

October 8

Nehemiah 1-3

Today, we begin the book of Nehemiah - one of the all-time great studies on leadership.

The first thing I'd to point out to you today is that Nehemiah was already a very important man when he chose to take on this new task of rebuilding Jerusalem's walls. He was "cupbearer" to King Artaxerxes. That tells us that he was a very well trusted servant of the king, who unlike almost anyone else had daily and easy access to the king. The principle job of the cupbearer was to select and present the wines which the king would drink and in the presenting of the king's wine to serve as a "taster" before the king himself was served. So many ancient monarchs were poisoned that it was a necessary precaution that someone else beside the king should sample the wine first.

Did you notice the "bullet prayer" that was mentioned in today's reading? A bullet prayer is that quick "God help me!" that you send up when an emergency arises or an opportunity that you have been expecting and praying for suddenly presents itself. For four months Nehemiah has been fasting and praying and all of a sudden the king says "Man, what is wrong with you? Why are you sad?" It's an opportunity he has been looking for, but it is also a crisis because first of all you are not supposed to show your personal feelings in front of the king and secondly because the source of the sorrow is the king's own edict prohibiting further work on the walls of Jerusalem.

So when the king asks why are you sad, Nehemiah sends up a bullet prayer, "O God help me now" and then he plunges in! When you and I are all prayed up, that is, when our lives are bathed in fervent prayer, the communication lines between us and God are wide open and we can be constantly talking to him with these brief prayer bullets that communicate our reliance upon His providential leading and encourage our spirits with the assurance that what is happening is part of His good plan for us!

Perhaps it is in order here as well to note that careers in politics and government ought not to be considered inappropriate for Christians -- as though it would be utterly impossible for a person to follow that career track and remain honest and a man or woman of integrity! I cannot believe that it is any more difficult to be a person of faith in public service today than it was during the reigns of the Babylonian and Persian kings. I pray that God will raise up some of the finest of our young people of faith to be leaders in government and society for our next generation. Sometimes we are guilty of letting people believe that the only way you can really be effective for God is to be a minister or a missionary. God does not call everyone to what we erroneously call full-time Christian service (as if no one but a preacher or missionary serves God all the time!) He calls many gifted

people into all kinds of critical arenas so that he can be well represented in every sphere of human activity -- including politics!

Nehemiah said that King Artaxerxes granted his request because "the gracious hand of my God was upon me." The use of the very same expression that we found so frequently in Ezra's book shows us how close the connection is between these two leaders. When people spend enough time together they often start to use common language and expressions.

Nehemiah's leadership was also brilliant in that he had prayed and planned so well that he knew exactly what resources he would need. He needed safety and supplies. Jerusalem was impoverished and under attack. They did not have supplies to build a wall. They were hopeless to succeed if they could not get those resources. Nehemiah knew this - even from hundreds of miles away. So he had a master plan if Artaxerxes said yes.

Nehemiah asked for, and got, some letters from Artaxerxes to provide him with safe conduct and supplies. One of those letters was directed to Asaph, the keeper of the king's "forest." The people of Jerusalem could have never rebuilt the walls without this. They needed raw materials they could never afford. So Nehemiah brings both resources and hope.

Nehemiah is a great leader in this: He prays AND plans. Great leaders always do both. Some think that praying is unhelpful or planning is unspiritual. But wherever you see great leaders, you see both happening.

Nehemiah creates other action that exhibit leadership brilliance. Here they are.

- 1) Research - he gets the facts of the wall at night before he vision casts. Nobody can ever accuse him of 'not knowing what he is talking about.'
- 2) Vision Casting -- before the whole community, he gives a clear and compelling vision, highlighting the problem, the solution, and calling people to action.
- 3) Division of Labor - He assigns people to a portion of the wall that they will have ownership over. Later in Nehemiah, we learn people were assigned the portion near their own house - so they were motivated to do the work well.

Friends - everything rises and falls on leadership. Great leaders mobilize people to accomplish great things. Leaders put everybody into play. Leaders research, vision cast, gain resources and develop the plan.

What has God called you to lead - your family? business? small group? church? Leadership matters. Do it well!