

# **COURAGEOUSLY UNSELFISH: THE EXAMPLE OF NEHEMIAH**

## **Nehemiah 2:17-20**

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Today we are beginning a new five week worship and sermon series designed to help us think about leadership. As we have created this series, we are assuming that each person here is a leader. Some of you are leaders in the workplace, either in a position of authority over many people or over a few; some are leaders of clients, of patients; some are leaders in a classroom. Some of you have leadership responsibilities in volunteer organizations. All of us are called to be leaders among our group of friends and relatives. And each of us is called to lead our own lives with integrity and excellence. One of the ways we become better leaders is by choosing carefully the people we emulate. In these five sermons we will be lifting up people from history and people from the Bible to see what we can learn from their lives. We aren't putting these people on pedestals, but we are shining a light on certain characteristics each of them embodies. Some of the people you probably know something about. Others may be new to you. Like today's figure: Nehemiah.

You don't have to study much history to see one of the common themes: countries become aggressive and take over other countries. Names change, borders change, and the ordinary people become dispossessed. It's one of the dominant themes of the Old Testament. In the year 587 BC, the country of Babylon invades Israel, takes over Jerusalem, the capital city, and destroys the temple. The people of Israel are forced to leave their homeland and live in Babylon. They were captives there

for 70 years, living in Babylon so long that, for some, it was the only home they ever knew. For some, it began to feel like home.

In the year 538, King Cyrus of Persia announces that the exile is over. The Jewish people can go home again. First order of business is to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. When the temple is rebuilt, people will feel like order has been established. They'll have a place to gather, a place to worship, a place to remember who they are. A priest named Ezra is first put in charge of the project. He proves to be incompetent. Nehemiah volunteers for the job, and he receives the assignment. Once he arrives in Jerusalem, he shows his work ethic and his character. He defies the opposition of enemies from all sides. You see, Israel's neighbors weren't so sure it wanted Israel to rebuilt and become strong again, and perhaps threaten them. So everywhere Nehemiah turns, there's opposition. But Nehemiah defies it all, and he oversees the rebuilding of the temple walls in 52 days. Nehemiah serves as governor of the region for 12 years; he is described as "ruling with justice and righteousness."

I have never preached about Nehemiah before. Here are the two sentences that inspired me to lift him up in our series about leadership – a two-sentence description of him: "In contrast with the pale and ineffective personality of Ezra, Nehemiah stands forth as a vigorous and successful man of action. Through his energy, self-denial, and shrewdness, he brought new life to the helpless and pathetic Jewish community in Jerusalem, and may have saved it from extinction."

Nehemiah was a faithful, strong and effective leader, a good model for us as we consider how it is we can lead our own lives and lead in our areas of responsibility in ways that help us maintain our values and convictions.

As we look at characteristics of leadership over the next five weeks, we will look at five different individuals and see what their lives and examples teach us. In all things, we look to Jesus, and as we consider what kind of leader he is, we learn the term, “servant leadership.” Jesus said, “I came not to be served but to serve.” Servant leaders are humble; they are not out for their own gain, for power or for reward, but to make things better for the people they can influence. Servant leaders may run into opposition. One’s motives may be attacked. Servant leadership is not always easy.

Nehemiah is a biblical example, from the Hebrew scriptures, of servant leadership. Nehemiah was sent by the king of Persia to govern a portion of Israel. His main task was to rebuild the walls surrounding Jerusalem so as to provide security, a sense of identity, and protection for the people of the city who had returned from Babylonian captivity. This would establish the conditions for the reordering of community life around the temple.

Here’s what Nehemiah’s job was like. Imagine that Northeast Ohio was invaded. Everyone who lives here now has to leave. When our grandchildren return, after 70 years, all of the infrastructure is gone. They need to rebuild, everything from roads to sewer systems to power plants, from schools to churches to public buildings. Everything has been destroyed. In Nehemiah’s case, it was necessary to rebuild the wall around the city so that enemies couldn’t invade.

How do you summon the energy and will for a project that massive?  
The first thing Nehemiah does is build commitment; he’s not a lone ranger. He knows he can’t possibly do the project by himself; he needs the buy-in of the public. Listen to his words again: <sup>17</sup> Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem

lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace.”<sup>18</sup> I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me.

In other words, Nehemiah takes the time to explain the situation to the people. The king has sent me here. I've prayed about this assignment. We have the resources to do this.

And the people respond immediately. Then they said, “Let us start building!” So they committed themselves to the common good.

He doesn't coerce people. As a servant leader, he shows humility. He has confidence that God has called him to do the project.

But it's not smooth sailing. In the very next verse, we see that Nehemiah has opposition. There were three men watching Nehemiah work. They were from a neighboring town, and they didn't want to see Jerusalem rebuilt and strong again. So they come in and try to break Nehemiah's confidence. They ridicule him, tell him he can't possibly accomplish such a huge project.

In the face of this opposition, a servant leader does not retaliate. Nehemiah prays for God's help and does not let the opposition distract him from his ultimate purpose.

If you were to continue reading, you'd see that these three enemies don't go away. They just step up their opposition. Their threats turn from words to violence, but Nehemiah does not back down. In the sixth chapter, we read this conclusion: “So the wall was finished...in fifty-two days. And when all our enemies heard of it...they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of...God.”

Nehemiah displays three characteristics of servant leadership:

1. He believes that his work is ultimately for the glory of God, and for the good of those people being served.

It's perhaps not always as easy for us to see that our work has a higher purpose. Often when people talk to me about their frustrations on the job, they talk about how it seems pointless or meaningless. Sometimes the first step in leadership is finding the right perspective. In what way can you bring more light, more life into your organization? In what way can your work lift people up rather than bringing them down? When you find that perspective, you can ask for God's help.

2. Nehemiah believes in the pursuit of excellence in leadership and management.

It's not about being perfect, but we bring glory to God when we give all of our efforts our very best.

3. Nehemiah reminds us to keep our focus on achieving positive results. We all run into opposition, sometimes it's internal opposition. Sometimes we're our own worst enemy. We become tired, frustrated, burned out. God calls us maintain our own inner strength, caring for our selves so that we can serve others. Whether the opposition is internal or external, servant leaders find the strength to persevere.

Servant leadership goes against the grain. We are being taught to admire people who exemplify very different values. Media shines the spotlight on celebrities, people like Hollywood actors or sports figures. None of them can become celebrities if they don't care about promoting themselves. They're not bad people, but they're caught up in a system that promotes different values. You can't make it into TV or movies unless you have an agent who promotes you. You can't deal with the pressures of

professional sports unless you have an agent who takes care of you. The whole system revolves around ego. How can this person spend more time in the limelight than someone else?

Some of our celebrities, to be sure, care about making the world a better place. They donate time and money to charitable causes. But they are not examples of servant leadership. We need to look elsewhere to learn how to tune our hearts towards service.

Servant leaders show courage in the face of odds that seem insurmountable, fortitude in the face of opposition, and they care more about serving others than promoting themselves. Nehemiah inspired the people he led, so that they themselves said, "Let us start building!" And they devoted themselves to the common good. How badly does our world need more leaders like that?