

Nehemiah – Leadership Principles

Lesson 3 - Wisdom

Leader Notes

Read or have someone read the paragraph.

Nehemiah's wisdom made him a good leader. Nehemiah's relationship with God not only demonstrated his trust in God, but also was a sign of the wisdom God granted to him. This wisdom manifested itself in practical ways by which Nehemiah put it to good use for the task of rebuilding Jerusalem's wall. The following teach us about wisdom and being a leader.

1. 2:1-8

- a. Verse 2 – Why was Nehemiah afraid? Review again why Nehemiah might be afraid (see Prayer Section part 2a)

He had broken the cardinal rule of always putting on a happy face. This could have been very serious concerning job security or even his life.

- b. Verse 3 – What wisdom does Nehemiah show in this verse?

Nehemiah politely and deferentially dispelled any notion of a plot by immediately explaining the reason for his sadness.

Nehemiah did not mention Jerusalem by name because its enemies branded the city a hotbed of “rebellion and sedition” (Ezra 4:19). Rather he diplomatically referred to it as an ancestral burial place that needed to be preserved from desecration (v. 5; 3:16).

- c. Verse 4 – Why was this a great time to pray?

Nehemiah trusted God and as a man of prayer apparently prayed silently even as he made his request to the king. Luther noted that such resorting to prayer in an acute moment of need is God-pleasing and fulfills the Second Commandment.

Nehemiah's success in presenting his petition to the king may be attributed to the fact that he prepared himself ahead of time and this including praying to the Lord.

- d. Verse 5 – Read Ezra 4:21 and context and then tell why this was a great approach for Nehemiah to take.

Nehemiah's request of Artaxerxes was phrased as diplomatically as possible. He asked for the favor only if both it and he met the king's approval. He mentioned the region of Judah, but did not mention the city of Jerusalem by name, and he asked to rebuild Judah without directly mentioning the wall of Jerusalem. Artaxerxes had previously stopped the rebuilding of Jerusalem (Ezra 4:21). By not mentioning the city by name, Nehemiah was allowing the king to save face even as he reversed his decision. Nehemiah's use of prayer, his language, and his diplomacy reveal that he was both God-fearing and wise.

Here we learn the importance of loyalty and tact, how to avoid an unnecessary polarization, the technique of good questions, and the way the administration may be encouraged to adopt our ideas. Tact does not mean that we have to agree with everything a person says. Nor does it mean that we have to lie to keep from hurting others. Tact is based on the truth and character, and an understanding of human nature.

- e. Verse 6 – Take a guess as why the presence of the queen is mentioned.

Much scholarly discussion has been occasioned by Nehemiah's notice that the queen was present. Some believe this indicates that this was a private meal. However, Dan. 5:2 records that the king's wives were present at banquets, and the Aramaic cognate for the word "queen," that is used in this verse. Scholars have frequently noted that feminine influence was strong in Artaxerxes court, so the queen may be mentioned here because she was influential with Artaxerxes and was favorably disposed toward Nehemiah.

- f. Verses 7-8 – Why are these requests important?

When we take on a new assignment we should ask for the public clarification of our role so that others will not hinder us from carrying out the mandate given to us.

Having been granted his first request, Nehemiah became bolder and requested a number of items that would allow him to effectively carry out the task Artaxerxes had granted him. Although it might seem that Nehemiah was being pushy in asking for such things, that impression is mistaken, since the things for which he asked were necessary for him to carry out his commission. A letter of safe

conduct was most necessary in the western reaches of the Persian Empire, especially given the political opposition to Judeans in Jerusalem as exhibited by the account in the Aramaic document in Ezra 4:8-6:18 as well as the notice in Nehemiah 2:10.

2. 2:11-18

a. Verses 11-18 – What wise action does Nehemiah take in these verses?

In Ezra 8:32 Ezra reports that the travelers stayed in Jerusalem three days before they undertook any official work. Since they arrived in Jerusalem on a Friday, the next day would have been a Sabbath, when they could do not work. The following day, the first day of the new week, may have been used to settle in temporary accommodations, to rest from the trip, and to unpack necessary items.

Nehemiah relates that he took a few men with him, who no doubt were local Judeans who could help him find his way around the outside of Jerusalem at night.

The goal of Nehemiah's night inspection of the ruins was to organize the work so that it could be completed as quickly as possible after it began. In this way Sanballat and Tobiah would have little opportunity to organize their opposition.

Nehemiah took only one mount, perhaps to avoid the appearance of leading a military excursion when he left the city.

All this once again points to Nehemiah's wisdom and discretion. He did not betray to the opposition the plans "God had been placing" in his heart. With only three days in Jerusalem, he may not have had time to learn who was trustworthy and who might have been secretly allied with Sanballat or Tobiah (cf. 13:1-9, 28). God calls believers, who are justified by grace alone, to exercise discretion in their dealings with other sinful people in this world, and God-given prudence sometimes leads believers to withhold information when its disclosure would be harmful to God's people and His plans (e.g., Josh.2; Is. 53:7; Amos 5:13; Prov. 11:12; 17:28).

Nehemiah's message was simple: the Judeans, including himself, were in dire straits, but it was now time to reverse this situation by rebuilding Jerusalem's wall. Note he uses the pronoun "we" and twice he uses first person plural verbs, "let's rebuild" and "we will no longer be exposed to shame." The dire straits were not only because Jerusalem was defenseless without a wall, but also because

they city was consequently exposed to “shame.” This Hebrew word is used elsewhere in the OT, especially in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, to describe the shame and derision that Jerusalem and its inhabitants experienced as a result of the Babylonian conquest and captivity. (Jer. 23:40; 24:9; 29:18; 44:8, 12; Ezek.5:14-15; 16:57; 22:4; Lam. 5:1; Dan. 9:16; cf. Ezek. 36:15, 30) The other nations knew that the Israelites had been punished by their own God, which is the worst form of humiliation for any people. For example, see the graphic picture of God shaming Jerusalem in the sight of other nations in Ezekiel 16:27-59.

Nehemiah’s motivation to rebuild the wall was to demonstrate that the God of Israel had finished punishing His people and how He was displaying His favor toward them. God rescued His people from the Babylonian captivity and now would remove their shame and disgrace. As long as the wall of Jerusalem remained in ruins, that disgrace would not be fully removed. Jeremiah had specifically linked the ultimate removal of Israel’s disgrace by the work of the promised Messiah and the new covenant He would establish (Jer. 31:31-34) with the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its wall (Jer. 31:38-40; cf. Ezek. 36:15, 30). (CC)

Nehemiah then reinforced his contention that now was the time to rebuild Jerusalem by explaining that God’s “hand” upon him had been “good” (cf. 2:7-8), as shown through the permission given by the Persian king Artaxerxes for Nehemiah to rebuild the city (2:5-8). By the reaction of the Judean leaders, we can see that Nehemiah’s Gospel encouragement not only persuaded the leaders, but also motivated them to encourage one another “for the good work” of acting upon the constructive opportunity that God had set before them.

- b. What are the steps of leadership in these verses? Why is the sequence important?

Nehemiah got settled personally. He did a low key but important assessment of what needed to be done. No doubt he laid his plans before the Lord and let the Lord guide his thinking. Nehemiah begins by focusing their attention on the problem. He also links himself with them by using the pronoun “we.” Nehemiah (1) checked things out in order that his decisions might be based on fact. (2) He aroused the interest of the people and wisely withheld details regarding his plan and purpose until he was ready to act. (3) He then convened a public meeting and gave everyone the opportunity of hearing him in person and of interacting with his idea. (4) He challenged them with the work to be done, (5) motivated them to undertake the task, (6) and encouraged them with assurance of success.

Nehemiah was wise enough to know that if he is to challenge the people to rebuild the wall, he must be prepared to set them to work at once.

- c. When have you or might you use these steps?

Thank those who are willing to share but don't force anyone.

3. 3:1-32
 - a. Scan the chapter and note the leadership principles.

In this chapter God has illustrated the basic principles of success.

1. **The principle of coordination. Each person knew where he belonged.**
2. **The principle of cooperation. Men from different places and walks of life worked together on the wall.**
3. **The principle of commendation. He paid the workers and took a personal interest in them.**
4. **The principle of completion. Each person completed the task assigned to him. The words "built" and "repaired" are in the perfect tense.**

- b. Go back over the principles and note under which circumstances you have used them and/or when in the future you may want to apply them.

This is personal work and don't force anyone to share.

4. 4:13-23
 - a. What wise strategies can be found in these verses?

Nehemiah posted men conspicuously in the areas that were the most vulnerable along the wall. (13)

Nehemiah found an effective way to reverse the declining morale of the builders. Instead of allowing them simply to fear the enemy, he armed them against the enemy. By equipping them to be active participants in the warfare, Nehemiah was boosting their morale and signaling to them that they could indeed complete the project. (13)

When a difficult situation arose he faced it objectively. He was sensitive to the needs of those within Jerusalem as well as the plots and schemes of those without. (13)

The best way to dispel fear is to remember the Lord, who alone is to be feared. (The Word of the Lord) (14)

Nehemiah followed these words with a call for the builders to fight for their families and homes in this verse. Through their newly configured vocation of armed builders, they themselves would be the instruments through which God would defend them. Since Nehemiah had arranged the builders by clans (4:13, they would be especially conscious of fighting for their families as they worked and bore arms together. (14)

By using his own men, Nehemiah was demonstrating that he was leading the way in supporting the rebuilding of the wall. He was not a governor who expected the people to do the work of his bidding without any sacrifice on his part. He did not argue that he could not spare his men. Instead he embodied Jesus' teaching that one who wants to be greatest must be servant of all. (16)

Their staying within Jerusalem enabled them to guard each other from any nocturnal attack, instead of leaving Jerusalem vulnerable if they had returned to their various villages. (22)

Nehemiah and his administration once again led by example. They were ready at all times. Despite the grime from the labor, they did not even change their clothes, and they always carried a weapon in hand. Likewise, Christians are to remain armed and vigilant in their spiritual warfare (23)

- b. Go back over the strategies and note under which circumstances you have used them and/or when in the future you may want to apply them.

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5. 5:1-19

- a. Scan the chapter and note the leadership principles.

Read or have someone read the two paragraphs below. The go to leadership principles.

Information: To pay the taxes and survive many of the poor had to borrow, often at exorbitant interest rates. In the Persian period the rates rose sharply from 20 percent under Cyrus and Cambyses up to 40 to 50 percent at the end of the fifth century BC.

Information: Debt slavery was not prohibited in the OT, but there were limits placed on it so that the poor would retain some rights. Israelites who were sold into slavery were to be set free in the seventh, Sabbatical Year, and the Jubilee Year, when all debts were also to be canceled (Ex. 21:2-11; Lev. 25:1-55; Deut. 15:1-18).

He was prepared to stop and listen. He saw the complainers as people, not as statistics; and they were more important than his production schedule. He knew from long experience that people who are deeply concerned over some personal misfortune or hardship cannot give of their best. He, therefore, encouraged them to air their grievances. (6)

Nehemiah wisely did not vent his anger in precipitous action. Instead he thought the situation over carefully before accusing the upper classes of breaking the Law of Moses by lending money at interest to fellow Israelites. Their action was in violation of, for example, Ex. 22:25-27; Lev. 25:35-37; Deut. 23:19-20; 24:10-14. Nehemiah probed beneath the surface issues to the real cause of their predicament. (7)

He called a mass meeting of all the people (Ezra 10:1). This would bring information to all and stop or slow down any gossip. (7)

By pointing out that their abusive actions were not only inhumane, but also violated the Word of God, Nehemiah was able to strip the creditors of any defense. (8)

Nehemiah appealed to their status as people of God living under the Gospel. The fear of Yahweh can denote fear of God's wrath (Prov. 24:21-22). Most often, however, it also denotes a positive, filial relationship to God through faith that causes a redeemed person to want to please the heavenly Father (Prov. 8:13). God, who bestows blessings for temporal and eternal life and leads people to wisdom, initiates, sustains, and completes this positive relationship. (9)

Nehemiah did not simply call on others to repent and live in the light of the Gospel. As a true leader, when confronted with a sin in which he himself had participated, he admitted that he, his family, and members of his administration were among those who were guilty of lending money for profit. This confession of sin demonstrated his true contrition. Moreover, he showed true repentance and faith when he included himself in the mandate to live in a new way that conforms to God's Word. (10)

The wisdom and effectiveness of Nehemiah's leadership is shown in the creditors' pledge not only to return the property and repay the interest charged, but also their pledge not to seek any additional interest. However, Nehemiah was well aware that in any group some will try to find ways around the letter of the law. Therefore, he took two further actions to impress upon the people the seriousness of their pledge. First, he called the priests to administer oaths to each creditor, solemnizing the pledge, most likely by invoking God Himself to ensure that all of His people complied. Second, Nehemiah also took on the character of a prophet, many of whom performed symbolic actions that reinforced the message of their prophecies. (12)

Nehemiah symbolically shook out the folds of his robe, calling on God to enforce the oath by shaking out from the land any creditor who did not keep his word. These two actions insured the response of the people both vocally ("amen") and in actually carrying out their pledge. (13)

Nehemiah tells the reader that he waived the food allowance for all twelve years of his tenure as governor. This was in contrast to previous governors who taxed the people the equivalent of forty shekels per day for their provisions and allowed the minor officials who served under them to add further to this tax burden. (14)

Nehemiah's behavior as governor was guided by principles of service rather than by opportunism. (16)

Dwight D. Eisenhower said, "In order for a man to be a leader he must have followers, he must have their confidence. Hence the supreme quality for a leader is unquestionable integrity. Without it, no real success is possible, no matter whether it is on a section gang, a football field, in an army, or in an office. If a man's associates find him guilty of phoniness, if they find that he lacks forthright integrity, he will fail. His teachings and actions must square with each other. The first great need, therefore, is integrity and high purpose." (16)

These two verses outline the great expense that Nehemiah has as a governor, as he was expected to supply provisions for members of his administration as well as visiting officials in the Persian Empire. The daily amount of food is impressive and seems more than could be eaten by 150 men. However, they were joined by others, and Nehemiah's table probably saw several hundred people on a daily basis. Yet despite this, Nehemiah exacted no additional taxes. Instead he exercised restraint in order to lessen the people's burden. This is further

confirmation that Nehemiah was quite wealthy and must have had other means of income, perhaps including his family's estate in Judea (cf. 2:3). (17-18)

- b. Go back over the principles and note under which circumstances you have used them and/or when in the future you may want to apply them.

This is personal work and don't force anyone to share.

6. 6:2-13

- a. What were the enemies of Nehemiah hoping to accomplish?

Their ultimate goal was to keep Jerusalem from being protected from physical harm. They also wanted their influence on religious matters to continue.

- b. What traps does Nehemiah avoid?

Nehemiah avoided being lured outside of Jerusalem and to the edge of the territory of Judea in order to assassinate him. (2)

Nehemiah does not mince words. He calls the report a lie. He may have sent his own messenger to the Persian king to assure him of his loyalty. (8)

He tells the readers that he knew what his enemies were thinking; by intimating him they thought they would be able to paralyze him with fear and stop the project. (9)

Nehemiah apparently visited Shemaiah in his own house because of his confinement. Once there, Shemaiah offered both advice and what Nehemiah 6:12 calls a "prophecy." This purported prophecy was intended to panic Nehemiah into seeking protection in the temple building. Since Nehemiah was not a priest, he was not permitted to enter the temple itself, and so if he were to comply with this "prophecy," he would be putting a higher priority on his own human fear and on his safety than on the sanctity of God's temple. (10)

Nehemiah wisely understood the consequences of following Shemaiah's fabrication. He would have committed a grievous and cowardly public sin, and his reputation would have been ruined. Then it would have been difficult for the discredited governor to continue to be supported by the people. The Judeans would know that he feared his human opponents more than God and he had let

that fear overrule his faith and decide his course of action. Had Nehemiah fled to the temple in fear for his life, his speeches would have rung hollow from which he urged his fellow Judeans to be courageous in the face of the threats from Sanballat and Tobiah. (13)

- c. How does his trust in God help him in this situation?

Nehemiah was influenced by the Word of God and followed God-given principles rather than a policy of expediency. This required courage and discernment. Discernment comes from our personal exposure to the Word of God.

- d. What are some learnings you can apply in your life?

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You may want give the class participants some time in class to begin doing some thinking on this matter. If anyone wants to share fine, *BUT remember this is for their personal growth and no sharing is to be expected!*

- 7. This section has been a study of the application of wisdom on the part of Nehemiah. It is evident that Nehemiah was a great student of the Scriptures. This helped him immensely in dealing with various situations. The purpose of study is usually to learn something. Serious learning often leads to change. Keeping this line of thought in mind give some thought to the following personal study questions: (Note that is for your personal life only.)
 - a. How much quantity and quality time do I spend in Scripture? (consider when, where and how you spend time meditating on God's Word)
 - b. What will I change in my Scriptural study?
 - c. How will I make sure that I will follow through?

