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What Made Nehemiah Great?

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TEXT: Nehemiah 5:14-16 (ESV)

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 Artaxerxes the king, 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 from them for their daily ration forty shekels of silver. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God. I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work.

Mark 10:35-45

And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" And they said to him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Of all the people studied in the Old Testament for their leadership skills, probably Nehemiah is studied the most. I mean, he's held up in so many different leadership circles for his greatness as a leader. So, we're asking the question today, what made Nehemiah great? What makes him such a great leader that his legacy is still teaching people about greatness in leadership? To understand that, I think we have to let the Bible interpret for us what made him great, and our gospel lesson today. We clearly see that when Jesus called all of his disciples

together, they had been arguing over who was the greatest. They had done this several times, and finally, a couple of them came to him and said, "You know, Jesus, when you come into your kingdom, why don't you let one of us sit at your right hand and one of us sit at your left?" This was James and John, the sons of Zebedee. These were zealous men, and they even had their mom with them. One gospel narrative tells us. Jesus told them that it wasn't for him to grant. But the other disciples were irritated by James and John asking this question. So, Jesus called all of his disciples together, and he said this to them. It's so important when we're talking about greatness and leadership, how a person approaches the authority, rulership, leadership, and the realm that God has given them to manage; how they do that determines their legacy.

Jesus said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord their rulership over their people. They lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them." And then Jesus said this: "Not so with you, not so with you." Instead, he said, "Whoever wants to become great, you know what you notice here. Jesus did not squelch this passion for greatness that existed in these young men. He didn't snuff it out. He channeled it. He said, 'Not so with you. You don't lord your position in life over anyone. What you do, if you want to be great, you must become a servant. Whoever wants to be first must be a slave.'" Jesus said, even the Son of Man, Jesus was talking about himself here, did not come to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many. Jesus clearly taught that service, an attitude, a heart, a life of service is the pathway to greatness in life and in leadership. If you want to be great in any arena, you approach that arena as a servant. In his book on servant leadership, "A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness," author Robert Greenleaf writes that the servant leader is truly a servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve and to serve first.

Then a conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead as a servant. That person is sharply different from the one who is a leader first. The leader-first type person may have the desire to amass unusual power, drive, or acquire material possessions. It'll later be a choice for that person to serve. But this servant-first mindset is what makes a person great, and that's what Jesus is teaching here. What is the overarching theme that made Nehemiah great in life and his legacy so strong down through history? It's this: his whole life, when you study it, was one of service. Service not only to mankind and his people but also to God. Nehemiah served as a cupbearer to the king in a foreign land, and he did his job so well. If you study it and look at it, he served the king as best he could, which helped him find favor with the king. When God gave him a burden to go serve the Israelite people by helping rebuild the wall in Jerusalem

and reestablish the Israelite kingdom there, he was impassioned and supported by God and the king because of his servant attitude to go and serve his people by building this wall. In our text for today, he writes this:

"Moreover, from the 20th year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah until the 32nd year, 12 years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor. Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall, and all my men were assembled there for the work, and we didn't even acquire any land for ourselves. They had the means to do this, they had the position to do this, but they didn't do any selfish grabs in their service to the Israelite people, their people at that time as leaders. Nehemiah was not a leader first; he was a servant first, and that moved him to become a leader, to lead the accomplishment of something that would bring great service to his people. How do we know whether a leader is genuinely serving well? Greenleaf states this, and it's the best test, though difficult to administer: do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more like themselves? Do they themselves become better servants to the world? When you look at Nehemiah, he was doing all these things for the people. He was a servant first. His whole life was one of service, and that made him great. But even farther, when you press into this text, he was not only serving, he was also serving with discipline and focus and strength.

And you might even say that he was not distracted by the pleasures around him. One of the great distractions in our world is the lust of the flesh, the pride of life, and the lust of the eyes. Our selfish desires can take over and cause us to become selfish rather than servants. This temptation must have been great for Nehemiah. He was supported by all of these resources from the King to do this project. He got in there, and his leadership was respected by many. With the resources he had and the position he held, he could have become a very selfish man. This is the natural inclination of humanity, to be in it for ourselves. But, let's look at what he says. Moreover, from the 20th year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah until his 32nd year, 12 years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor. They didn't even eat the special portion of food brought to them. This went on for 12 years, friends. Nehemiah denied himself earthly pleasures to be a good servant leader. This is in stark contrast to what often happens in our world today and our culture. The pressure to indulge in one's own fleshly desires, to pursue pleasure, and to enjoy the pleasures of this world surrounds us. However, indulging in these pleasures doesn't necessarily make us better servants, better people in the eyes of God, or better servants and lovers of the people around us.

Nehemiah, as seen through the scriptures, chose to deny himself, take up his cross, and serve his God and his people. And that's exactly what he did for 12 years. He didn't even enjoy the food that was given to him, but he devoted himself to the work on the wall. He was disciplined in doing this, focused, and he did this work. In this text, we see that he was not only serving but also serving with discipline and focus, with strength.

What made Nehemiah great? His whole life was one of service. He was not distracted by all the pleasures around him or the temptations surrounding him. He remained focused for a long, durable period, dedicated to serving God and his people in Jerusalem. Furthermore, he did this because he feared God more than man. This is evident in the text. He says that the earlier governors, those who came before him, had placed a heavy burden on the people, oppressing them rather than serving them. This is exactly what Jesus was referring to when he said that the Gentiles lord their rulership over others, overtaxing and oppressing them. In the case of America, the pressure to indulge one's own fleshly desires, to pursue pleasure, and enjoy the pleasures of this world led to events like the Boston Tea Party and the birth of the nation. The earlier governors took 40 shekels of silver from the people, in addition to food and wine. Nehemiah, on the other hand, didn't take any money and didn't even eat the food allocated to him. He mentions that the earlier governors and their assistants also lorded it over the people, oppressing them.

But Nehemiah did things differently, saying, "Out of reverence for God, I did not act like that." This demonstrates the importance of having the fear of God or reverence for God in one's heart. The fear of God is about taking God seriously, understanding who we are in His presence, recognizing His character, and His nature. Nehemiah, over the course of his life, came to understand that you must take God seriously and live in a way that pleases Him. He realized that if you revere God, and you fear Him, you may gain the strong support of Almighty God in your life. Nehemiah humbled himself, recognizing that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. He came to Jerusalem and Judah and took on the role of a servant there.

He, in a sense, represents Christ, going to help redeem and rescue a people who were lost. They were scattered by God because they had disobeyed Him. And he went in there as a servant, giving his life in service to them. I mean, that's precisely what he did. He's known as one of the greatest leaders in history. Why? Because he lived a life of service. He was disciplined and focused, giving his best. As you read through this, you can see his passion.

Not only did he resist the pleasures and temptations of this world, but he also set boundaries against naysayers, remaining undistracted by those who opposed the work. All of this he did because he feared God more than man. This was his calling.

Friend, I don't know where you are today and what you're hearing, but I want to ask you, what is God calling you to? He's giving you a realm to manage in life that you have influence over. Are you approaching it with an attitude of service? Nehemiah sought wisdom from God on how to best serve his people, and God provided that wisdom. He didn't indulge in any selfish pursuits while serving them. He knew that he wasn't just helping the people; he was ultimately serving an audience of one.

I believe these are three characteristics any of us can adopt to know God's support in our lives and be great in God's kingdom. Jesus sometimes said, "Those who have ears, let them hear." I hope you can hear this, friend. What made Nehemiah great? An attitude of service, the ability to resist temptation and worldly pleasures, and a commitment to do one's best out of reverence for God. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, as we study your Word, it teaches us how to live and what to believe. We're called to believe that you're enlisting us, calling us to do your work in the world you've adopted. Perhaps there's someone listening who hasn't come to you yet, who doesn't know their calling. You might be drawing them to yourself even through this time we're spending together. May your Spirit encourage them to open their hearts to the gift of your Son, Jesus, and stir in them the passion to serve where you've placed them, to resist the temptations of this world, and to give their best in honor and reverence for you. Work in us in a way that only you can. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.