

A Study of Leadership

- Nehemiah 1:1-4
- As much as Esther is a book about obedience and the providence of God, Nehemiah is a book about leadership and the providence of God. Esther obeyed even at the risk of her own life and God worked through that obedience to save His people. Nehemiah stepped up to lead when he heard about the conditions back home in Jerusalem, and God worked through that leadership to restore a city and a people. Leadership is and always has been the missing piece, when things are going in the wrong direction. We see it in a nation. We see it in a family. We see it in a church. As you know, Cindy and I were at a conference last week with churches that are part of the Household of Faith fellowship of churches, led by our good friend Eric Burd. The common theme and cry of the hearts of the men from those churches was the same: we need more leadership. Several of the churches are in a position now where there is only one elder, because the other elder or elders have left the church. Because of that, most of the churches' walls have been broken down or breached, and the churches are suffering. It reminded me of some of the very same struggles Antioch has gone through, mostly in years past. It made my heart ache for them, want to pray for them, and want to help any way we can as a church. In another example, almost two weeks ago I was on a conference call with four men who are leading a church in Jacksonville, FL. Several of them came to our conference in 2012, and then 14 months ago, they started a church in the Fernandina Beach area. Their questions for me for 90 minutes were almost all about leadership, what it should look like, and how it should work. They are just getting started, just one year old, and they want to build walls that will last. Both of those events, and starting a series in Nehemiah, led me to look back at Antioch's past. Let me ask you some questions, and please raise your hand for all that apply.
- How many of you were at Antioch when we met in Whitley Auditorium? Raise your hands. McEwen Dining Hall? How many were at Antioch when we met at Arts Alive? How many were there when we spent a summer at Smith Elementary School? How many met with us at the New Directions Bldg? That was our first meeting place. How many of you only know Antioch as gathering at 1600 Power Line Rd? There's no place like home, and we are not there yet, but God has built some good walls for us over the years. And I believe with all my heart that the best years for this church are still ahead.
- My prayer is that as we walk through this book together over the next several months, God will do at least these three things in our lives. First, I know that He will teach us valuable lessons us about leadership. Go to any bookstore and you will find dozens and dozens of books on that topic. One that shaped my thinking early in ministry was *Spiritual Leadership*, by Oswald Sanders. But this book, Nehemiah, was the first. Second, I know that God will deepen our walk with Him in prayer. Nehemiah is going to model for us a deep dependence on God, and we will see that mostly in how he prayed. Third, this is a story about God's people coming together to work hard at building something for the glory of God and the good of His people. Since I believe with all that I am that the church is the sum and substance of God's plan for the world, I hope we will be stirred into action in some very specific ways as we study this book together. One specific way is this: I want us as a church to be intentional about inviting the unchurched people we know into our homes, into our home groups, and into the Sunday morning gathering. Unchurched. Some are unchurched because they are not saved. Let's invite them. Some are unchurched because they are disillusioned, bitter, maybe even angry at 'church.' Let's invite them, too. Let's get involved in their lives, and encourage each other in that as we stand side by side to build the wall. This book will help us get a vision for that.
- Before we even look at the text for this morning, let's put this book in historical context, and some of that will be a refresher for you since we were just in the book of Esther.
- **The Times**
- I was never good at memorizing a bunch of dates in history class. Part of my problem was that I usually *skipped* history class at UNC and worked on my tan instead. But I do remember 1066. That was a very important date. I just don't remember why, except that it had to do with somebody

named Norman. Or was it William? But here are four important dates that give us context for our story.

- **586 BC** – The Babylonians sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, and took the Jews into captivity. (Jeremiah and Isaiah, among others, were raised up by God to warn Israel of this event. They were ignored or imprisoned.)
- **539 BC** – Cyrus, King of the Medes and the Persians, defeated the Babylonians. This is huge because Cyrus allowed many of the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild the temple. Zerubbabel led this first return to Jerusalem.
- **458 BC** – Ezra leads a second group of exiles back to Jerusalem, to establish the law. This was during the 7th year of Artaxerxes, who was the son of Ahaseurus (Xerxes), whom you know as the man married to Esther.
- **445 BC** – Nehemiah leads a third group back to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall and to institute lasting religious and moral reforms. This was during the 20th year of Artaxerxes. And during the 29th year of Antioch Community Church.

- **The Man**

- We don't know much about Nehemiah if we just look at these first four verses. We know that he was the son of Hacaliah, but the problem is we don't anything about Hacaliah. Except that he had a son named Nehemiah who is pretty important in the Bible. Which is just a reminder that God doesn't care about our pedigree nearly as much as we tend to: where we grew up, where we went to college or even if we went, who our parents were. Those things don't limit God in the least.
- We know the story begins in the month of Chislew. You know when that is, right? Well, we are entering it today. Chislew was the month of November-December. Maybe Nov. 15-Dec. 15. We know this was the 20th year of the reign of Artaxerxes, which was 446 BC. The expedition to Jerusalem, which takes place in chapter 2, will start in the following spring, in the year 445 BC.
- We know that Hanani is a brother to Nehemiah, and most believe that means he was literally his brother by blood, and he has made the journey of 1000 miles from Jerusalem to Susa. And that's when Nehemiah gets the report in verse 3 that changed his life forever. **Read verse 3.**
- This is where we really start to get to know the man, Nehemiah, and what he was made of. Verse 4 tells us that when he heard this about Jerusalem, and the people living there, he sat down and wept and mourned for days, and continued fasting and praying. His heart was moved with compassion for the suffering of others 1000 miles away. When I read this, I was reminded of the men's retreat when we were praying together on Saturday morning, and praying through Psalm 34, and verse 17 says, "When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles." Scott began to pray for our brothers and sisters all over the world who are persecuted for their faith, like I think Nehemiah prayed for his brothers and sisters who were living in the rubble that used to be the city of God. And the room was silent as we all entered into his prayers and his tears. There was no pretense to it and no attempt to 'sound good' or to teach something: Scott was broken over the suffering of others. Bob Pierce who founded World Vision in 1950 and Samaritan's Purse in 1970 used to say, "Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God."
- Paul could have been thinking about Nehemiah when he wrote, "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." (Philippians 2:4)
- What else do we know about Nehemiah? If you have read ahead, you know from the last verse of the chapter that he is...the cupbearer to the king. That means he had it made. A cupbearer was not the one who set the table, or made sure that everyone had a cup to drink from. The cupbearer was like a drink bodyguard for the king. His job was to choose and to taste the wine to make sure it wasn't poisoned before bringing it to the king. It was a risky job but one which gave him almost constant access to power, which meant he also had a position of influence. Nehemiah was one of the most trusted men in the king's inner circle. So, what does the most trusted man in the king's circle do, when he heard the news from his brother? He prayed. Just like Mordecai did. Just like Esther did.

- The most trusted man in the king's inner circle...prayed. We will get to know Nehemiah as a man of decisive action. And when we think of leadership, we often think of it only in those terms. Getting something done. All the clichés come to mind. Don't just stand there, do something. Stop talking and act. Lead, follow, or get out of the way. Or, "Do something, even if it's wrong." But Peter Drucker, whom I would normally NOT quote said this: "Effective executives do first things first and they do one thing at a time." That's a good principle for leadership, and we clearly see that the first priority for Nehemiah is prayer. As we learned last week, we don't see prayer right if we say we will pray about the battle. Prayer IS the battle. Nehemiah knew that, which is why he went there first. He knew, as AJ Gordon said, that you can always do more than pray after you have prayed, but you can never do more than pray until you have prayed. And EM Bounds said: "What the church needs today is not more or better machinery, not new organizations, or more novel methods; but men whom the Holy Spirit can use- men of prayer, men mighty in prayer."

“The story of Nehemiah is famous for its marriage of the wholly spiritual with the unashamedly hard-headed.” (Derek Kidner) God works with His people by giving them favor, certainly, but He helps them also by giving them a heart for vigilance and hard work.