

# Nehemiah: Servant Leadership

## by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

### Prayer for Illumination

Gracious God, give us humble, teachable, and obedient hearts, that we may receive what you have revealed and do what you have commanded. Amen.

### Background

Nehemiah is a book of new beginnings. He shows us how to rebuild not only a city, but a community from the rubble of exile. The book of Nehemiah is a memoir—so to read this book is to read Nehemiah’s journals. And so we get a sense of his emotions and motivations like no other book.

The book opens with “the words of Nehemiah,” but this opening could be just as accurately translated, “the actions of Nehemiah.” Nehemiah is one of the greatest living examples of leadership in the Bible. His gifts of administration, mobilization, and discernment are inspiring to see in action. The name Nehemiah means “God comforts” and that’s exactly what Nehemiah does through word and deed. For Nehemiah, faith was not merely a mental exercise. It was a way of life that made an impact for good in the world.

Nehemiah was not a priest or scribe, but a cupbearer to King Artaxerxes of Persia during the exile. In a daring plan, Nehemiah asked if the king might grant him leave from his post to help his beleaguered people rebuild in the Holy Land. The king honored Nehemiah’s request and even gave him considerable resources to accomplish his goal. Nehemiah would eventually serve as Jerusalem’s governor for twelve years. Nehemiah orchestrated the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls in an astounding 52 days, even while being hounded by hostile forces.

But as we’ll see in our passage, Nehemiah didn’t come to Jerusalem just to build *walls*, he was there to build a *community*. In our scene, there was a need for not only building walls, but mending fences between his own people.

The men of Jerusalem’s energies were diverted from raising crops to raising walls. The unpaid volunteer work on the walls took a financial toll on many of the farmers. A famine in the land brought these strains to a head. Walls between the people were being erected that separated them from one another: the walls of wealth, class distinction, and exploitation.

Loans from fellow Jews had to be taken out just to put food on the table. When the loans couldn’t be paid on time, property and goods were seized. The wealthy were acting less like family and more like pawnbrokers, predatory lenders, and the repo man towards the poor. Children were separated from parents and had to be sold into slavery to pay off debts. Vulnerable daughters were taken advantage of by the collectors. Plus the King of Persia’s taxes were breaking the back of the Jewish community.

The wealthier Jews that purchased their fellow Jews from slavery to foreigners were now bringing their brothers and sisters back into slavery—to themselves.

Governor Nehemiah would need to summon all of his leadership skills very quickly before everything imploded.

*Let's hear the word of the Lord from:*

### **Scripture: Nehemiah 5:1-19 (NRSV)**

Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish kin. For there were those who said, "With our sons and our daughters, we are many; we must get grain, so that we may eat and stay alive." There were also those who said, "We are having to pledge our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine." And there were those who said, "We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king's tax. Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been ravished; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others." I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these complaints. After thinking it over, I brought charges against the nobles and the officials; I said to them, "You are all taking interest from your own people." And I called a great assembly to deal with them, and said to them, "As far as we were able, we have bought back our Jewish kindred who had been sold to other nations; but now you are selling your own kin, who must then be bought back by us!" They were silent, and could not find a word to say. So I said, "The thing that you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God, to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? Moreover I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us stop this taking of interest. Restore to them, this very day, their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the interest on money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them." Then they said, "We will restore everything and demand nothing more from them. We will do as you say." And I called the priests, and made them take an oath to do as they had promised.

I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, "So may God shake out everyone from house and from property who does not perform this promise. Thus may they be shaken out and emptied." And all the assembly said, "Amen," and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised. Moreover from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people, and took food and wine from them, besides forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God. Indeed, I devoted myself to the work on this wall, and acquired no land; and all my servants were gathered there for the work. Moreover there were at my table one hundred fifty people, Jews and officials, besides those

who came to us from the nations around us. Now that which was prepared for one day was one ox and six choice sheep; also fowls were prepared for me, and every ten days skins of wine in abundance; yet with all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because of the heavy burden of labor on the people. Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

## **Sermon – Nehemiah: Servant Leadership**

Don Miguel Ruiz tells a story about a Master who was teaching a crowd of people. His message was so inspiring and filled with such gentle wisdom that everyone was touched by his words of love. There was a man who hung on every word the Master said. To show his gratitude, he invited the Master to his home for a meal.

The Master looked into the man's eyes and with a beautiful smile said, "Prepare everything. I will be there." Then the Master walked away. Excitedly, the man hurried home to make the meal. He purchased the best wine and the finest food. He bought beautiful clothes to lavish upon the Master.

Then he heard a knock on the door and to his surprise it was not the Master, but an old woman. She looked into his eyes and said, "I'm starving, can you give me a piece of bread?"

The man was disappointed because it wasn't the Master, but still he said, "Please come in." He seated her at the Master's place and served her the food he had prepared for the Master. The woman ate and was touched by the man's generosity and said her goodbyes.

Not long after there was another knock. It was another stranger. This one had been traveling a long time in the wilderness. He looked into the man's eyes and said, "I'm thirsty, do you have anything to drink?" Again, he was disappointed because it wasn't the Master, yet he said, "Come in" and seated him at the Master's place and served him his best wine. The man thanked him for his generosity and continued along his journey.

A third knock was heard. The man opened the door and once again it was a stranger—this time a child. The child looked into his eyes and said, "Sir, I'm freezing. Could you give me a blanket to cover my body?"

The man was disappointed, yet he looked into the child's eyes and felt a deep love for the little one. "Yes, come in—I have clothes for you." The man gave the child the clothes he was going to give the Master. The child thanked him and went on his way.

He prepared everything again for the Master and waited very late for him to come—but there was no knock at the door. The man knew he asked much for the Master to come to his humble home. Something important must have come up that the Master had to attend to. Although he didn't

come, at least the Master said that he *would* come. That was enough for the man. He finally decided to go to bed, after putting away the wine and the food.

As the man slept he had a dream. In his dream, the Master appeared to him. "Master, you remembered! You came to my home! You kept your word!"

The Master replied, "Yes I am here, but I was here before. I was hungry, and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was cold and you covered me with clothes."

The man woke up filled with joy. The Master loved him so much that he visited him not once, but three times to teach him about love. When you feed the hungry, when you give drink to the thirsty, when clothe the naked, you give your love to the Master himself.

Nehemiah reminds me of the man in this story. Leadership for Nehemiah was a labor of love for his people, particularly the most vulnerable. His life and leadership was shaped by the Great Commandment: the love of God and the love of neighbor.

Nehemiah models for us the The Four C's of Leadership:

**First**, Nehemiah shows us leadership with *conscience*.

Nehemiah refused to do what was "merely legal" if it also exploited others. Nehemiah said, "*This is not right.*" Paul would say something similar later to the Corinthians, "This is permissible, but not beneficial." In other words, Nehemiah believed in following the law—the spirit of the law, not the letter of the law. The spirit of the law keeps in mind others, not just a minority's self-interests. We're a community, we're connected.

Nehemiah called for a jubilee in a time of famine because *it was the right thing to do*. It was a time for gifts, not loans. "Let us abandon our claims to property and restore our brothers and sisters to their land and goods." Nehemiah chose generosity at personal cost over personal gain at the expense of others.

Nehemiah reminds us that Judeo-Christian leadership is ever mindful of the vulnerable—particularly women and children. Nehemiah's bottom line wasn't money, it was people. He came up with short-term relief and then a more modified sustainable long-term solution to the problems.

In addition, Nehemiah could have burdened the people with more taxes and fees to pay for his costs of entertaining diplomats, like the previous governors did—but he didn't. Nehemiah led with conscience.

**Second**, Nehemiah shows us leadership with *courage*.

Nehemiah knew that leadership faces conflict, rather than ignoring it or running from it. Courageously facing conflict in the community is important because it helps to clarify vision, purpose, values, and the community's mission. Conflict is a reality check because it can force us to deal with our false pretenses that everything's just fine and dandy. Nehemiah knew he needed divine help to face these challenges, so he was a man of prayer and a man of action. His regular prayer was, "But now O God, strengthen my hands...." Prayer emboldened him to faithfully carry out his calling.

Prayer gave Nehemiah the guts to say no to those who would distract him from God's purposes for his people. Prayer helped him see God's hand at work.

Nehemiah also led with gusto. In another passage he famously said to his people who were tired, "Be not afraid ... Go now and feast on rich food and sweet drinks. And send a share to all who cannot provide for themselves ... Let there be no sadness, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

**Third**, Nehemiah models for us *clever* leadership.

Nehemiah was emotionally intelligent. He was able to experience his emotions and then control his feelings, rather than be controlled by them. He harnessed his anger in order to bring constructive change in a measured and mature manner.

He called a meeting that brought everyone together—rich and poor alike. This was everyone's problem. By talking about the elephant in the room with the whole community, the people of Israel could make needed changes.

And he made sure that people were held accountable—himself included. He had some skin in the game. In a time of conflict, he challenged the leaders, but also gave them room to save face.

**Fourth and finally**, Nehemiah demonstrated *character* in his leadership.

Nehemiah talked the talk and walked the walk. He led by example and took responsibility. He admitted when he was part of the problem and refused to play the blame game. Instead, Nehemiah chose the high ground. He inspired, rather than chided, the leadership to be governed by higher motives and the better angles of our nature.

Like Nehemiah, when we lead with integrity, people will trust us. The fruit of that trust was the people worked "vigorously and to good purpose."

Immanuel, let's follow the example of Nehemiah—who inspires us to use our influence for the good of others with conscience, courage, character, and Christ-like craftiness.

And all the people said ... AMEN!

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