

What Makes A Leader?

Nehemiah 4 is a great chapter of The Bible. As I read through it, I really felt God speaking to me. As you read it and then use this talk, see what God is saying to you..

You may not think of yourself as a great leader – you may think “I’m only a teenager” or “only someone from a small town.” But often a leader is just someone who has an influence.

Remember what 1 Timothy 4:12 says – “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.”

So you can be a person of influence (speech, life, love, faith) no matter what age or where you’re from! It may be something simple like speaking up for teens in your church or neighbourhood, it may be doing something radical for God and challenging older people, it may be forming a band. But you can have a great influence. Joyce Meyer told a true story about how 5 teenage girls from the US got together and raised \$24,000 for charity. That is the power of influence..

Let’s look at a few keys of leading and leadership from the example of Nehemiah..

Prayer and looking to God first

When Nehemiah heard that his enemies (Sanballat and Tobiah) were causing even more trouble, where did he turn? Did he consult his friends, or his favourite book? No, he went straight to God in heaven. Nehemiah’s enemies were insulting God’s people. But more importantly they were trying to stop God’s work being done and were disrespecting God. What do you do when any kind of trouble comes? Too often we look everywhere except to God! Nehemiah prayed (talked to God). In verses 4-5 of chapter 4, we read the prayer Nehemiah prayed – he asked God to hear his prayers, to see the trouble his enemy was causing and to deal with them, and deliver God’s people.

“Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders.”

Our pattern of prayer should be the same: talk to God, ask him to hear us, tell us what’s going on (God knows, but wants us to talk to him) and then ask him to help and come through for us and for his kingdom.

Don’t just pray, do something

If you’re like me, then there are times where instead of doing something practically, we just pray. Now let’s get this straight – prayer is a powerful weapon. When we pray, God moves and does extraordinary things to advance his kingdom and transform people’s lives. But prayer without action can be an excuse. Often, God asks us to pray and do something.

Other times, all we can do is pray. For example, you may hear that someone isn't well. What do you do? First, you can pray about it and give it to God. But then you could send them a text, give them a call, send a card, message them. Your prayer works with a practical action. Put together, God's power is released in 2 ways! If you just pray, that's great but the person has missed out on knowing you're looking out for them.

James says this (but about faith) in James 2.15-16: "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?"

In the same way, prayer without action is often not as good as prayer with action.

Nehemiah prayed, then he took action. The Bible is unique in that it expresses amazing things without getting over-inflated or flowery. God's Word just says it as it is – then moves on! Nehemiah 4.6 simply says, *"So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart."* Something stunning happened – spurred on by the abuse and prayer, the people of Israel built up the wall around Jerusalem to half its height, with the people all working with all their heart. We'll see more about this in the next few verses..

"But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the men of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat."

Again, when Nehemiah's enemies (and more importantly, God's enemies) heard that building work was steaming ahead, they got stressed again. Nehemiah's response was exactly the same except in one thing. This time, we learn that **'we'** prayed to **'our'** God. It seems that this time, prayer involved lots of other people. When the going gets tougher, what we need is united prayer. Again and again in the Bible, we find that the power of group prayer more carries extra power, especially when we come together united and in agreement.

Story – when a friend's baby in her womb was in danger because of bleeding, the couple prayed and nothing seemed to happen. But when they got a group together with them who prayed in unity, mother and baby were completely healed. Now that baby is a healthy little boy. That is the power of unified prayer.

Standing firm in the face of opposition and negativity

Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, "The strength of the labourers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall." Also our enemies said, "Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work." Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us."

Sometimes we respond in the right way and some things appear to get worse. Nehemiah had prayed to God, got people together, the wall was being rebuilt. But, things seemed to

have moved to another level of opposition. This time, the attack came from within the people, not just from outside. One of the enemy's greatest strategies against the church is to divide it from within. How many churches have split and been broken because of issues from within the church. Sometimes, this has to happen (for example, where a church is consistently preaching false teaching). Other times, it is unnecessary and not from God. This is why Jesus prayed that his disciples would love one another and that this love would be the mark of his church (John 13.34-35).

In Nehemiah, we find that the circumstances seemed to be created a sense of despair and hopelessness among the people (another attack Satan uses, let's be wise to this one too..) We can often look at the mess around us in our lives or other people's lives and wonder whether it's really worth it. This is where a person of influence / a leader steps in and steps up. You see, Nehemiah saw the bigger picture. Right back in Nehemiah 1, he'd felt the pain of hearing Jerusalem was in ruins and he spent days fasting and mourning (being sad) before God. Often the greater the pain, the greater the call to do something. Nehemiah had a deep sense of destiny and could see the rebuilt Jerusalem. This passion for God and his people is what spurred him on to inspire others to dream and come together.

So what did Nehemiah do? "Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows" (verse 13).

Nehemiah again took decisive and wise action by standing armed guards on the lowest points of the walls, with the armed men standing alongside families. Far from dividing the work of God's people, the attack from the enemy plus Nehemiah's leadership, actually brought the people together.

Giving glory to God

At all times through Nehemiah, God is not only called on by Nehemiah and the people, he is also credited by Nehemiah. In verse 15, we read Nehemiah's actions with God's help sent the enemy into retreat.

"When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his own work."

Notice all the thanks go upwards. Nehemiah tells us what action he took, but always credits God for the success. Many of us as individuals, churches and definitely some 'big ministries' need to sit up and take note. When the author and preacher Derek Prince died, it was a sad day. What I loved about Derek Prince was his refusal to take credit for what God had done through him. He didn't demand money from people or big himself up. Instead, like Nehemiah, God was the one who was recognised.

God actively looks out for us, protects and defends us daily, even from things we don't see. So we need to be thankful to him every day, and make sure that we always credit God and point to him. When I did a show in school recently, lots of students were coming up saying how much they loved it. But God has brought me to a place where people's praise doesn't faze me. Instead, I know it is God who gets the glory and I always try to make sure he knows too!

Listening and responding

Another hallmark of a person of influence is someone who is ready to listen and respond to people's cries. We can't always respond and people can be unreasonable and expect the impossible, so we have to judge how to respond carefully. But, Nehemiah was ready to hear people's voices. When the people cried out in fear, he listened and then responded by placing armed guards around the walls as we've seen. But what interests me is how he responded. Sometimes leaders are poor at responding. Other times they respond but don't communicate why they do certain things and it makes people feel alienated. But Nehemiah gives an example of where good listening, communication and action came together to galvanize (bring together) the people.

In verse 14 he said, "After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes."

Nehemiah told the people that the awesome Lord was in charge. He spoke to their individual and practical concerns (your brothers, sons, daughters, wives, homes) and reminded them not to be afraid.

Standing Strong

"From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. But the man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me." (verses 17-18)

Nehemiah didn't let up his guard. He was aware of the threat and kept the defences up while continuing to rebuild the wall. We need to do the same. We live in a world where all the God-given barriers that protect us are coming down. God's truth is being kicked down by people's opinions and people doing whatever they want / feel is right. As this happens, societies are beginning to crumble with breakdown, crime, and evil things happening across the globe. God gave the 10 Commandments as a 'wall' to the people of Israel (and to us today). Inside this wall, we know that we have real freedom and can enjoy our lives, safely walking with God. But when we step outside of what God says, the walls are broken down and we are no longer safe or really free.

Today in the church, our mission (should we choose to accept it..) is to help rebuild the walls around our communities and nations / places where we live and work like schools. Through prayer and living out God's life as Christians, talking to people in love about Jesus – we can help see lives rebuilt and walls repaired. At the same time, we need to stay strong and be prepared. Ephesians 6 tells us about the 'body armour' of God and how we need to take up these weapons of defence and attack so we can stand strong. Just as the police or military put on their body armour and get kitted out with weapons, so we must do so in a spiritual way – prayer, faith, knowing who we are in God..

This is just what Nehemiah encouraged the people to do – stand strong, keep on working but be prepared for the enemy attack – and to attack the enemy.

The Word

Notice how the builders worked with *'his sword at his side'* (verse 18). What an interesting description.. I think we can use this example practically today. In the old times, Christians used to call the Bible, 'the sword'. This was taken from Ephesians 6.17 where the Bible talks about the *"sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."*

The builders on the wall stood with their swords by their sides. The swords were close to them, ready for use. What about us today in the church? When I go to church on a Sunday, I see that many people never bring their Bible with them. Many others don't even read their Bibles every week, let alone every day! This is dangerous. If we don't have the Word inside us, God can't talk to us like he does to others who read their Bibles; we aren't as protected from the enemy; we don't have the same resources to get through life; don't know the truth; can't stay within God's limits so well; won't be able to attack the enemy strongholds and won't have the same power available to us!

When I was in the army cadets, if we left our SA80 rifle unattended, we'd be in serious trouble. You see, the army knows the necessity of carrying round your main weapon all the time. Yet so often in the church we don't do this. This is one reason why we are so powerless. Don't be a loser – carry, know and love the Word of God. It may well save your life.

Looking ahead and responding

Then I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!"

The Christian life isn't just about responding to what's going on around us. It should also be about looking ahead, seeing what may reasonably happen and taking action to address this. If you are a leader or person of influence, this is doubly important as you're responsible for other people as well as yourself. This may be in a family, a club, a Christian Union, or a church. As the work on the wall progressed, the work spread out as there were only half the men doing an increased amount of work. Therefore, Nehemiah decided to let everyone know that everyone needed to listen out for the trumpet. When they heard it, they would all go to its sound and fight. But it would be God fighting for them. The trumpet would act as a rallying call for the people to come together.

The Bible lets us know that when we love God and are serving him, God will work all things for good (Romans 8.28). For Nehemiah and the people, the opposition they faced only made them stronger and brought them together. This is true in countries where Christians are persecuted. I've often thought that the most effective attack on Christians is to make them prosperous and rich as this creates an apathy! But where God and his people are attacked, God works it for good and makes his church even stronger and we become more than conquerors.

It is also significant that the trumpet was used. Apart from its practical use and loud volume, it is significant that we read about the trumpet in Revelation – and about the fact that music does something powerful.

Our worship in music on Sundays and in the week, should bring us together in worship and ready to do God's work. It should change our hearts and minds as we enter God's gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise (Psalm 100.4).

Staying Focused and Committed

Verses 21-23 end Nehemiah 4 saying this:

"So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out. At that time I also said to the people, "Have every man and his helper stay inside Jerusalem at night, so they can serve us as guards by night and workmen by day." Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water."

Paul talked about running a race and getting the prize..

1 Corinthians 9:24 – "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize."

Galatians 2:2 – "I went in response to a revelation and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. But I did this privately to those who seemed to be leaders, for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain."

Galatians 5:7 – "You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?"

Philippians 3:14 – "I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

Hebrews 12:1 also talks about this, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

The Prime Minister of Britain in World War II was a great leader called Winston Churchill. He made this famous quote:

"Never give in. Never give in. Never, never, never, never – in nothing, great or small, large or petty – never give in, except to convictions of honour and good sense. Never yield to force. Never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy."

Nehemiah applied this lesson and saw the walls of Jerusalem rebuilt. God is challenging us to do the same – keep going, keep running, don't give in, don't give up. In due season we will reap a reward if we don't quit.

Galatians 6.9 says, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."

Prayer

Lord, we thank you for your Word and we thank you for the way your Holy Spirit speaks to us and brings your Word to life in our hearts. Father, we ask that this talk would change our hearts and transform our lives so we can become more like you and be men and women of influence for your glory and fame. Help us, strengthen us, fill us with your love. Help us to be sensitive to your voice, to love you, your Word, seek your Kingdom and obey your voice. Amen.