

Nehemiah: Leading in Relationships wk2

REVIEW: Last week we began a series on Nehemiah, his life and his leadership. We saw a few characteristics of a great leader right away in the life of Nehemiah. The first was compassion. Nehemiah wept when he heard of what was taking place in Jerusalem. Then Nehemiah responded in prayer. In that prayer we see that Nehemiah had a right view of God - reminding Himself that even though things look bleak, God is faithful. He had a right view of himself - a sinner before a holy God. Something we too often gloss over in life. Then he remembered the promises of God. Finally he prays to be a part of God's solution and success for the plan.

TRAN: All that in just one little chapter. The life of Nehemiah is quite compelling, and I think we will all get a lot out of it.

INTRO: This morning will be a study in leadership and relationships. Nehemiah had a relationship with God - the eternal authority. He also had a relationship with the king - his immediate superior. Between God's plan, and Artaxerxes plans was Nehemiah, kind of trapped in the middle. So today as we walk through just the first eight verses of chapter 2, we will pull out lessons we see from Nehemiah in these relationships.

- I. The setting of Nehemiah's request - v. 1-4
 - A. We talked last week about the month of Nisan
 1. It was about 4-5 months after Nehemiah heard what was taking place in Jerusalem
 2. The implication is that Nehemiah was praying over those months for success with the king to go back and help Jerusalem
 - B. When we look further at verse 1 it says, "when wine was brought before him, I took the wine and gave it to the king"
 1. Now, the thing you need to know about the Persians is, they loved a good wine tasting
 - a) Well perhaps not really a wine tasting - that implies a little more sophistication
 - b) They liked to drink!
 - (1) Don't believe me, read Esther 1
 - (2) For 180 days the king showed off his wealth
 - (3) Then he threw a week long party
 - (a) This is Artaxerxes dad, by the way, Xerxes
 - (b) And the text says that when he was "high in spirits"
 - i) He was not just happy folks
 - ii) He was drunk

Nehemiah: Leading in Relationships wk2

- (c) And what he did next was command the Queen to come dance for them wearing “her royal crown” - the implication being ONLY her royal crown - which is why she refused
- (4) Are you catching what I am saying about the fact they liked their drinking parties
- 2. Artaxerxes was no exception, so he is having a party
- C. When Nehemiah brings him the wine, Artaxerxes notices Nehemiah’s appearance
 - 1. Nehemiah admits that he had never been sad in the presence of the king before
 - a) And who want a sad clown at a party - not very fun
 - b) But the other reason to be careful of your demeanor in front of the king is that kings could be very mean
 - (1) The kings were often suspicious of disloyalty
 - (2) So even something as simple as a sad face could be misunderstood, and arouse suspicion
 - 2. The king takes notice
 - a) You are not ill, are you?
 - b) This has to be “sadness of the heart” - you’re depressed - Nehemiah’s inner feeling is coming out in expression - the Hebrew literally is, “Why is your face so bad”
 - (1) Not sure how to take a question like that
 - (2) Hey, why is your face so bad!
 - c) Commentators differ on what this means about the king
 - (1) Some say he was a keen observer, and had a humane side - he was worried about his cupbearer
 - (a) A little later we see that the king did not want his cupbearer to be gone too long
 - (2) Others say perhaps the king was getting angry
 - (a) They say this because of Nehemiah’s reaction to the king’s inquiry
 - (b) “I was very much afraid...”
 - (3) Personally, I opt for the first interpretation
 - (a) All things considered in the passage, it seems as if Artaxerxes had a genuine bond with Nehemiah
 - (b) Nehemiah’s fear, I think, was more about the request to be made - perhaps the king would find it disloyal
 - (c) Yet God was at work ahead of Nehemiah, answering his requests, and softening the heart of the king

Nehemiah: Leading in Relationships wk2

D. So Nehemiah responds - “May the king live forever! I’m sad because the city of my ancestors is in ruins”

1. First Nehemiah responds with a typical well wish to the king
 - a) Some think that Nehemiah did not mean it and was trying to butter up the king
 - b) However, it was a standard practice
 - c) And nothing in the text indicates that it was mere flattery
 - d) What it is, in reality is a sign of loyalty
 - (1) When it comes to a boss that you have, loyalty is one of the best things you can display
 - (2) Nehemiah is about to make a request that says, “Hey, I like you just fine king, but I want to leave”
 - (a) This is when the king needs to know that you are loyal
 - (b) That when you leave you will not rebel, but that you are still in the folds the kingdom
2. What is more interesting, and scholars debate, is that Nehemiah does not call his home city, Jerusalem
 - a) This may very well be because Artaxerxes years before ordered work stopped in Jerusalem
 - b) So rather than touch on what could be a sore spot, especially at the first mention of the request, Nehemiah referred to Jerusalem on personal terms
 - (1) Dale Carnegie used to say “If you want to gather honey, don’t kick over the beehive.”

E. The king responses, “So what is it you really want?”

1. And here we go - Nehemiah gets ready to roll

II. Nehemiah’s request - v. 4b-8

A. The first thing to note is that Nehemiah prayed

1. Nehemiah’s prayer in chapter one is a great model prayer, and one that I am sure he uttered in various forms many times over the past 4-5 months
2. Here, Nehemiah realizes that the time he has been praying for has arrived
 - a) So he offers a quick prayer for a successful request
3. Nehemiah’s prayers are a good reminder of what our prayer life should look like
 - a) We should have regular time of focused prayer like chapter 1
 - (1) Time in which we fully engage in prayer
 - (2) Focusing on who God is, who we are, confessing sin
 - b) We should also have those quick moments of prayer about daily life
 - (1) When we are about to enter a business meeting

Nehemiah: Leading in Relationships wk2

- (2) When we are about to talk with someone about a touchy subject
 - (3) When we are headed into the doctor's office
 - c) But our lives need BOTH
 - (1) It's like a marriage
 - (2) There are days you feel like you don't know if you are coming or going - and the best you can muster with your significant other is a quick pass in the house between events
 - (a) But your relationship cannot be sustained on that
 - (b) You must have more than just the quick moments
 - (3) So you need protracted time to talk and really connect
 - d) The same is true in prayer
- B. The second thing to notice about Nehemiah's request is that he made it a personal request
- 1. In a day and age when kings were constantly worried about loyalty, and provinces were being increasingly rebellious, if Nehemiah had framed this as a political concern, Nehemiah may have lost his head
 - a) In fact, his desire was flying in the face of a direct order from the king before (Ezra 4)
 - b) So asking to fortify Jerusalem would have been suicide
 - 2. But asking to rebuild the city he loved because that is where his ancestors lie, was to tap into what the king would understand
 - a) Esther did the same thing
 - b) She did not say, "There is a plot to kill the Jews, oh and by the way, you were unknowingly a part of it ya half-wit"
 - c) She said, "please spare MY life" - it was personal at that point
- C. Take note of Nehemiah's honesty as well
- 1. When the king asks what he wants, Nehemiah did not have some scheme to try to get to Jerusalem and work behind the king's back
 - a) "Oh, yeah king, I just need a little vacation time. I was thinking of going back to Jerusalem to take some pictures of my ancestors graves."
 - 2. No, Nehemiah told him, "My heart's desire is to rebuild the city."
 - a) The king did not have to worry that is what Nehemiah was up to - he knew
 - b) For the king's part, a good leader is willing to have those under them develop their own programs
 - (1) However, the king (or boss) does not like to be surprised by the plans of those under them
 - (2) So if you want to succeed with your boss, don't surprise him - make sure he is with you in what you are doing

Nehemiah: Leading in Relationships wk2

- D. Back to the story, the king, along with the queen ask some follow up questions
1. No one is quite sure why the detail of the queen is in the story - maybe they went in a side room from the party to have a discussion?
 2. So the king grants him this idea of rebuilding the city
 3. Then we see more brilliance out of Nehemiah - he asks for two things
 - a) Papers for safe travel
 - b) And papers to get supplies from the appropriate people
 4. This shows Nehemiah had a plan, or a goal in mind
 - a) During those 4-5 months of prayer, Nehemiah was not just praying - he was thinking of his goal
 - (1) This is all very important in keeping first thing first
 - (a) If you do not seek first thing first, you will wind up having lesser things that need attention, crowd out the most important things
 - (b) LIFE LESSON: This happens FAR TOO OFTEN in Christianity
 - i) Our prayer lives suffer because other pressing matters obscure the fact that prayer is a “first things first” issue
 - ii) Our devotional life, suffers
 - iii) Engaging in regular Bible study with others
 - iv) All first things first issues - and they get crowded out by lesser (still important, but lesser) issues
 - (2) The story is told of Yogi Berra, the catcher for the Yankees, who used to like to jaw with his opponents
 - (a) It was the World Series, and the Yankees were playing the Milwaukee Braves
 - (b) As Hank Aaron stepped up to the plate, Berra tried to distract him by saying, “Henry, you are holding the bat wrong! You are supposed to hold it so you can see the trademark.”
 - (c) Hank Aaron said nothing - and when the next pitch came, he hit it into the bleachers in left field
 - (d) When Aaron crossed home plate he looked at Yogi and said, “I didn’t come up here to read.”
 - (e) Aaron was not distracted with lesser things - first thing remained first
 - b) So Nehemiah began to plan during those 4-5 months of how to achieve this goal
 - (1) Nehemiah knew who the keeper of the king’s royal park was

Nehemiah: Leading in Relationships wk2

- (a) This is where they got trees for construction - probably the forest of Lebanon
 - (2) He worked out how long it might take to complete the task
 - (3) He knew he would need letters to get safe passage
 - (a) If he did not get those, he may never make it to Jerusalem
 - (4) He knew he would need supplies
 - (a) If he remembered the letters and forgot the supplies, he would make it there and have little resources to build with
 - (5) He knew all of this, so that when the time arrived to speak to the king, Nehemiah was prepared
 - (6) This is a great lesson for those that like to over-spiritualize leadership
 - (a) “Well, God told me to do this, so let’s go!”
 - (b) “How exactly are you going to get that done?”
 - (c) “I have no idea. I guess God will just provide as I go along.”
 - (d) Over-spiritualizing things
 - i) Even Jesus gave the parable and said, “no one starts to build a house without first counting the cost to see if he has all he needs to build it”
 - ii) Kings don’t go to war without planning things out
 - (7) “Dependance on God does not eliminate planning any more than it eliminates hard work.” - James M. Boice
- E. Through this story we can see Nehemiah’s dependance on God
- 1. Remember that while Nehemiah was planning, he was also praying
 - 2. Look at the end of verse 8
 - a) “Because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests.”
 - b) Nehemiah knew where his success came from
 - (1) It was not his fancy planning - and even that was guided by God
 - (2) It was God’s hand working on behalf of Nehemiah
 - 3. So Nehemiah did all he could toward the goal, but did not take the credit - it was God’s doing, not his
 - 4. This is something that, because of the age we live in, we can struggle to see and to do
 - a) We look at all the factors involved and say, “Isn’t it great that it all worked out.”
 - b) I could look at having two different mission trips get pushed from various locations for various reasons and say, “Isn’t it great that we caught the potential problems in time before something really bad happened?”

Nehemiah: Leading in Relationships wk2

- (1) The fact is, it has been God at work
- (2) God is re-directing our team as He sees fit, for who knows the reason
 - (a) Maybe we need to help a certain family or person there
 - (b) Maybe we are not as ready as we think we are for a certain trip
 - (c) Who knows - we don't but God does, and we will acknowledge His hand in what happens

III. The king's response to Nehemiah - v. 9

- A. We all know the king was favorable to Nehemiah's request, but look at verse 9 for a minute
 1. "The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me."
 2. Did Nehemiah request any of that? - No
 - a) Yet the king granted that to him anyway
 - b) Another sign that the king may have been fond of Nehemiah
 3. What does this make you think of?
- B. Turn to Ephesians 3:20
 1. "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us..."
 2. The story of Nehemiah is a reminder that the King we serve
 - a) Our King is far greater than Artaxerxes could ever have been
 - b) Our King is above all kings
 - c) Our King can do even more than we ask or imagine
 3. Nehemiah got some soldiers and some horses that he never asked for
 4. Imagine what we can receive when we ask in faith
 - a) When we ask, seeking to be a part of God's plan
 - b) God supplies all we need and more
 5. So think about the situations in your life now - what should you be asking for in faith
 - a) Is your marriage difficult, or beyond difficult?
 - b) Do you have a child that is walking all the wrong paths?
 - c) Is your job a difficult drudgery? Or no job at all?
 - d) Or maybe you are praying for positive things
 - (1) Praying for your college kid to meet a godly man or woman to start a life with
 - (2) Praying for direction in life for your kids
 - (3) Praising God for your spouse and how they help you grow each day - asking for more of the same
 - e) Now God says that He is able to do more than we ask Him
 - (1) And let's face it, the word "just" has crept into our prayer vocabulary like we are bothering God

Nehemiah: Leading in Relationships wk2

- (a) “Lord I just pray...”
- (b) Stop! You are not bothering God!
- (c) Ask for the big things because we have a big God!
- (2) God is able to do more than we ask (that’s Artaxerxes - he did more than was asked of him)
- (3) But God is also able to do more than we imagine!
 - (a) Hold on to that promise!
 - (b) God gave you the promise that He can do more than we imagine
 - i) Note that He did NOT say I WILL do more than you imagine
 - ii) He says He is able to do - that is power waiting to be realized
 - iii) So ask for it to be realized
- C. Let me do one other contrast with the king and prayer and we are done
 - 1. Nehemiah had to come afraid into the presence of the king
 - a) Because you never know what kind of mood you will catch a human king
 - b) If it ain’t a good mood, you are about to have a really bad day
 - 2. We, on the other hand, never have to worry about the mood we are catching our King in today
 - a) God is the same yesterday, today and forever
 - b) God wants to hear our requests
 - c) God desires that relationship from us
 - d) God desires to give His children good things

CONCLUSION: These are some amazing things from Nehemiah. We see his skills in leadership, his patience in prayer, his dependance on God, and his tact and honesty in his dealings with his superior. All of these things are great lessons for our lives. I encourage you to go home and re-read these verses from Nehemiah with these thoughts in mind. Look for ways in which the Spirit is directing you to apply these things to your life.