

What the Best Leaders Do

Nehemiah 2

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Bellevue Baptist Church

From the time I was young, I've wanted to be a leader. Not everyone feels that way, because leadership comes with a high cost, and not everybody feels called to pay that bill. Leading people can be hard, and discouraging. When I was a young pastor, I had an older man in the church warn me. He said, "Son, when you sit high on the saddle, you're gonna get shot at."

That's a classic piece of "outlaw wisdom." It's the old-school way of saying that the higher you rise or the more you stand out, the bigger the target on your back becomes. And it's true. When the buck stops with you, there will always be those who oppose you.

Years ago, football coach Kirby Smart said this about leadership—that anyone who wants to lead must be willing to pay the costs. He listed three:

Costs Associated with Leadership

By Kirby Smart

- **You'll have to make hard decisions that will negatively affect people you care about.**
- **You'll be disliked despite your best efforts to do the best for the most.**
- **You'll be misunderstood and not always have the opportunity to defend yourself.**

I've served as the leader of three churches now, and one Christian organization, and I can tell you—there have been moments when I have had to pay all three of those bills to stay in the business of leadership.

But if God has called you to be a leader, then you have no choice but to do what he says. And there's no better book in the Bible to learn about leadership than the one we explore today: Nehemiah. Over the past 30 years, I have panned this river for gold many times and come up with something new with every visit.

Today, as we jump into the story, we'll learn four things that the best leaders do.

Before I read the passage, let me set the context. Nehemiah was a man who was born into exile. 140 years before this story begins, the Jews had been conquered and forced to leave their homes in Jerusalem. God had allowed his people to come under discipline because of their

idolatry. Nehemiah grew up in Babylon, and while he never knew anything different, He had a dream in his heart to one day return to the Promised Land. That trip, should he ever make it, would require 900 miles with a slow-moving caravan. To put that in perspective, it's about a thousand miles from here to Denver. Can you imagine the difficulties of walking that far, with a large team of young and old people? Just arriving would be a miracle, let alone rebuild a giant wall around the city, which God would call him to do.

Nehemiah is like an Old Testament Cinderella story really—this obscure Jewish man had risen up in the ranks of the Babylonian government, becoming cupbearer to the king. He filled the highly trusted role as the taster of the royal drinks, ensuring that the poison of an assassin had not slipped into the cup. And so, the king trusted Nehemiah with his life.

Let me summarize chapter 1 so we can jump right into the action. In chapter 1, Nehemiah first hears that the Jewish Holy City, Jerusalem, is in ruins. It had no protective wall, leaving it exposed to robbers and raiders.

When you picture that wall that required fixing, don't see something waste-high, but a wall that was way over your head. Historians believe this wall around the city was 25-40 feet high in some places—high enough that you couldn't hoist another man up and over it. That wall was the way the ancient people locked their doors at night.

When the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem 150 years before, their battering rams had broken down huge areas and the holes needed to be patched. For months, Nehemiah had been praying: God make me a leader. I'm willing to pay the personal costs!

And then, in Nehemiah 2, that door swings open. Watch what happens, 2:1...

During the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was set before him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had never been sad in his presence, ²so the king said to me, "Why do you look so sad, when you aren't sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart."

I was overwhelmed with fear ³and replied to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should I not be sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"

⁴Then the king asked me, "What is your request?"

So I prayed to the God of the heavens ⁵and answered the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor with you, send me to Judah and to the city where my ancestors

are buried, so that I may rebuild it.”

⁶The king, with the queen seated beside him, asked me, “How long will your journey take, and when will you return?” So I gave him a definite time, and it pleased the king to send me.

⁷I also said to the king, “If it pleases the king, let me have letters written to the governors of the region west of the Euphrates River, so that they will grant me safe passage until I reach Judah. ⁸ And let me have a letter written to Asaph, keeper of the king’s forest, so that he will give me timber to rebuild the gates of the temple’s fortress, the city wall, and the home where I will live.” The king granted my requests, for the gracious hand of my God was on me.
Ne 2:1–8

As I said before, in Nehemiah 2, we see the four things that the best leaders do. Let’s work that list.

What the Best Leaders Do

1. They wait on God’s timing. (2:1)

Notice chapter 2 starts with: *During the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was set before him...*

The month of Nisan is four months from the start of this story, when Nehemiah first heard about the state of that wall. As every believer should, Nehemiah waited on the Lord for directions rather than rushing ahead and forcing a project to start prematurely. We see this often in Scripture: A) God provides a leader with a picture of the preferred future, and B) a good amount of time must pass before the vision becomes a reality. God is not in a hurry as we are.

In case you didn’t know, one of the residues of the Holy Spirit, one of the ways we know the Spirit has full control over our lives—is patience. This is the fourth fruit of the Spirit, remember? Love, joy, peace, patience. As we grow in the Lord, we learn to wait on His timing. Warren Wiersbe says it well:

True faith in God brings a calmness to the heart that keeps us from rushing about and trying to do in our own strength what only God can do. We must know not only how to *weep and pray*, but also how to *wait and pray*. –Warren Wiersbe

When Nehemiah heard that the wall was in ruins, the Word says in 1:4, that he wept and he prayed. In chapter 2, it shows that he kept praying, even when he didn’t see immediate results.

Confession is in order. I hate to wait. And I hate being put into circumstances where I have no choice but to wait. Our family moved to Shelby County last year and a few months ago, I

received a letter saying that the licence plates on all of our vehicles have to be renewed, in person, at the DMV.

So I reluctantly went, and of course, I sat for several hours. When I finally stepped up to the window, I had all my information carefully prepared in my manilla folder. I felt relieved when the lady at my ticket window was quite nice. It was all going well, until she said, “Sir, you can only renew three vehicles in a single visit.” We have four kids who drive. I have more than three vehicles. At that moment, I knew that I was going to get the opportunity to come back again, for another half day of sitting so that I might have a five minute interaction that results in tiny sticker being placed on the back of a car.

Sometimes waiting makes us want to cry. Nehemiah didn’t wait for four hours, he waited for four months, which probably felt like 8 months, because I’ve learned this—when the Lord puts a dream on your heart, your spirit feels ready to enter that Promised Land as soon as tomorrow. In those moments, when life moves slow, the Psalmist offers the challenge:

**Wait for the LORD;
be strong and take heart
and wait for the LORD. Psalm 27:14**

Are you in a season of waiting? Do you feel like God has placed a dream on your heart, but shown no interest in turning that dream into a reality? Has He given you a picture of a preferred future, but it feels like that vision is permanently on hold?

If your spirit says—YES—then the Lord may be teaching you what He taught Nehemiah. Wait for it. You will get that sticker, but mentally prepare for multiple trips to the DMV.

#1, the best leaders wait on the Lord’s timing. But the second thing they do is this...

2. They make bold requests. (2:4-8)

Look with me again, at v.4, what does the king ask when he sees his servant so sad? V.4...

⁴ Then the king asked me, “What is your request?”

And the Word tells us what Nehemiah does...

So I prayed to the God of the heavens ⁵ and answered the king, “If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor with you, send me to Judah and to the city where my ancestors are buried; so that I may rebuild it.”

That prayer is what we Christians call a hand grenade prayer. Pull the pin and toss it over. Nehemiah has no time to call a prayer meeting. The king says, “What is it that you want? And

in that moment, Nehemiah prays. We aren't told what He prayed, in those five seconds. Maybe "Lord, have mercy!" He throws up his prayer and then makes his bold request.

"King, if you are in a good mood (if it so pleases you), then send me on the trip of a lifetime. I get you: Let me go back to my roots. Let me take some people to the place where my great great grandfather was buried. Let me be one who will bring the spring back to my people, to rebuild that wall, and to restore our hope."

Nehemiah had prepared for that moment, clearly. For the past four months, while he waited, he wasn't just sitting on his hands, he had been doing his research, finding out exactly what the task would require. We call this, "getting an education."

He had learned that he would need letters for safe passage, or else others would mess with him. He would need this guy Asaph on his side, the one who took care of all the timber. I like to think of Asaph as the owner/operator of Israel's Home Depot. Without a credit at Asaph's store, Nehemiah would do nothing more than stare at that broken wall.

But Nehemiah believes. The leader must believe, more than any other person, that this vision came from God, and when God wants to do something, He will supply the resources. the Lord will provide what we need when we need it IF we are working on the project He has assigned.

And so Nehemiah show us that the best leaders, at some point, go for broke. They make bold requests. They go all-in.

Years ago, Lynley and I read a book called *Praying For Your Elephants*, a book where the author begins by telling the story of when he was a youth pastor, how he dreamed of hosting an unforgettable event for the kids. At that moment in his life, he had this wild idea—how cool would it be to have a real, live elephant show up at one of their gatherings. For some odd reason, he saw in his head this possibility and he had the nerve to ask God to do it.

I know that sounds like a strange request, but he felt like the Lord had led him to ask for it. Well, time marched on and the elephant vision never materialized. He forgot all about it and years later, while leading a mission trip overseas, he went into his hotel room to rest, when he heard a commotion outside. He went to his window, and there in the courtyard, his group of students were reaching up and petting this enormous elephant.

From that day forward, he began to pray with greater boldness and his strategy for praying was sealed. He said:

“I am in the business of prayer creation; I leave the editorial and distribution responsibilities to God.” –Adam Statdmiller, Praying For Your Elephant

Nehemiah believed that if God put the vision in his heart, then it wasn't wrong to ask for bold things, to believe that God may end up doing something far beyond what seems reasonable.

This is what it means to pray with great faith, like Nehemiah did, in asking the king for more than seemed reasonable.

The best leaders make bold requests.

3. They stay committed to the call no matter the size of the task. (2:11-18)

2:11 tells us what he did once he traveled those 900 miles.

After I arrived in Jerusalem and had been there three days, ¹²I got up at night and took a few men with me. I didn't tell anyone what my God had laid on my heart to do for Jerusalem.

2:11–12

And he goes into detail about the devastation he saw at night, as he laid eyes on the project. Once he surveyed the damage, he gathered the people. V.17...

¹⁷ So I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in. Jerusalem lies in ruins and its gates have been burned. Come, let's rebuild Jerusalem's wall, so that we will no longer be a disgrace.” ¹⁸ I told them how the gracious hand of my God had been on me, and what the king had said to me.

They said, “Let's start rebuilding,” and their hands were strengthened to do this good work.

Ne 2:17–18

There is a lesson in here that I want us to see. When Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem, he doesn't call a meeting, make a speech, or announce a plan. He remains silent. For three days he waits, and then under the cover of night, he goes out to see the walls for himself. He walks the rubble, studies the gates, and traces the broken places. And what he sees is sobering. After more than a century, the walls aren't just damaged, they are devastated. The gates aren't just weak, they are burned to the ground.

But this is what I see in Nehemiah that is inspiring: no matter what those walls looked like, he had already made up his mind. The condition of the wall couldn't change his calling, because his “yes” had already been settled before his eyes ever saw the scope of it.

Over the years, I've discovered something in the leadership assignments Lynley and I have said yes to. Every time we've said "yes" to what we believed God was calling us to do, things turned out to be harder than we expected and greater than we imagined.

It's as if God begins barrier removal, only after the leader has signed the contract. He calls us to live by faith.

Think back to the Old Testament and the story of Abraham—the one who heard God say "Go... to a land I will show you." Not *I have shown you*, but *I will show you*. Even later, Abraham walks up a mountain with Isaac, not knowing how God will provide a way out. That's the tension of faith: it is obedience without full visibility.

In *The Pursuit of God*, A.W. Tozer says that God had to bring Abraham to a place where he possessed nothing. Abraham had to release his need for control, and then, his greatest treasures would finally feel safe. Tozer writes:

Our Lord came not to destroy but to save. Everything is safe which we commit to Him, and nothing is really safe which is not so committed...

Did you catch that? There is a happiness, a blessedness, that comes with letting God decide what He wants to do with our lives, our children, our dreams. These things are only safe when we let them come out of our hands and rest in God's hands. Even our successes in life are entirely up to him. Tozer goes on...

Our gifts and talents should also be turned over to Him. They should be recognized for what they are, God's loan to us, and should never be considered in any sense our own. We have no more right to claim credit for special abilities than for blue eyes. "For who maketh thee to differ from another? And what hast thou that that thou didst not receive (1 Cor. 4:7)?" –A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*

Our dreams are safe only when we let them rest in the hands of God.

And Nehemiah, as he spent those three days in the dark, walking those walls, observing the devastation, but he did not let his mind despair, because his confidence wasn't in his skills, but in the sovereign power of God, who called him to it.

The best leaders wait on God's timing. They make bold requests, and they stay committed no matter the size of the task. They trust that God can do immeasurably more.

Which leads us to #4.

4. They bring other people into the plan. (2:18-19)

Notice again what I read at the end. When Nehemiah expresses His confidence in God, something powerful happens. The people want to join him in the work. He doesn't say "you need to rebuild these walls." He says, "we." He identifies with them. He steps into their burden. He connects the mission not just to a construction project, but to the glory of God and the visible evidence that God's hand is already at work. He tells his story—*"the gracious hand of my God was on me."* And when he does, something shifts in the room. The people don't just listen, they lean in.

By the time you reach the end of the passage, the vision has transferred. They respond, *"Let us rise up and build."* Their hands are strengthened for the work. That's the moment you know this isn't just Nehemiah's burden anymore—it has become *their* burden. That's leadership. Not compliance, but ownership.

Great leaders refuse to go alone. They understand that if you have to carry the whole thing by yourself, you're not really leading, you're just working. Leadership isn't about control; it's about shared conviction. It's about helping people see what God is doing so clearly that they want to give their lives to it as well.

There's an old phrase: *"Teamwork makes the dream work."* It may sound simple, but it's profoundly true. Even the people we think of as self-made were never actually alone. When you look closely at their lives, you find a network of people—partners, encouragers, co-laborers—whom God used to help accomplish the work. No great work of God is ever built on one set of shoulders.

And that's what Nehemiah models. He doesn't just bring a plan, he brings people into the plan. He doesn't just carry vision, he multiplies it. He doesn't just start the work, he strengthens the hands of others to join him in it.

A great leader doesn't go alone... he inspires others to rise.

Now, with my time remaining, I'd like to raise questions from the room.

A Seasoned Christian Asks:

How do I stay patient when I see others moving ahead faster than me?

If you're a competitive person, it's almost instinctive to glance sideways and measure your pace against someone else's progress. You see others advancing faster, achieving more, and it can

quietly raise a troubling question: *Does God love them more? Has He given them more? Opened doors for them that He's left closed for me?*

But Scripture gently pulls our eyes back to a different horizon. Ecclesiastes 3 reminds us that there is a season for every activity under heaven. God is not hurried, and He is not careless. He determines when each life comes into bloom.

And Ephesians 2:10 tells us that we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. That means your assignment is not random, and your timing is not accidental. God is not running your race on someone else's clock.

So the calling is not to keep pace with others, but to keep step with Him. To trust that in seasons of waiting, He is not withholding purpose—He is shaping you for it.

Even in the world of art and literature, this rhythm holds true. Fyodor Dostoevsky didn't publish *The Brothers Karamazov* until he was nearly 60. J. R. R. Tolkien didn't publish *The Lord of the Rings* until his mid-60s. A more modern example, Tim Keller didn't write his first book until he turned 50. Colonel Sanders didn't launch his KFC franchise until his 60s—and we might all agree that his fried chicken was part of God's will for our consumption.

From your vantage point, it often seems like others are running out ahead of you. But maybe it's better to think about your life like a tree in an orchard.

You don't walk through an orchard in April and accuse the apple tree of being lazy because the cherry tree bloomed first. You understand that each tree has its own season, its own rhythm, its own assignment written into its design. In the same way, God has planted you where you are, and He knows exactly what kind of fruit your life is meant to bear—and when.

So don't get in a rush, and don't resent another tree's flowers. He has prepared, in advance, good works for you to do. In his time.

A Good-Hearted Skeptic Asks:

So what do you call it when someone “steps out in faith” and it completely falls apart—was that God, or just a bad idea?

Yes, it's true that Christians often point to the stories in Scripture where someone takes a bold step of faith and sees immediate, visible results.

In 1 Samuel 14, Jonathan and his armor-bearer climb a cliff and take on an entire Philistine outpost—two against twenty. God gives them victory, and their courage sparks a national breakthrough.

But then you turn to John the Baptist. He also steps out boldly. He confronts corruption. He preaches truth without flinching. And instead of a miraculous rescue, he ends up in a prison cell... and then loses his life.

So what do we do with that?

Why does one story end in triumph, and the other in what looks like tragedy? Did Jonathan have more faith than John? The Bible doesn't give us any reason to think that. In fact, Jesus speaks of John with the highest honor.

Which means this: outcomes are not the truest measure of faithfulness.

From our perspective, one "worked" and one "failed." But Scripture invites us to see differently. What looks like failure to us can still be victory in the eyes of God:

- You share your faith with someone, and they walk away uninterested. No story to tell, but your courage grows, and a seed is still planted.
- You step into a leadership role, and it doesn't go well. You make mistakes. But later, that experience becomes the very thing God uses to shape your wisdom.
- You start something you believed in: a ministry, a project—and it never gains traction. But the discipline, humility, and dependence on God that it produced in you... those remain.

In other words, what we often label as "it fell apart" might actually be God doing His most important work, just beneath the surface, where it can't be applauded yet.

Faith is not a formula where boldness guarantees success. It's a relationship where obedience matters more than outcomes.

So when something falls apart, it doesn't automatically mean it wasn't from God. It may mean God is doing something *in you* that matters just as much as what He's doing *through you*. And sometimes, the truest victories are the ones no one claps for.

A Student Asks:

I'm not a take-charge type. I prefer behind-the-scenes work. Does this make me a second-class Christian? Does this mean that I'm cowardly?

To be clear, to serve in a support role does not make you a second-class Christian. And it certainly doesn't mean you're cowardly.

Jesus never called everyone to stand at the front. But He did call everyone to be faithful to the assignment they received.

In John 13, when Jesus Christ wanted to show His disciples what leadership truly looked like, He didn't climb a platform and make a speech, he knelt down with a towel and a basin. He washed their feet and taught us that Christian leadership is not seeking visibility, but performing a service.

Which means the question is not, *"Am I out front or behind the scenes?"* The question is, *"Am I serving where God has placed me?"*

In the Kingdom of God, some are called to lead from the front, others are called to strengthen and support from behind the scenes. In fact, it is often the person behind the leader that truly makes things happen.

A few years ago, I came across a book called Gatekeepers. The subtitle caught my attention: How the White House Chiefs of Staff Define every Presidency.

The book has a fascinating argument--that the US presidents who saw the greatest results in their time at the helm were not necessarily the most charismatic. Success was usually the result of setting the right structure in place.

The author Chris Whipple makes a compelling case that the Chief of Staff has been the make-or-break for the person in the highest office. Here's a few lines from the book...

You've got other people who see the president once a week, once a month, once a year. Even though they may have been good friends before, they don't have the ability to pick the right moment to talk to him and tell him what he does not want to hear. Because the Chief of Staff is with the president day in and day out, he has the ability to select those moments...He is the one person--besides his wife who can do that--who can look him in the eye and say, 'This is not right. You can't go down that road. It's not going to work, it's a mistake. --Chris Whipple, The Gatekeepers

Whipple walks through ten US presidencies to strengthen his theory--that the men who have gotten the most done in Washington were those who carefully selected the one who played second-fiddle.

I raise this example because I have found this to be true in Christian leadership also. God wires some with stage gifts--they can inspire and use rhetoric to unite people in a common cause. But behind every out front leader, there is usually one or even a few that are making the vision operational.

You may not be Nehemiah in this story, you may be Asaph--the keeper of the trees. You are skilled at a craft and your responsibility is to figure out how you can use your craft, your skill, your talent to advance the kingdom of God.

So don't underestimate your wiring. If God has shaped you to be steady, thoughtful, discerning—someone who doesn't need the spotlight but strengthens others—that's not a weakness. That's a gift.

Your calling is not to become someone else. It's to become fully who God designed you to be, and to offer that, wholeheartedly, for His purposes. Because in God's Kingdom, there are no second-class servants.

Only faithful ones.