistence, faith and good works.”

R&D *How did you handle a situation in which you faced stiff opposition?*

Prayer: *When the obstacles seem most overwhelming, it is time to be on our knees before a gracious God who is always there to encourage us.*

Day 14

Read: Acts 4:1-22

Are We Courageous?

Peter and John had been the instruments through whom God had healed a lame man at the Beautiful Gate (3:1-10). This had created quite a crowd scene, and Peter had used the opportunity to preach the “good news” of Jesus Christ. Upon this scene, however, came the Sadducees and the captain of the temple guard.

The Sadducees were the wealthy, aristocratic class. They would have had great difficulty with what Peter was preaching on at least two accounts. First of all, they did not believe in resurrection from the dead, and it was this truth that Peter was proclaiming. More than that, they

were collaborators with the Roman government. They tried to keep on good terms with the Romans and knew that the government would not tolerate public disorder; so, they had Peter and John arrested.

The court before which they were brought was the Sanhedrin, the highest court of the Jews. It was composed of 71 members: priests who were practically all Sadducees, the scribes who were experts in the traditional law, the Pharisees who so rigidly adhered to the law, and the elders who were respected members of the community. In reading Peter's speech, if we take into account the power, prestige, and prejudice of those to whom it was spoken, we have to recognize this as a great act of courage.

There is the courage that runs recklessly into a situation hardly aware of the danger it is facing. Then there is the far greater, cool courage of the person who knows exactly what he is up against yet goes ahead undaunted. The latter is the true courage of a leader, and it is that kind of courage that Peter demonstrated in this instance.

R&D Name some other instances of courage in the Bible.

Prayer: Give me the courage to speak for you, Lord Jesus, whenever I have the opportunity to do so.

Day 15

Read: Nehemiah 4:15-23

Prepared

A good leader is prepared. Nehemiah once again demonstrates his considerable gifts of leadership in a crisis.

It can be argued that Judah's enemies would not have undertaken a massive assault despite the overwhelming forces at their control, because Nehemiah was operating under authority from King Artaxerxes. That factor would have been a major deterrent to them. More likely, Nehemiah would face what we today call guerrilla warfare. Therefore, he prepared for the real threat rather than an imagined one.

Nehemiah's strategy consisted of: (1) dividing the people into two groups, some who would work and others who would be in readiness to fight at any time (vv.16-17); (2) being ready, in any event, for an unexpected attack (vv.18-20); (3) increasing the work hours (they would now work from "dawn until the stars came out," (v.21); (4) keeping the people in the city at night as well as day (v.22); and (5) reminding them that God would fight for them (v.20b). Nehemiah's practical leadership is shown once more by way of the preparations he made. But, more importantly, his spiritual leadership was also evident. In reading this passage, one is reminded of Oliver Cromwell's famous line, "Trust in God and keep your powder dry."

R&D What principles of preparation do you glean from the study of this passage of Scripture?

Prayer: We need to remember, Lord, that, in times of trouble, You are always the first line of resistance.

Day 16

Read: Matthew 25:1-13

Are We Prepared?

According to William Barclay, the story Jesus tells of the wise and foolish virgins is not fanciful, but common to the Jewish customs of the day. It deals with the importance of being prepared.

Although, on the surface, the story has to do with physical preparedness, its message is more toward mental and spiritual preparedness. Jesus was trying to get the point across to the Jews that, because they were God's chosen people, their entire history should have been preparation for the coming of the Son of God. Instead, they were unprepared and would miss the joy of the kingdom.

There are other things in the parable, however, that speak more directly to Christians today. First of all, it warns us that there are some things that cannot be obtained at the last minute. Unless we are growing in the knowledge of our Lord through Bible study, worship, and in other ways, we will not be mentally prepared, and may miss what He has for us. Secondly, it warns us that there are some things that cannot be borrowed. We cannot borrow a relationship with God; that has to do with spiritual preparation: we must live into that relationship on a day-to-day basis.

A good leader will be physically, mentally, and spiritually prepared. More than that, the Christian leader will do all in his or her ability to see that those people for whom he or she is responsible also are prepared physically, mentally, and spiritually.

R&D In what ways do you need to be better prepared for what God might have you do or be?

Prayer: The right preparation begins with prayer.

Day 17

Read: Nehemiah 5:1-13

Compassion

We have earlier studied the courage of Nehemiah and the importance of courage as a characteristic of leadership. Today's passage certainly reinforces that teaching. If it were not enough for Nehemiah to have so many obstacles to overcome from exterior sources, here we see an instance of internal opposition which has to be courageously met. In this study, however, we want to look primarily at the importance of compassion on the part of the leader. In the verses which follow today's study (vv.14-19), Nehemiah tells of his own personal sacrifice on behalf of the people. He did not eat the food allowance to which he was entitled as governor. His predecessors had imposed burdens on the people. He, instead, fed them; there were 150 at his table. In telling of this, Nehemiah makes it clear why he had compassion on the people: respect for God.

The crux of today's passage is this: The nobles and officials were loaning money to the people, exacting interest, and—when the poor were unable to pay—taking their homes and land from them and selling them into slavery. Nehemiah had been buying his Jewish brothers and sisters out of slavery, “but you even sell your brethren that they may be sold to us!” (v.8b). The pain of this injustice runs deep in Nehemiah, reflecting the extent of his compassion.

The compassionate leader, however, does not stop at being sympathetic about an injustice. He does something about it. Calling together an assembly, Nehemiah meets the issue head-on. By openly exposing what has been going on and exerting his leadership authority—“The thing that

you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God?" (v.9)—he gains their acquiescence: "We will do as you say."

R&D When has your respect for God led you to compassionate action?

Prayer: Our hearts should always be filled with the desire to take compassionate action.

Day 18

Read: Matthew 9:35-38

Are We Compassionate?

In this passage, Jesus illustrates several things to us about being a compassionate leader. "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them" (v.36a). Jesus was moved to compassion because of people's sorrow (Luke 7:13), their hunger (Matthew 15:32), their isolation (Mark 1:41), and their bewilderment because of the ineffectiveness of their leaders ("sheep without a shepherd"). Our situation today is no different; we have a lot of politicians but few statesmen, a lot of visionaries but few prophets, a lot of bosses but few leaders.

As compassion had led Nehemiah to action, so it also was with Jesus. He went about all the villages and cities teaching, preaching, and healing. The gospel which Jesus brought did not end in words but was translated into action. "He turned the words of Christian truth into the deeds of Christian love" (William Barclay).

Today, some people look out on the world and see a pluralistic society to which Christianity must adapt if it is to be relevant. Instead, God would have us look with compassion at a world filled with sinners like ourselves, knowing that they can become His as we have become His. This is the opportunity before us ("The harvest is plentiful"), an opportunity that can be brought to fulfillment through compassionate leadership.

R&D What stirs up your compassion concerning the world today?

Prayer: Help us, Lord, not just to feel compassion but to act upon that feeling.

Day 19

Read: Nehemiah 6:1-15

Humility

There are a number of things to learn about good leadership in this passage. Nehemiah faces several temptations as the work on the wall nears completion.

His enemies first attempt to trap him by inviting him to meet with them outside the walls. Sensing danger, Nehemiah "just says no." "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down" (v.3). There is always a temptation to leave the very thing the Lord wants us to do in order to take care of something perhaps less stressful or to satisfy the unwarranted demands of others. There is a saying, however, that the good is the enemy of the best. In the distracting world in which we live today, it is important to stay focused on what God wants us to do.

Nehemiah's opponents next try blackmail. They allege that Nehemiah is really building the wall to set himself up as king, something that would clearly turn Artaxerxes against him. The best defense against blackmail is righteousness. If you don't have anything to hide, blackmail will not work against you. Nehemiah was a righteous man, not seduced by such a trick.

Finally, they try to get Nehemiah to compromise his faith. Shemaiah, in suggesting that Nehemiah meet him in the inner portions of the temple, was trying to get him to violate the Old Testament Law. As a layperson, Nehemiah was not allowed into that area (Numbers 18:7). Nehemiah's obligation to God was greater than self-protection, even if he had believed that Shemaiah was trying to save his life.

Among the many things to be learned from this passage, the most important is humility. The leader who is humble is one who is in a right relationship with God; he knows that his success comes from God. The result is that he has no false pride which would make it necessary for him to risk the work God has given him to do in order to demonstrate foolish bravery or to satisfy the expectations of others. "So the wall was finished...in 52 days."

R&D *What have you learned about leadership from this passage?*

Prayer: *Humility gives us a clear mind to hear You, Lord, rather than relying on our prideful selves.*

Day 20

Read: Luke 22:24-27

Are We Humble?

God calls His people to service. What a disappointment it must have been to Jesus that his disciples were still fighting about their "place." The ways of God are very different—often they are opposite—from the ways of the world. The essential thing is to be in relationship with God that we may be aware of our dependence on Him. That is the essence of humility and the servanthood it produces.

What people want and need is service, someone who cares enough about them personally to devote the time and attention to their problem that it deserves. This is true in the workplace, where the person who devotes himself to doing his job as well as he can is the one who is appreciated. This is a lesson we have not always learned so well in the church. When Peter could say, "I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, walk," the man was healed (Acts 3:6). Today the church has silver and gold, but there is little healing.

We can base our life on power, prestige, and privilege or on humility and servanthood, on getting or on giving. The fact is that if we base it on getting, we will miss both the friendship of people and the grace of God. The kind of leadership Jesus wants is servant leadership.

R&D *In what new way is God calling you to servanthood today?*

Prayer: *You put us here, Lord, to serve others.*

Day 21

Read: Nehemiah 7:73b—8:12 [13-18]

Devoted to God's Word

Chapter 7 had dealt with a census of the people taken to help determine how to populate Jerusalem. It leads into today's passage in which there is a huge assembly in Jerusalem of people from the surrounding towns. Although Ezra the priest assumes a major role in this passage, the happening of the event must be credited to Nehemiah's overall leadership. Nehemiah was a leader devoted to the word of God.

We have in these verses one of the clearest pictures in the Old Testament of the Jewish people at worship. It seems to have been a solemn occasion.

J.G. McConville says, “We can almost hear the hush as Ezra opens the book and the people stand” (v.5). The action is reminiscent of the Gospel procession in churches of our day, where the Bible is held high and the congregation turns to face the minister as the Gospel lesson is read.

There is great emphasis on the understanding of the Scripture that was being read to the people (vv.2, 7-8). The action of the Levites could either be of translating or, more likely, of explaining the things that the people might not have otherwise understood.

Although the setting was solemn and the focus was on helping the people to understand, the response was spontaneous and emotional. The people shouted “Amen,” raised their hands in prayer and prostrated themselves in adoration. In all respects—mind, body and spirit—the word of God penetrated the people.

R&D How could you demonstrate that you are devoted to the word of God?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for the opportunity we have to study the Bible daily in the manner we are presently doing through this resource You have provided to us.

Day 22

Read: Nehemiah 9:1-3, 32-37

Believed in Repentance

A next step toward wholeness for God’s people was to come to grips with their need for individual and corporate penitence. As their leader, Nehemiah understood this. James Montgomery Boice says, “The first evidence of a true movement of the Holy Spirit is an awakened conscience, leading to genuine sorrow for sin in God’s people. Only after that does revival come.”

Boice points out that there can be no real progress for either a nation or a person without an acknowledgment of, penitence concerning, and a turning away from sin. Nations and people move forward morally and spiritually only in times of spiritual renewal that is grounded in true repentance.

There can, however, be no real sense of what is sinful, or why a particular action or inaction is sinful, without hearing and responding to the law of God. We will never acknowledge sinfulness in ourselves or our nation, nor grieve over that sin, unless and until we see it as an offense against God. In turn, it is in Scripture that we learn what does and what does not wound the heart of God. In our passage for today, the confession of the people is clearly linked to the reading of Scripture.

R&D Recall an instance in which you were convicted of sin by reading or hearing Scripture.

Prayer: Lord God, it is easy for us to stray; please tend Your sheep this day.

Day 24

Read: Nehemiah 9:33—10:28-32, 39

Encouraged Spiritual Renewal

As a leader, Nehemiah also encouraged the spiritual renewal of the people, here by getting them to renew the covenant between God and His people. We have already seen Nehemiah’s devotion to the word of God, and the call to repentance which preceded our lesson for today and

laid the foundation for it. This “third step” is a formal commitment to change, a binding agreement to which the leaders affixed their seals.

By committing themselves in this manner, the people were accepting the authority of Scripture. Nothing deserves a more complete response of obedience and service than God, and God has expressed His will in Scripture. Furthermore, they were acknowledging the importance of worship by commitments made toward support and maintenance of the temple. The reconstructed walls could provide physical safety, but only worship could bring the people together in union with God. Finally, in the covenant, the people were also acknowledging that it was their responsibility to keep God’s law.

What the Israelites did by way of the covenant in Nehemiah’s time can have application for us today. Although Christians are not under the specifics of Old Testament rules and regulations, where moral and ethical issues are concerned, as Boice says, “When we pass from the Old Testament to the New, the standard goes up rather than down.” (See Matthew 5:17-48.) Spiritual renewal comes for us when we are convicted by the word of God, confess our sins, and covenant with God to live according to His will for our lives.

R&D Do you have a “rule of life”—a conscious commitment of prayer, worship, Bible study and service?

Prayer: Show me, Blessed Lord, where I am falling short of Your expectations of me.

Day 25

Read: Nehemiah 13:1-11, 30-31

Persevered

The final quality of leadership exhibited by Nehemiah that we will look at in this study is perseverance. Many people have good ideas that they would just as soon have someone else bring to fruition. Others like implementing a plan but hate having to do the follow-up necessary to keep it going. A good leader has the tenacity to see that the job is done and that it continues to be done. Nehemiah was such a leader.

The events in the 13th chapter of the book of Nehemiah take place some years after the other chapters. After 12 years as governor of Jerusalem, Nehemiah had returned to Babylon. Now, some time later, he has returned to Jerusalem to discover that many of the reforms he had instituted are being ignored and the covenant is not being kept.

The first and most serious offense that comes to Nehemiah’s attention is that his old enemy Tobiah, with the cooperation of a priest named Eliashib, has literally “moved in” to the temple. This sacrilege gains immediate action from Nehemiah, who throws Tobiah’s possessions out of the temple and has it purified. Where injustice is concerned, and especially wherein God has been mocked, Nehemiah remains a man of action!

He does not stop there, however. He takes a series of other actions to restore order and honor God. It has been speculated that Nehemiah was 65 (“retirement age”) when these events occurred. That’s perseverance; and that’s the type of leader Nehemiah was.

R&D In what have you had to persevere recently?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, remind us that Christians never “retire” from being Your servants to the world around us. Even when we are old and incapacitated, we can be Your prayer warriors.

Day 26

Read: Nehemiah 12:27-30

Conclusion: Walls

Nehemiah is best known for restoring the walls of Jerusalem, a symbol of the restoration of the Jewish faith from which Christianity would be born. But walls can have a bad connotation. Walls can keep people out or keep people in.

But walls can also protect, as was true with the walls Nehemiah rebuilt. Our protective walls are falling down today. Family life is disintegrating; drugs are destroying people and leading to rampant crime; moral values are being held up to scorn, sometimes within the Church itself.

People need boundaries, psychologically and spiritually. As we think about Nehemiah and the walls God called him to repair, we need also to think about ourselves and those walls, those boundaries that protect and give stability, that God wants each of us to have the courage to repair. It is time for us to exercise Christian leadership. May Nehemiah, that “man for all seasons,” be an example for us today.

R&D One of the secrets of Nehemiah’s success was that he had people work on their own section of the wall, the part closest to home. What section of the wall does God want you working on today?

Prayer: Lord, help me to be—in all respects—the leader You call me to be.

by Harry C. Griffith

Copyright © 2021 by the Bible Reading Fellowship
PO Box 380, Winter Park, FL 32790

This study is reprinted from *The Journey*, a publication of the Bible Reading Fellowship. For more information about our publications, please visit our website www.biblereading.org.