

Prayer: *The Reflex of a Leader*

Nehemiah 1:1-11

Introduction: Leadership. We'd all agree it's a needed quality and action, is often lacking in the home, church, society, and government, and is sometimes hard to quantify or define consistently across the board. We have historical examples that we study, and it's interesting that currently there are three different movies/shows dealing with Winston Churchill ("Darkest Hour", "Churchill", "The Crown"), with another coming out in 2016 (Churchill's Secret) and the movie "Dunkirk", which was an indirect reference to the British PM during the time. We have a country thirsting for true leadership, someone who shows and tells us where we are going, and does it in a way that is truthful and gracious. There is never a lack of writing on the subject. In a recent article of *Business News Daily* (Sept. 21, 2017), they tried to answer the questions of what leadership embodies and how leaders achieve **success** (always a slippery word to understand and define). They came up with the following attributes:

Decisiveness, Awareness, Focus, Accountability, Empathy, Confidence, Optimism, Honesty, and Inspiration.

According to the article, leaders achieve success by: 1) Bettering their environment 2) Know their team and themselves well 3) Maintain a Positive Attitude 4) Build the next generation

We resonate with these and believe/hope for these things. But is this enough? Is there more. How about historical beliefs of leadership, or from different areas of oversight?

Military:

- 1) You manage things; you lead people - Rear Admiral Grace Murray Hooper
- 2) Lead me, follow me, or get out of my way - General George Patton
- 3) My own definition of leadership is this: The capacity and the will to rally men and women to a common purpose and the character which inspires confidence - General Montgomery
- 4) A competent leader can get efficient service from poor troops, while on the contrary an incapable leader can demoralize the best of troops - John J. Pershing

Business/Scholarship:

- 1) No man will make a great leader who wants to do it all himself, or to get all the credit for doing it - Andrew Carnegie
- 2) The most dangerous leadership myth is that leaders are born- that there is a genetic factor to leadership. That's nonsense; in fact, the opposite is true. Leaders are made rather than born - Warren Bennis
- 3) A cowardly leader is the most dangerous of men - Stephen King
- 4) The key to successful leadership today is influence, not authority - Kenneth Blanchard

Government:

- 1) The nation will find it very hard to look up to leaders who are keeping their ears to the ground - Sir Winston Churchill
- 2) In matters of style, swim with the current; in matters of principle, stand like a rock - Thomas Jefferson
- 3) The art of leadership is saying 'no', not saying 'yes'. It is very easy to say yes

Christian Sphere:

- 1) People buy into the leader before they buy into vision - John Maxwell
- 2) A good leader is a person who takes a little more than his share of the blame and gets a little less than his share of the credit - Maxwell
- 3) You don't need to title to be a leader - multiple attributions

Now, the point in all of this is that leadership is seen as a necessity in all walks of life, not just the church or our homes, but we also recognize the deep need for leadership to be defined Biblically in all these areas. The Bible defines what success is and how it is achieved. It gives us principles of God's expectation for leaders, influencers, and disciple makers, since we are ALL called to these things. The Book of Nehemiah **IS NOT A LEADERSHIP MANUAL**, but is a book from which we glean these principles.

Nehemiah is a continuation of the story we started in Ezra, This is the last narrative of the OT that brings us from a broken monarchy, broken covenant, and broken people to a remnant that came back into the land and prepares the path for the Messiah to come onto the scene centuries later. Nehemiah jumps forward about **13 years** from the end of Ezra, from 458 B.C to 445 B.C, which is the twentieth year of the reign of King Artaxerxes of Persia (465-424 B.C). This is the third return: The first with Zerubbabel saw a **return of a small remnant and the rebuilding of the Temple**, the second under Ezra where there was a **restoration of worship in the Temple**, and now a third under Nehemiah where there will be a **rebuilding of a wall and stability**.

The Makeup of a Leader (1:1-3; 11b)

*The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in **Susa** the capital,² that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah.*

*And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem.³ And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great **trouble and shame**. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire."*

." Now I was cupbearer to the king.

Personal Characteristics

We are dropped into a scene of a man we have not met nor do we have much background. However, we can discern much from what the text does tell us about this man that would lead a broken group of people to a monumental accomplishment: they would rebuild a wall that laid fallow for decades, and he would do it in an unprecedented **52 days!** (Neh. 6:15) This allowed the nation to deal with moral obligations they were neglecting and to be able to solidify a nation that had been blown around like paper in the wind.

At the end of chapter 1 there is a short phrase describing Nehemiah: "Now I was a cupbearer to the king". We do not resonate with this language of monarchical dynamics, but the role of cupbearer was only given to someone who was trustworthy and able, since this person had more access to the king than almost anyone else in the kingdom. In fact, the cupbearer was like the "chief of staff", giving input to king and having influence through counsel. The role was exactly what the name suggests: he would test the wine to make sure it was not poisoned before the king would drink. We do not live with anything equivalent to this, since we only have people who will test whether the coffee is any good or not. None of us live each day wondering if someone is going to try to poison us. It was also true that if you wanted to get to the king, you would go through the cupbearer. There was not a more important servant role in the kingdom than this one.

We glean a couple of things about Nehemiah here. 1) He was a Jewish man, raised in exile in a foreign country, with a foreign government, but dedicated himself to love fully to the Lord, moving through the

governmental ranks through discipline, study, and hard work. In other words, he was set up to be a leader of Israel by years of preparation beforehand. He had positioned himself to be used in a significant way since he did all the behind the scenes work to lead to visible results. Non-leaders want results without discipline and the sweat equity it takes to achieve 2) Being a Jewish man meant he was part of the conquered people of Persia, and yet he had demonstrated integrity in his life that King Artaxerxes trusted his life to this servant! This is NOT insignificant. Nehemiah was a man of honesty, humility (willing to die in service of the king), and lived life NOT for himself.

Personal Concerns

It was on a late November or December day (month of Chislev) while strolling at the winter palace of the king in Susa, that Nehemiah received an official delegation that had returned from Jerusalem. The leader was his brother (most likely his actual blood brother), and was informed about the conditions in Jerusalem, and the word was grave. There was great trouble and shame, the walls and gates were broken down, and it was a desperate situation. Here are a few things we glean from this correspondence:

1) This was NOT referring to the original destruction in 587 by Nebuchadnezzar, since this would not be "new news". This referred to what happened in **Ezra 4**, where the opponents of Israel in the land surrounding Jerusalem wrote to Artaxerxes (yes the same one Nehemiah served), to get him to order the Israelites to stop building the wall. They were ok with the Temple (that was religious stuff), but a rebuilt wall would have signaled a newfound strength. So the construction was halted, and over time this had become overgrown, burned, and laid in waste. Even though Ezra brought reform, he could not rally the nation to rebuild. This absolutely adds to the intrigue of this story. Nehemiah was going to have to appeal for something (rebuild a wall) that he had already officially decreed to halt.

2) A leader by nature has a greater view of life beyond himself. Nehemiah believed **Psalms 137:1-6**, which says *"If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill. Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy."* Nehemiah had a full and accomplished life in Persia, but he never forgot his brothers and sisters in Jerusalem, and had a much more global view about his life.

We must have a broad view of the church and nations. When other churches hurt, so do we. When they are in need, we seek to help. In other words, there is a global vision and responsibility for every leader in the church, not only to handle life in our home and in this locale, but also with an eye toward those globally. Without this, Nehemiah would never have returned and played a role in the rebuilding of Jerusalem. This was faithful risk at its best, leaving what was comfortable and good for what was hard and best.

The Reflex of a Leader (1:4)

As soon as I heard these words I sat down and **wept** and **mourned** for days, and I **continued** fasting and **praying** before the God of heaven.

Taking Action

When hearing situation in Jerusalem, Nehemiah took action. This is a mark of capable people, those who see problems and solve problems. Assess, strategize, and take steps to correct whatever needs solving. However, what Nehemiah demonstrated is a **huge secret to leadership**. *"A true leader is not so much aware of the talents or gifts he has that others do not have as he is of the fact that he is weak and as capable of sin as anyone. It is when leaders forget their sinfulness that they fall into sin and lose their*

*leadership ability.*¹ His **reflex**, that involuntary and primary responsive muscle, was to sit down and weep, to pray, to seek God. This response tells us everything we need to know about our view of God. Is He a genie in a bottle to be called upon when we cannot handle things, or do we realize we CANNOT handle anything without Him? Is prayer our last resort or the place we first start? Is seeking God's face the response to frustration of not knowing what to do, or the most powerful thing we could ever do on behalf of people?

Self-sufficiency is NOT a problem with leaders but with humanity. "The self-sufficient do not pray; they merely talk to themselves. The self-satisfied will not pray; they have no knowledge of their need. the self-righteous cannot pray; they have no basis on which to approach God."² Prayer, then, demonstrates our awareness of our need, our own sin, and our inability to do anything FOR God if its done WITHOUT God and the strength He provides.

Where in your life do you see this kind of self-sufficiency? When is prayer secondary or the last thing instead of the first? Where do we demonstrate independence from God when dealing with our jobs, our kids, our trials, our financial circumstances, or the struggles in our marriages?

Practicing Perseverance

Notice that he began to pray and he continued to pray. In fact, between Nehemiah 1 and 2, **4-5 months time had passed** (The month of Nisan in 2:1 is equivalent to April). He prayed before the God of heaven for months **before** he took specific action. In fact, it could be argued from the text that he did NOT have a specific plan in mind until **after** he had spent months in prayer. We will see that the makeup of his prayer was not mechanical, but it also was directed to God first and foremost, not simply filled with a litany of demands and requests. Often we can get frustrated that God does not answer our prayer. We think that He's not listening or does not care, and we interpret His silence as proof that He is distant and unresponsive. However, most often the problem lies with us! We pray for the wrong things, or ask for things that will lead us away from Him, or that could be spent on our passions (James 4:2-4). **We think that God is there to advance our vision, rather than we to be faithful to His!**

Nehemiah demonstrated this hugely important principle: *He engaged in prayer directed to God, His glory and His promises, which lead to a clear vision, which lead to risk taking faith!* This is not only an effective order or sequence, it is safe. Remember, our prayer as our life needs to reflect the fact that all of this is about God and His glory, not about us. This means that we pray persistently until God changes us and our desires to conform to His.

The Prayer of a Leader (1:5-11)

And I said, "O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments,⁶ let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned.⁷ We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.⁸ Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples,⁹ but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though you dispersed be under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.'¹⁰ They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.¹¹ O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the

¹ James Montgomery Boice, "Nehemiah", p. 19.

² Cyril J. Barber, "Nehemiah and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership", p. 22-23.

prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man

A High View of God (5-6a)

Sometimes we struggle in our prayer life in knowing *what or how* to pray. We move from wanting more formulas or outlines to wanting more spontaneity in our prayer life. Much like any of our disciplines to know God more, a disciplined approach allows us to exercise the right kind of spontaneity (ie. giving regularly allows us to give in spontaneous, joyful ways without compromising regular demonstrations of faith driven giving.

Nehemiah began with **adoration**, which is another way of saying he **told God about God**. Its even something different than *thanksgiving*, since it simply acknowledges to God what He already knows. The Psalms are written this way, saying things about God that should be obvious but in which God takes pleasure in us acknowledging and adoring. Nehemiah began with telling God of His awesomeness, His love, His covenant keeping, and the fact that He hears His servants when they pray. Adoration requires us to know the God we are praying to, and helps deepen our understanding of His character. How often do we skip to requests without spending time retelling God of His own greatness? When we do this regularly and habitually, not only does our knowledge of Him grow, but our perspective undoubtedly begins to change.

A Humble View in Confession (6b-7)

His prayer, much like Ezra, expressed the need to be cleansed from sin, confessing sin both corporately and personally. This meant that he recognized the plight that the people of Israel found themselves in was not a result of God leaving them, but because sin had brought consequences. We often think that our problems are a result of someone else's actions or their mistakes, but the main culprit is typically us. When *The Times* of London invited several authors to respond to the theme 'What's Wrong with the World," , G.K Chesterson answer was simply:

Dear Sirs,
I am
Sincerely Yours,
G.K. Chesterton³

Perhaps no time of prayer is complete until there is confession of sin, since anytime spent adoring the person and nature of God shines a light on our own desperate, sinful condition and the fact that our sin is ever before us. Far from being a downer (stop focusing on sin all the time---you're bringing me down, man!), this is the best kind of news for us. When we realize that we are the problem, it shines a light on the fact that Jesus is the solution, since we are terrible solutions! Confessing our sin keeps us from constant complaint, blame-shifting, or seeing artificial solutions in weak institutions. A leader, or any Christian, humbles himself and sees prayer as an opportunity to confess sin, welcoming the fresh oxygenated truth of Christ's atoning work into our lungs and heart.

A Grounded View of God's Promises (8-10)

Nehemiah had sustained prayer for months, never running out of material, because he had a firm grasp of Scripture. Most of what is prayed in verses 8-10 can be traced back to sections of Deuteronomy. Deut. 4:25-31 anticipated the scenario that Israel found themselves in, as well as the promise of mercy, faithfulness, and forgiveness. Verse 10 is almost an exact copy of Deut. 9:29, that God would redeem

³ Derek W. H. Thomas, "Nehemiah", p. 212

His people with the payment of a price to reclaim them from slavery. This is often so neglected in our prayer. Now, please note that this does not mean we simply repeat Scripture and cannot add anything else of personal request, thanksgiving or praise. It simply means Scripture gives us the basis and foundation to **adore, thank, and make proper requests of God**. I love the phrase that we should "**pray big prayers of God**", but usually people mean that in the realm of material, physical, or financial realms. Instead, we should pray the big, hairy, audacious prayers that the Bible gives, like "God open the eyes of unbelievers, even though they are blind and our enemy is actively trying to keep it that way." (2 Cor. 4:1-6). Or "build your church, and don't let anything stand in its way, even the gates of hell" (Matt. 16:13-20). Or "By your authority, help us make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching them, and do this through us here and to the ends of the earth" (Matt. 28:18-20). Or, "Since you have said you will redeem your people, and since you said your name will dwell in Jerusalem, hear our prayer and give success by granting mercy today. (Neh. 1:8-11). What a big prayer that God answered after months of praying. Do we pray this way?

A Request for Success (11)

Success is a fleeting word that means all kinds of things in our day (financial, power, accomplishment), but Nehemiah prayed that God would give success that was dependant on God hearing His people, them fearing His name, and His granting mercy. Nehemiah started in a God saturated way and ended His prayer the same way. Notice that he did not narrow this request to specific terms, but in broad promises. "You've said you would do this, now we ask that you would fulfill this through your willing servants, in whatever way you see fit." This seems like such a radical departure from most of the prayers we often pray.

God saturated prayer that focuses on His promises leads to clear vision that leads to risk taking faith.

Some questions to consider:

- If someone examined your prayer life, what would it reveal about your view of God? Your self-reliance?
- What are some helpful things that have helped your prayer life? What areas would you like to improve?
- How do we improve our prayer reflex?
- What are you praying for right now? Have you experienced answered prayer?