

I don't know if you have ever read the Book of Nehemiah in the Old Testament or even heard of Nehemiah, but he is one of more interesting characters in the Bible. Over the years, I have studied the leadership styles of various biblical characters and found Nehemiah to be one of the most gifted administrators and leaders. He was a God-fearing man and God had a special task for him.

Before we begin our discussion of Nehemiah, let me give you some background into the Book of Nehemiah. As you read the Old Testament, you find that the Israelites were constantly disobeying God. They would be faithful for a while, then drift away from God to worship idols. As a result, they were conquered by the Babylonians in 586 BC. The Babylonians completely destroyed the City of Jerusalem and took many of the Israelites into captivity to Babylon where they spent 70 years in exile. By the time of Nehemiah, the Persians had conquered the Babylonians and were now in control. Nehemiah had an extremely important role as a servant in the king's court; he was the king's cupbearer which meant that he tasted all the wine before the king drank it to make sure no one poisoned the king. Because of his loyalty and dedication, Nehemiah had earned the trust and respect of the king.

God's call to Nehemiah came when one of Nehemiah's brothers traveled from Jerusalem to Persia to see Nehemiah. Of course, one of Nehemiah's first questions was: "How are things back home in Jerusalem?" Nehemiah learned that the walls of Jerusalem were still in rubble following the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, the gates of the city were burned, and the people were downcast and disgraced. The lack of fortified walls around the city left the people defenseless against their enemies. After 70 years, no one had tried to rebuild the walls of the holy city. Upon hearing this news, Nehemiah sat down and wept; for days, he mourned, fasted, and prayed to God. He knew that God was calling him to go back to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls. But he needed the permission of the king to undertake this project. So, he prayed to God for guidance. Listen to his prayer which is recorded in the first chapter of the Book of Nehemiah, verses 4 through 11.

Read Nehemiah 1:4-11

Of course, the man whose favor Nehemiah is seeking in the last verse is the King of Persia who had previously ordered a ban on rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. Nehemiah knew that he needed God's guidance and protection if he was to bring up this controversial subject to the king. So, Nehemiah waited until the time was right and continued to serve as the king's cupbearer. Now the relationship between the king and Nehemiah was such that after a while the king noticed that his servant was sad and depressed about something. So, the king asked Nehemiah what was wrong; Nehemiah said a quick prayer and then asked for the king's

permission to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls. With God's intervention, the king not only granted Nehemiah's request, but also asked him what resources he needed to complete the task.

The king then appoints Nehemiah as the Governor of Judah. Although Nehemiah knew what God wanted him to do, he didn't announce his project when he first arrived in Jerusalem. As a good leader, he wanted to gather all the information available and to assess the situation firsthand before taking action. So, one night, he secretly inspected the walls around the city to determine what was needed to complete the task.

Once he had completed all his homework and had all the facts, then he met with the people and offered the challenge of rebuilding the walls. Different groups of people were assigned portions of the wall and gates nearest their homes. Many faithful people from diverse social backgrounds and skills worked side-by-side on the wall. Of course, as with any project, they faced opposition and criticism. There are always naysayers who say it can't be done, and then there are those who don't want it done. Opposition is to be expected when God's will is to be carried out.

Nehemiah's leadership ability and patience were definitely challenged, but he remained focused and faithful. As a result, the wall was finished in just 52 days; did you hear that, the entire wall around the city of Jerusalem was rebuilt in 52 days!! Now this was no small task; they didn't have bulldozers, cranes, and heavy equipment back then; it all had to be done by hand. We all are aware of projects around our homes, community, state, and nation that are still waiting to be done after over a year. This was a remarkable feat!

Now as an old highway engineer, I can relate somewhat to this. When we started the reconstruction of the Big I in downtown Albuquerque, we set a goal of completing the project in 2 years. The reconstruction of an interchange of two major Interstate routes such as I-25 and I-40 usually took 3-4 years; doing it in just 2 years was unheard of. At a pre-construction meeting with potential contractors, some of the contractors said that it couldn't be done. The Chief Engineer of the State Highway Department stood up and told them that the Highway Department did not want anyone to bid on the project who didn't think it could be done, and if they felt that way, they should leave the meeting; no one left. We finished the project in 23 months, a national record. We could have done it in 22 months but one of the subcontractors went bankrupt and had to be replaced. In addition, the project was completed basically within budget.

So how do you do this? How did Nehemiah completely rebuild the walls around Jerusalem in just 52 days? First, Nehemiah had a vision, a vision from God. There's an old saying: "Vision without action is merely a dream; action without a vision just passes the time; vision with

action can change the world.” George Washington Carver said that “where there is no vision, there is no hope.” Before he told the people about this vision, Nehemiah developed a plan of action; a plan based on the facts and a personal inspection of the condition of the walls. He did not go into this project half-cocked. Going out in faith does not mean in a haphazard manner.

Unfortunately, many Christians today undertake a project in the Lord’s name without careful planning. Jesus told us in Luke 14:28-30: “Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it. For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was unable to finish.’”

Second, the people were united in completing this task. As I noted earlier, people from all walks of life were working together side-by-side. Another reason that they were united was that Nehemiah was right there with them in the rubble, up to his elbows in bricks and mortar. In the second chapter, Nehemiah stated: “Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer suffer disgrace.” Note that he stated “us” and “we,” not you build the wall and I’ll supervise. He got his hands dirty with the rest of the people. That’s the sign of a true leader; something that is missing in our world and churches today. Many Christians want to serve God, but only in an advisory capacity; they are not willing to get their hands dirty.

They were also committed to the project; even when faced with opposition and criticism they kept going. In working for the government and now in ministry, I have found that anytime you undertake a project there will be some opposition. I wish I had a dollar for every time I have heard the statement: “it can’t be done.” One of the main opponents of Nehemiah and the church today is the devil and his agents. The devil rarely attacks a church that is dying or complacent, but if a church is growing and doing the Lord’s will there will be opposition, both from outside and believe it or not, from inside the church. However, if you are doing God’s will, He will give you the strength and ability to keep going and finish the project. Someone once told me that the most successful people in the world are not the most talented or educated, but those who persevere, who keep going when the going gets tough. The cry of the people in Jerusalem was “keep mixing the mortar and hand me another brick.”

Finally, Nehemiah and the people trusted in God. Corrie Ten Boom said: “Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.” Now trusting in God is not a passive state of mind, where you sit back and wait for God to do all the work. It is actively walking in faith, taking action, and leaning on the promises of God.

As you study the Book of Nehemiah, you quickly discover that Nehemiah was a man of prayer; he truly understood that the Lord was the source of his strength. Leaning on the promises of God to Moses that the faithful would return to their homeland, he prays to the Lord prior to his

meeting with the king. When the king asked him what was troubling him, Nehemiah paused again for a quick moment of prayer before he responded. He practiced what the Apostle Paul would write about centuries later in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 – to pray without ceasing; to take everything to God and to maintain constant communication with God.

When he and the project were ridiculed, Nehemiah prayed to the Lord. When threatened and insulted, Nehemiah did not address his opposition directly. Instead, he discussed his feelings with the Lord. He didn't get caught up in anger or a shouting match like a lot of people do today; he kept his cool and his wits about him. Often when we are insulted or verbally attacked our first reaction is to fight back. Instead, the servant leader follows the advice that James recorded centuries later: "Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger." Nehemiah being a wise leader understood this; he went to the Lord before he spoke or acted. Throughout the story of Nehemiah, we find him always seeking the Lord's guidance.

A servant leader prays, and then acts. The prayer does not have to be long; the prayer can even be silently expressed during the middle of a conversation. Prayer before action places the action in the right direction: toward God's will on earth. There's an old statement that goes like this: "Nothing is ever settled until it is settled right, and nothing is ever settled right till it is settled with God." God invites us to talk it over. Isaiah 1:18 states: "Come now, and let us reason together." John Wesley said: "God does nothing but by prayer, and everything with it." But here's the key point; each time Nehemiah prayed he took action. Once we have consulted God, He expects us to do our part. When we pray, we must be willing and available for the task at hand.

As I studied the story of Nehemiah, it dawned on me that if Nehemiah could rebuild the entire walls of Jerusalem in just 52 days, think what we could do as individuals and a church in 52 weeks over the next year. As Jesus stated in Matthew 19:26 – "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." If we follow the principles outlined by Nehemiah, we can do anything. If we have a vision, work together, are committed, and trust in God we can make a significant difference for the Lord right here at High Desert, and even in our individual lives and families.

Now the big question is – what are we going to do? To be honest, I don't really know. What I do know is that God has put it on my heart that there is something or several things we could be doing to build His kingdom here in Rio Rancho. Some of the first things that come to mind are: how do we grow in our personal relationship with the Lord; how do we grow as a church; how do we increase our outreach efforts; what new outreach projects are needed; how can we improve our ministry to the surrounding neighborhood and especially to our senior population; and how do we bring more people to know Jesus Christ?

There is no one clear answer. But remember what we just discussed; before Nehemiah took any action, he went first to God in prayer. So, here's what I want you to do during the coming summer months, earnestly pray where God is leading us as a church and you as an individual. What does He want us to do? Spend time alone with God in prayer. Also, when you gather during classes, choir, or other activities, take time to pray on this. Then let's see what God has planned for us. Let me know what you think. Remember if God wants something done, it will be done; we just have to be willing to be His workers. Then we, like the people, in Jerusalem can say: "Keep mixing the mortar and hand me another brick" as we build God's kingdom here at High Desert. Amen