

Nehemiah: A Life of Leadership

INTRO: This morning we will be taking an extended break from our search for Shepherds. We are doing this for a few reasons:

- I have just hit you up with a lot of theology over the last several weeks. While theology may not be as directly applicational to our lives as we study the details of it, theology is still applicational in that it is our foundation. If we have right theology we have right practice. That is why it is so important to study theology - from theology comes practice.
- Second, behind the scenes of the sermons are the meetings of the constitutional committee. They are in the process of setting up what eldership will look like for THIS church.
- We told you there is freedom in many of the ways eldership is carried out in a church. Otherwise, Paul would have just handed us a nifty little instruction sheet and said, “He ya go. Do this.” So they are at work behind the scenes to prepare the way for what this may look like for First Congregational Church, and we need to give them time to work.

TRAN: So, we are going to start a series that complements our series on eldership. The life of Nehemiah is a great study in leadership in action. There are so many lessons we can learn from his life and work. So grab your Bibles and turn to Nehemiah 1 (p. 476).

I. Introduction to Nehemiah

- A. If you have sat through a book study with me at the beginning, you know there are certain things that we have to cover before we can dig into the study
 1. Namely, the who’s, whats, wheres, whys, hows - all those introductory questions
 - a) I remind you of this to help you know how to study a book of the Bible yourself
 - b) If you have a study Bible, most of these things will at the beginning of the book
 - c) And if you are new to the church or new to the faith, taking a book like the Gospel of Luke, or the Gospel of John is a great place to start
 2. So first obvious question - who wrote the book of Nehemiah?
 - a) If you said Nehemiah - thanks for playing but you are incorrect
 - b) The reality is we are not sure
 - (1) The leading candidates are Ezra or an editor
 - (a) Ezra has some problems for his authorship
 - (b) Probably the best candidate is an editor - and it may be the same person that wrote Chronicles

Nehemiah: A Life of Leadership

- (2) In truth, we just can't say for sure
- B. Next thing to make sure we understand is time frame in history we are talking about - so I am going to give you the fly by of Israel's history - starting with the Exodus
1. Most of us know the story, if for no other reason because of Hollywood: Moses leading the people of Israel out of Egypt
 - a) After leaving Egypt the people complained - why did we ever leave Egypt - we need to run back to Egypt
 - b) They were not trusting in God, they trusted in what they could see, namely the nation of Egypt that treated them horribly
 2. Fast forward through the wandering in the desert, they enter the promised land
 - a) They are happy for a while, but then they hit the period of the Judges
 - b) You can read all about it in the book of Judges, but I can give you the overview in a few steps
 - (1) Israel falls into sin, forgetting about God and His commands
 - (2) A foreign power comes in and oppresses Israel
 - (3) They cry out to God, and God raises up a Judge (or defender of Israel)
 - (4) They kick the foreign power's tail
 - (5) Israel returns to God
 - (6) Start cycle all over again
 3. This happens for years and years until Israel decides they want a king like everyone else has (instead of God being their King)
 - a) God reluctantly indulges them
 - b) And basically tells them they will regret this choice - sure enough they do
 4. Then you have the united kingdom under Saul, David, and Solomon
 5. Solomon's failures to follow God whole heartedly result in the kingdom dividing into two halves
 - a) The northern kingdom - Israel
 - b) The southern kingdom - Judah
 - (1) The north NEVER had a good king
 - (2) The south was up and down - good king, bad king, righteous king, wicked king
 - c) The northern kingdom gets conquered by Assyria in about 721 BC
 - d) The southern kingdom holds out a little longer because there was some semblance of godliness, but eventually they were conquered too - in 586 BC (the final deportation)

Nehemiah: A Life of Leadership

- (1) Leading up to the final destruction, Judah was fearful of the growing Babylonian power (which defeated Assyria)
 - (2) So they said, “We need to rely on Egypt! Let’s get help from Egypt!”
 - (a) Does this sound familiar?
 - (b) Part of the reason they were carried away into exile is because they refused to trust God for their safety
 - (c) They wanted to run for help to what they could see, rather than trust in the Greatest Power that they could not see
 - (d) A great lesson folks - We do not trust any power but God alone
 6. Now, Israel has been in exile for around 70 years - and they find a gracious king in power
 - a) During that 70 years you have such famous stories as
 - (1) The fiery furnace
 - (2) Daniel and the lions den
 - b) Babylon has been taken over by the Persians and the Persian king Artaxerxes is in control (show map of Persian empire)
 - (1) His father was king at the time that the story of Esther is playing out
 - c) Artaxerxes is having trouble with provinces rebelling and yet he has a policy to allow the exiles to go back to the land and set up their worship centers
 - (1) The idea being that they will be more loyal subjects if he allows them to have their religion
 - (2) However, the people in provinces are uniting and causing problems
 - (3) In the midst of this is where our story starts
- II. Nehemiah gets bad news - 1:1-4
- A. The month is Nov/Dec in Artaxerxes 20th year of reigning - that month will become important in a few minutes
 - B. Nehemiah is at the “citadel of Susa”
 1. Two things to note - first, kings moved around the empire according to the seasons - so at this season, Nehemiah is in Susa (it is due east of Israel located in modern day Iran - not too far from the Persian gulf)
 2. Second, Nehemiah is in the palace with the king
 - a) Drop to the last sentence in chapter 1
 - b) “I was cupbearer to the king”
 - c) Nehemiah was living life high on the hog
 - (1) He was in the palace

Nehemiah: A Life of Leadership

- (2) Eating the choicest of foods - no Big Mc's for him - it's filet, with the best vegetables, some wine, and not the cheap stuff
 - (3) Of course, he is the cup bearer, which means there is the specter of dying a horrible death by poison from tasting the king's food
 - (4) But otherwise it is a pretty sweet job
- C. While he is in Susa, Hanani and some other men come and give him the report of what is taking place in Jerusalem - the wall is broken down and the gates are burned
1. The importance of a wall cannot be overstated back in those days
 2. It would be a little like calling the police and having them tell you to wait until the break in is over, take some photos and text us later because Barney Fife is out on a run and Andy can't get away from the office
 3. The people in such great distress in Jerusalem are exiles that a previous king allowed to return
 - a) The walls are busted and the gates burned are probably because of the Samaritan residents
 - b) We will see them in Nehemiah's opposition later in the book
- D. In Nehemiah's reaction we begin to see qualities of a great leader emerging
1. Nehemiah's first reaction was compassion
 - a) He sits down weeping and mourning
 - b) Realize that chances are high that he probably knows few if any of the people there
 - (1) He is simply so burdened for his countrymen
 - (2) That his first reaction is tears and mourning
 - c) Which begs the question, what is our compassion level? Or more specifically, what is our compassion level for people we may not even know?
 - (1) Many of you long timers in the church may remember Lizzie Rinke - here is a picture of how you may remember her
 - (2) Lizzie was burdened like Nehemiah by people she never knew, and she made that her capstone project for school
 - (a) I asked her to come share today, but she was scheduled to help with worship at her church
 - (b) So instead, she made a video for us
 - (3) VIDEO: Lizzie & Zoe International
 - (4) I show you this for two reasons
 - (a) First, I want you to understand that we, as a church, support mission work that fights against human trafficking, and this is where your money goes that you give in the offering plate

Nehemiah: A Life of Leadership

- (b) Second, I hope God breaks your heart like He broke Nehemiah's, like He broke Lizzie's
- (5) This obviously is not the only area in which we can have compassion, in which God can break our hearts
- d) The city walls and gates being in ruin and his fellow Israelites being in danger was an issue that Nehemiah was passionate about
 - (1) What you need to ask yourself is what is my issue - what am I passionate about - what is God calling me to engage in
 - (2) You can't fight every problem in this world, but you can ask God to break your heart over an area of injustice and let Him use you to fight back against the darkness
- 2. The second way in which Nehemiah responded was in prayer and fasting
 - a) We don't talk often about fasting - and we won't talk much about it today because the prayer is the greater focus, other than to say, Nehemiah was fasting to remove distractions and focus on prayer
 - b) So for the rest of our time, I want to break down this prayer a little bit to see what we can learn

III. Nehemiah's prayer - 1:5-11

A. Nehemiah begins with a right view of God - v. 5-6a

- 1. Nehemiah is reminding himself of who God is
 - a) You are great, awesome
 - b) You are a covenant keeping God
 - c) But the fact is that the people of Israel are scattered all over
 - (1) How is God great?
 - (2) How is He keeping His promises?
- 2. Nehemiah is reminding himself NOT to view God by the circumstances that he is presently in
 - a) Is that not the easiest thing to do - sit in judgement of God because our circumstances are hard or difficult and so God must not be the loving God He claims to be
 - b) NO! We need to remember who God is by the many things God has done for us
 - (1) Remember that for us God sent His Son to take the penalty for our sins
 - (2) Remember that God called us to Himself - even when some of us were as deaf as doorposts
 - (3) Remember that God pursued us to be in a relationship with Him
 - (4) If we only view the circumstances around us, we are much like Peter walking in the water (or sinking into the water)

Nehemiah: A Life of Leadership

- (a) We take our eyes off of who God really is
 - (b) And look at the circumstances - that is when we falter
 - c) So Nehemiah is reaching back to a time before the exile that he could see more clearly who God is and what amazing things He has done - how God has been faithful
 - (1) Nehemiah starts with a correct view of God
 - (2) And when we are in difficult circumstances, we need to start at the beginning, at who God is
- B. Next, Nehemiah is reminded of who he really is - v. 6b-7
- 1. I confess OUR sins - I once had someone tell me you cannot confess the sins of others and yet we have several examples of people that pray on behalf of others in scripture
 - a) Nehemiah is confessing the sins of the people AND including himself
 - (1) He didn't say, they all are sinners God and I'm the one peach in a basket of rotting fruit
 - (2) He included himself in the group
 - 2. Even in verse 7 he says "We have acted wickedly... WE have not obeyed"
 - 3. We have talked about this before, but isn't it funny that when we truly get a proper view of God, we then get a proper view of ourselves?
 - a) Think about Isaiah chapter 6
 - (1) "I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on the throne..."
 - (2) The angels were calling out "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty, the whole earth is filled with His glory"
 - (3) Isaiah's response to this, "Woe to me, I am ruled. I am a man of unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips"
 - b) Revelation 1:12-18 (p. 1236)
 - (1) John falls at Jesus feet as though dead
 - (2) He gets a true vision of who God is and begins to see who He really is
 - c) We need to get a proper view of God
 - (1) We need to pray for a proper view of God
 - (2) We need to pray for God to reveal Himself to us, and to reveal our real selves to us as well
 - (3) When that happens, we, like Nehemiah will be confessing before God - which is the start of God being able to use us
- C. The third thing in Nehemiah's prayer is remembering the promises of God that apply for the current situation - v. 8-10
- 1. If we are unfaithful You will scatter us among the nations

Nehemiah: A Life of Leadership

- a) That has happened
- b) That is our current circumstance
- 2. BUT, if we return to You and obey Your commands, then You will bring us back
 - a) No matter how far we are scattered
 - b) No matter how bad it seems, You God have promised to put things back to the way You always wanted them to be
- 3. Putting this into our lives should not be too difficult
 - a) No matter how difficult the circumstance
 - b) Even in the darkest of times, God is faithful to do what He says He will do
 - (1) Now let's be careful not to turn God into a magical genie
 - (2) He is not there to turn everything into what YOU think it should be
 - (a) That has never been a promise in all of Scripture
 - (b) In fact, we have an example in Paul
 - i) Three times Paul prayed and basically begged God to remove this "thorn in the flesh"
 - ii) God's response was "My grace is sufficient"
 - (3) We have to remember that God does not owe us anything more than what He promised
 - c) This is why it is so important to know God's word - to know the promises of Scripture and how they apply
 - d) There are numerous examples of people in the Bible praying God's promises back to God
 - (1) It's almost like they are reminding Him - but God doesn't need the reminder
 - (2) In reality, they are taking comfort in God's promises
 - (3) And you can take comfort in God's promises too
 - (a) So if you are in a dark time - a dark place in life - hang on to the promises of God
 - (b) Pray those promises back to God to help comfort yourself
- D. Finally Nehemiah prays to be a part of God's solution, and success in the plan - v. 11
 - 1. God, please listen and respond to my prayer, and the prayers of others that revere your name
 - 2. Give me success before "this man" - the king
 - 3. Nehemiah has decided that it is time to act on behalf of those God has filled his heart with compassion for
 - a) Which goes back to who has God given you compassion for?

Nehemiah: A Life of Leadership

- b) Have you prayed? Have you prayed about how to act on their behalf?
 - c) Now what is holding you back from acting?
 - (1) Nehemiah is not JUST praying for a solution
 - (2) He realizes he IS the solution
- E. The importance of Nehemiah 2:1
- 1. “In the month of Nisan...”
 - 2. This is about our March/April (depending on the calendar used to determine)
 - 3. Remember when I told you at the beginning that the month of Kislev would be important
 - a) Nehemiah began prayer and fasting in Nov/Dec
 - b) He went before the king in March/April
 - c) He was persistent in prayer - he did not act until he felt God had revealed the path for him
 - d) Praying for four or five months on your passion is persistence
 - (1) Persistence and faith
 - (2) Two characteristics of a great leader
- IV. This is only the beginning
- A. We have hit on several characteristics of leadership
 - 1. Compassion
 - 2. Prayer
 - 3. Knowledge of and trust in God’s promises
 - 4. Persistence
 - B. There is a lot more to come, but let me finish by saying this: leadership does not mean being in charge of big things
 - 1. Too often we think that leadership is only for people running big corporations
 - 2. The biggest lie about leadership that has ever been told is that some people are just born to lead, and the rest, too bad
 - a) The fact is that leadership is a skill set, it can be learned
 - b) And whether you exercise those skills as:
 - (1) A stay-at-home mom or...
 - (2) A sales person or...
 - (3) A business man or woman or
 - (4) The member of a sports team
 - (5) Or whatever your situation is, learning leadership is a skill that is taught
 - 3. I pray that each of us would use our time in Nehemiah to grow in our leadership skills and let God use us where He may