
Day 281 - October 8

Period of Restoration (535-425 BCE)

Nehemiah Rebuilds the Wall

Readings: *Nehemiah 1:1-3:32*

Reflections:

- Nehemiah at first glance rises to spiritual leadership from an unlikely place. He is the cup bearer to king in the Persian palace in Susa. Now, it is important to remember that this was one of the most trusted positions for the king as many assassinations were through poisoning. Apparently Artaxerxes is very close to Nehemiah and Nehemiah's writings give us a window into Artaxerxes. Fourteen years have passed since Ezra was commissioned to return to Jerusalem. During these years the work to rebuild Jerusalem and the walls had been slowed because of local opposition, fearful, secular nobles as well leaders from Samaria including a man named Sanballat, who was still bitter for being excluded from participating in the reconstruction of the temple.
- A report comes to Nehemiah in 445 BCE about the slow progress which in turns affects Nehemiah. His sadness leads to Artaxerxes noticing and after hearing of the situation and in turn, empowering him to return as a temporary governor. Nehemiah takes immediate action, deals with the issues and completes the project in six months. Many see within the account of Nehemiah a good example of solid leadership.
- We see in Nehemiah's first response to hearing of the poor condition of Jerusalem his deep emotional attachment to seeing God's community and temple restored: "When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven." His prayer that is recorded reflects his knowledge of the unfolding drama and the reality of Israel's complete failure to live according to God's law. Nehemiah identifies with the people's sin and sees it as his own. He also prays that in some way God might use him. We see in this opening section the first part of leadership. We see that Nehemiah take ownership for what he understands is God's vision and heart. Nehemiah is passionately committed to God and his kingdom. Second, we see Nehemiah completely identifies with the people. He does not see himself as above them or better than them. He is one of them in their failure and struggle. Lastly, he feels a deep personal responsibility to offer himself completely to God in response to the need. These three elements position Nehemiah to be used by God.

- The King notices Nehemiah's sadness and asks what the problem is and what Nehemiah would like the king to do. This shows their friendship. We also see one line that could be easily missed, "The king said to me, 'What is it you want?' Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king..." Nehemiah's relationship with God is woven into the fabric of everyday life. He sees himself as living in constant communion and friendship with God. In this way we see again a glimpse of what it means to have a friendship with God in the routine living of life.
- The King asks for a time bound commitment for the mission Nehemiah wanted to undertake. To win the trust of authorities, good leaders need to not only be able to envision goals but also understand good organizational timelines in completing goals. A good leader asks not only "what needs to be done?" but also, "what is the timeline for accomplishing this goal?"
- Nehemiah also outlines a basic plan for how the King can empower him and provide the necessary resources for successful completion. Good leaders need to have the courage to make bold requests for support from leaders and people with substantial resources. Big goals require big resources. Getting those resources means having big courage to make big asks. Interestingly, on top of what Nehemiah's requests, the King also sends army officers and some cavalry for support. At times, authorities or major donors will go beyond what a leader requests because they recognize there are other ways that help is needed and they want to ensure the project is successfully completed.
- Nehemiah clearly feels led by God as he tackles this mission: "I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem." Again, sometimes big dreams need to be held closely in your heart before you share them with others. People can criticize and doubt what God is asking you to do and make it that much more difficult to remain true to your calling. Sometimes you need to wait for a bit before you share your dreams with others.
- Nehemiah does his own secret, night time inspection of the walls when he arrives. He is doing an initial covert operation to ensure he has a proper personal assessment of the situation. Again, many times a good leader will quietly inspect before making final plans. If you include many people in your initial assessment of a problem, you are distracted by all the excuses and rationalizations of the people who are unsuccessfully working on the projects. Doing your own first hand review will enable you to form your own opinion before others add their own to your thoughts.
- When Nehemiah speaks out his vision, he is concise and passionate. He frames it in very personal terms for the people and expresses in his complete solidarity with the people (uses "we" language). He is clear on exactly what must be done. "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace."
- Immediately opposition is thrown at Nehemiah through Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem. They mock and ridicule Nehemiah but Nehemiah will not receive any of it. "The God of

heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it.” Nehemiah, when faced with opposition, remains focused on God, his role as a servant and in the appropriate boundaries that need to be maintained for the sake of the mission. He will not be intimidated or distracted.

- We see in the written record a careful detailing of the division of work. We are reminded that good leadership means good organization. Roles need to be clearly defined. Tasks clearly structured. People effectively empowered. People are directly linked to tasks. Nehemiah even notes the performance of his key workers, “Zabbai zealously repaired another section...” These small notes suggest that Nehemiah made it a priority to understand who was performing well and to properly acknowledge that in community. Celebrating those who are leading the way and setting the example inspires everyone to continue to do their best.
- All of the elements noted thus far help us see how Nehemiah was gifted as a leader to do this work. His leadership was holistic: spiritual, emotional, practical, relational, and organizational. All those who would seek to be leaders need to understand the importance of being fully invested and owning all aspects of mobilizing their community towards the mission God has for them.