



Nehemiah: Lessons in Leadership

Note: As we open the book of Nehemiah, we find the nation of Israel in exile. For more on the exile, see Daniel and Jeremiah.

We could do an entire study on how the book of Nehemiah is interwoven in so many important ways with many other OT books, Daniel, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Haggai and Zechariah to name a few. To understand the setting of the book of Nehemiah, it is helpful to read at least Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. It is also worth looking at Haggai and Zechariah as they are classified with Nehemiah and Ezra as part of the Restoration season of the Israelites.

That's a lot of reading! So we will do our best to stay on this book and the lessons that can be learned here. Just move forward in this study with this awareness: Nehemiah is a great example of how the entire Bible is connected; one big story, not several separate stories.

Let's start with an overview of the book of Nehemiah. Please take a few minutes to read the entire book (it's only 13 chapters, you can do it!) and make notes on the following:

Chapter One: We find Nehemiah working as cupbearer to the king. He is a Jew in exile who has found favor in a foreign land. Word comes to him that his beloved Jerusalem is in ruins.

Chapter Two: Nehemiah petitions the king for permission to go do the work of rebuilding the wall in Jerusalem. Permission is granted and he travels to the city to inspect the wall.

Chapter Three: Lists the builders of the wall

Chapter Four: Details some of the opposition, attacks and challenges Nehemiah and the workers experience as they do the work of rebuilding

Chapter Five: Changes focus on the work of the wall to focus on the people of the wall, so to speak. The rebuilding has taken a toll on families and finances. God's children are hungry and poor. Nehemiah speaks out against the social injustice, showing a new layer of his leadership role among the people.

Chapter Six: More opposition and attacks.

Chapter Seven: We begin to see Jerusalem repatriate. This is a roster of the returned exiles.

Chapters Eight, Nine, Ten: The reading of God's Word by Ezra creates praise and repentance, followed by a renewal of the covenant.

Chapters Eleven and Twelve: Additional rosters of repatriates and the dedication of the city and its peoples renewed fervor for their God. The celebration.

Chapter Thirteen: tells us that Nehemiah had left Jerusalem to return to the foreign king but does come back again, reiterating and reinforcing his earlier work both logistically and spiritually.

What do we learn from Nehemiah?

First, it's important for us to understand that we all are called to lead in one way or another. When most of us hear the term *leader*, we think of presidents, pastors, teachers, and CEOs. Most of us don't think of ourselves. However, as Christians, we are **all** called to be influencers for Jesus Christ. We are **all** called to lead others to the gospel of God's grace. So perhaps the first lesson we learn from Nehemiah is that we can (maybe even SHOULD) all be leaders.

As you study the book of Nehemiah and its' principles, trust the Lord to show you how you can apply them to your own sphere of influence. I will try to help you with that by asking you to consider two prongs of each leadership skill:

- First, a personal leadership role. Do you lead your children, your spouse, your friends?
- Second, a corporate (not work, necessarily but more the 'group' definition of corporate) environment like your church, neighborhood, ministry and of course, also, but not exclusively, the workplace.

I will keep poking at these so you don't forget that leadership can come in many forms. I want to make sure we are all tuned in to the fact that we are all leaders and remind you that you might even be currently leading in a few different capacities. If we can apply God's wisdom and biblical principles to all of those spaces, then we have done this study well.

Let's look at some specific examples of what Nehemiah teaches us, then we will think about how to apply these examples to our own lives.

Please read the last six words of 1:11 and write them here:

What does this tell you about Nehemiah and his role in the foreign kingdom?

Read all of chapter one and describe the events in your own words:

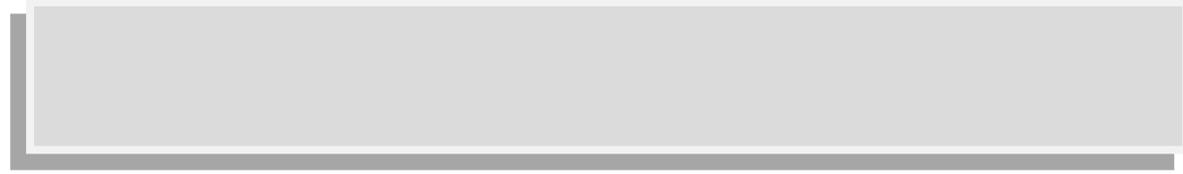
What was Nehemiah's response to the problems of his people and his own mourning (v. 4):

Chapter two begins four months after chapter one. Please read 2:1-5. Describe the events in your own words:

Specifically in vv 4-5 there is a pretty big moment. With respect to Nehemiah's request, do you think this was a spontaneous request, only occurring to him at the moment the king asked the question? Why or why not?

Later in chapter two, we find Nehemiah beginning to face some naysayers. In 2:20, consider his retort, specifically the order of the contents of his response.

What might this tell you about Nehemiah and his priorities in personal and corporate (group) efforts?



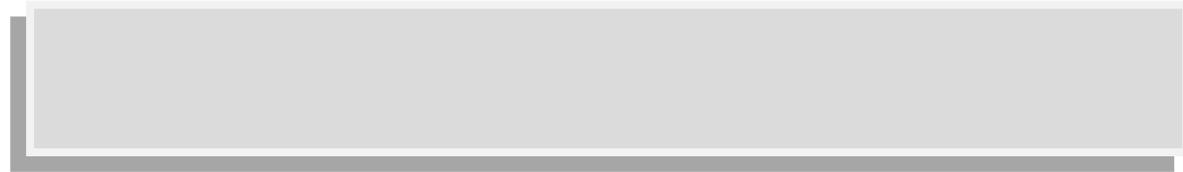
What, if anything, do you think would have been the difference in the communication if he had put the denial of the naysayers' share in Jerusalem before his declaration of faith in God for restoring it?



Chapter 3 lists the builders of the wall. Many commentaries on Nehemiah will take this chapter as an example for leadership in the area of motivation, delegation, etc. Sure. But perhaps this chapter is a better example of the following biblical principle: when God is moving in your heart, He's also moving in the hearts around you to accomplish His purposes.

We see the multitude of people who got behind Nehemiah. This happens when God is weaving hearts together for His purposes. We see it again in 5:12. We do know that Haggai and Zechariah were prophets working on the hearts of the people in this way. It's pretty spectacular to think of how God moves all things towards His goals.

Can you think of ways that this might be happening in our lives today? When God weaves together people and circumstances for His purposes, what does that look like in personal life? What might it look like in corporate life (church/professional/neighborhood/ministry)?



Chapter 4 shows us some of the challenges Nehemiah faced. Opposition and attacks (4:1-9) and sheer exhaustion (4:10).

Any time you walk forward into the purpose to which God has called you, expect opposition and attacks. You will feel discouraged and sometimes even derailed. What was Nehemiah's response to these challenges? (4:9)

How can we apply this example to our personal lives? How can we apply it to community life (church/work/neighborhood/ministry)?

4:21-23 shows vigilance to the call and also to the people in it. Whatever your leadership looks like, if a task and/or a group of people are entrusted to you, it's your job to be vigilant and protective, with God's help and guidance.

Can you think of some examples in your own life that can help bring this concept into a current culture understanding?

In chapter 5, Nehemiah deals with some social injustice. He stands up for what is right, even as a newly minted leader in the community. Does he seem to fret over his newness in this position? How would you characterize his response?

How does he handle the social injustice once he becomes aware of it? Let's go verse by verse so we don't miss any elements:

v. 6:

v. 7:

v. 8:

v. 9:

v. 10:

v. 11:

We see later in chapter 5 that he rises to power as governor and his heart for the people continues, he refuses to take the governors share when the people were hurting. How would you summarize that type of leadership?

Chapter 6 gives us a lesson in drama management. We see the return of opposition and attack, however, the nature of these attacks seems to have changed. Read 6:1-7 and describe the situation in your own words:

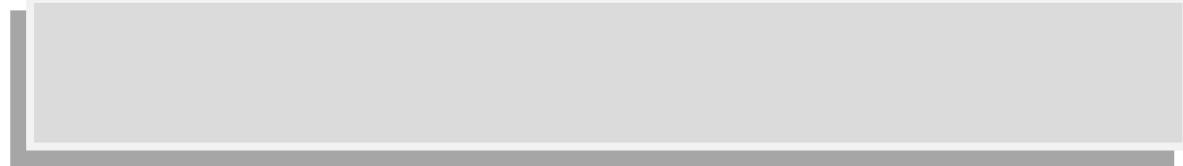
Read 6:8-9 and describe Nehemiah's response:

Do you see a similar pattern in 6:10-14? If so, what can you learn from Nehemiah's handling of the situation? How can you apply that to your life?

As noted in the overview, chapter 7 is the roster of the returned exiles, chapters 8-10 begin the new patterns of behavior and renewal of the covenant (a result of the new hearing and understanding of the word read by Ezra). Ch 11-12 is the

repatriation (repatriate is opposite of exile) and dedication of the city with the celebration. There is much to learn from these chapters, but for the purpose of this abbreviated study, we will not study them in depth.

One interesting note, in chapter 13 we learn that Nehemiah had left and gone back to the king. He eventually returned to reinforce the work and the law of the city when needed. Do you think he returned to the foreign king to be cupbearer again? Why or why not?



Summary:

Lesson One: Pray first, lead second.

Please note Nehemiah's frequent return to prayer, from the beginning to the end of his story: 1:4; 4:4-9; 5:19; 6:9,14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31. It's pretty easy to lead first, then ask God to bless your vision or your goals. That is just wrong. Pray, asking God to show you the path. Then pray ALONG the path. He will lead you and He will lead others to you, as long as your heart stays fully towards Him.

Lesson Two: Encouragement triumphs over discouragement.

Nehemiah 4:10 reveals that the labor and the discouragement is taking a toll on the workers. The task seems insurmountable, and the opposition appears overwhelming. Discouragement can rob people of their strength and vision. It damages confidence and the sense of security. How does Nehemiah respond to discouragement? Starting in chapter 4:13, he unifies their efforts. In verse 14, he directs their attention toward God. In verse 15-17, he balances his thoughts with actions. He makes a plan to keep everyone involved, and he determines a rallying point around hope in God in verse 20. Christian leadership and encouragement will always point back to God.

Lesson Three: The Lord will sustain you.

Chapter 2:17-18 demonstrates the strong motivation in Nehemiah's heart. However, with progress comes opposition. Sanballat and Tobaiah stand against these efforts, but in 2:19, Nehemiah stands up to this opposition and reaffirms his trust in God. Nehemiah 4:1-3 records more opposition from these individuals. They

mock the Jews rebuilding the walls. Nehemiah again returns to God. He does not let the taunts tear him down nor does he personally retaliate. He goes to God, and he stays on task.

Lesson Four: Practicality has a place.

We love our spiritual experiences. But we live in a practical world. 4:17 is a powerhouse in this example.

Imagine the work the Lord has been laying on your heart during this study. Now remember that Ephesians 6 describes the Word of the Lord as the Sword of the Spirit. How does that picture of the workers on the wall strike you now?

We often want to rush in to things with both hands and feet, but what if, spiritually and logistically, we found balance between the work at hand and the weapons needed to protect that work? I encourage you to write in the margins or on a separate piece of paper how that might look for you in this season of life.

Lesson Five: Servant Leadership

In 4:22-23, Nehemiah demonstrates that he stood side-by-side with those he was leading in their efforts. He was servant to his earthly king, and he becomes a servant in leading the people of his true King. Because of his hard work, Nehemiah was appointed to be “governor of Judah” (5:14) even before the wall was rebuilt. He accepted his appointment humbly, refusing special treatment and willingly sacrificing for the good of the people (5:18). Nehemiah could have led a clinic on servant leadership.

Of course, the greatest example of servant leadership in the Bible is Jesus. Consider John 13:1-17. Jesus washes the feet of his followers, which was actually the responsibility of the house-servant. Examination of this passage shows that Jesus’ basic motivation was love for his followers (v. 1). Of course we know that before the disciples experienced him as their servant, they had already experienced him many times before as Master, and as a strong and extremely powerful leader. However, Jesus voluntarily becomes a servant to his followers (v. 5-12). He did not come primarily as their foot washer, but he was ready to do this service for His followers. In this way He has set an example of servant leadership for all of His disciples, us included.

Jesus laid down His throne in heaven for the humble flesh of a man. He was obedient to His Father, even to death on a cross. No better example exists in all of history for how to lead, God's way.

We are all building a structure in our own lives. There are times when our efforts crumble and falter. There are times when we need to rebuild. By following biblical principles, we can encourage one another, be motivated to serve God and others, and be spiritual leaders like the one we seen in God's servant Nehemiah.