

13. Leaders in Israel (4Q 2019—Ezra and Nehemiah)

Biblical Material: 1 Kings 12:1–16; Acts 15:7–11; John 11:46–53; Neh. 4:7–23; 8:12; Ezra 8:21–23, 31, 32.

Quotes

- You don't have to hold a position in order to be a leader. *Henry Ford*
- A true shepherd leads the way. He does not merely point the way. *Leonard Ravenhill*
- The very first thing which needs to be said about Christian ministers of all kinds is that they are “under” people as their servants rather than “over” them (as their leaders, let alone their lords). Jesus made this absolutely plain. The chief characteristic of Christian leaders, he insisted, is humility not authority, and gentleness not power. *John Stott*
- According to Scripture, virtually everything that truly qualifies a person for leadership is directly related to character. It's not about style, status, personal charisma, clout, or worldly measurements of success. Integrity is the main issue that makes the difference between a good leader and a bad one. *John MacArthur*
- If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea. *Antoine de Saint-Exupery*
- The way of the Christian leader is not the way of upward mobility in which our world has invested so much, but the way of downward mobility ending on the cross. *Henri J.M. Nouwen*

Questions

What specific lessons can we learn today from the experiences of Ezra and Nehemiah as leaders? In what way are we all leaders in our churches and our families? What are the most important qualities in any leader, especially those who wish to truly represent God? How can we all live with vision and passion for God's truth?

Bible Summary

1 Kings 12:1–16 provides the details of Rehoboam's poor leadership decisions that led to his splitting of the kingdom. In Acts 15:7-11 we see Peter's leadership during the Jerusalem Council. Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin show their self-serving type of leadership in John 11:46–53. The challenges of leadership under pressure are illustrated in the rebuilding of Jerusalem's wall (Neh. 4:7–23). The people rejoice at hearing God's word—a great example of true leadership (Neh. 8:12). Ezra refuses to ask for an armed guard but leads the people back to Jerusalem, trusting in God's protection (Ezra 8:21-23, 31, 32).

Comment

The key words that come out of this study in regards to leadership are “vision” and “passion.” Both Ezra and Nehemiah were totally committed to what they were doing—they understood the importance of their work and were single-minded in making sure that everything worked towards this vision. The vision of course came from God, which is why they were sure that what they were doing was right. They also did things with passion, because it was so important to them and to the people. They were very driven, doing all they could to fulfill God's plan for his people.

While they were certainly human and undoubtedly made mistakes in their leadership, both Ezra and Nehemiah were respected by the people because they were men of God. Of Ezra it is said, “For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.” Ezra 7:10 NIV. He was recognized not only for his scholarship, but because his study of Scripture had made a difference in his life—and people could see that. Similarly Nehemiah fasted and prayed with great sincerity, which also impacted the people. True leadership can never be built on hypocrisy or pretense, but must be true and sincere. Only then will people be convinced and want to follow.

What God is looking for in all of us is that willingness to listen, to recognize goodness and truth, and to really want it—not just for ourselves, but for others too. This is what turns people into leaders, whether they are scribes or cupbearers! It’s not the desire for position or power, but the innate desire to share good with those around us—to help them on the way to the kingdom.

Sharing Jesus in our lives makes us leaders in some way—because we show the difference he has made in our lives, and we want others to discover that for themselves too.

Ellen White Comments

In this matter, Ezra and his companions saw an opportunity to magnify the name of God before the heathen. Faith in the power of the living God would be strengthened if the Israelites themselves should now reveal implicit faith in their divine Leader. They therefore determined to put their trust wholly in Him. They would ask for no guard of soldiers. They would give the heathen no occasion to ascribe to the strength of man the glory that belongs to God alone. They could not afford to arouse in the minds of their heathen friends one doubt as to the sincerity of their dependence on God as His people. Strength would be gained, not through wealth, not through the power and influence of idolatrous men, but through the favor of God. Only by keeping the law of the Lord before them, and striving to obey it, would they be protected. {PK 615-6}

Nehemiah and Ezra are men of opportunity. The Lord had a special work for them to do. They were to call upon the people to consider their ways, and to see where they had made their mistake; for the Lord had not suffered His people to become powerless and confused and to be taken into captivity without a cause. The Lord especially blessed these men for standing up for the right. Nehemiah was not set apart as a priest or a prophet, but the Lord used him to do a special work. He was chosen as a leader of the people. But his fidelity to God did not depend upon his position. {3BC 1135.2}

There is need of Nehemiahs in the church today--not men who can pray and preach only, but men whose prayers and sermons are braced with firm and eager purpose. The course pursued by this Hebrew patriot in the accomplishment of his plans is one that should still be adopted by ministers and leading men. When they have laid their plans, they should present them to the church in such a manner as to win their interest and cooperation. Let the people understand the plans and share in the work, and they will have a personal interest in its prosperity. The success attending Nehemiah’s efforts shows what prayer, faith, and wise, energetic action will accomplish. Living faith will prompt to energetic action. The spirit manifested by the leader will be, to a great extent, reflected by the people. If the leaders professing to believe the solemn, important truths that are to test the world at this time, manifest no ardent zeal to prepare a people to stand in the day of God, we must expect the church to be careless, indolent, and pleasure-loving.--ChS 177. {PM 256.1}