

LEADING WITH A WARM HEART

The Leader and Spiritual Passion

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In the week in which I accepted the invitation to serve as vicar of a local church for the first time, my personal Bible readings happened to be from the book of Nehemiah. This seemed to be a remarkable instance of God's providence. The church I had agreed to serve had experienced very significant and potentially catastrophic events in its recent history. A not insignificant number of people had left and morale was very low. It's reputation within its wider community had been badly affected – a biblical narrative concerning rebuilding out of ruins seemed particularly apt.

Over the months and years that followed, Nehemiah became a great friend and counsellor to me. I learnt a huge amount from his own example, most significantly some vital lessons about enabling the contributions of the whole people of God and about maintaining focus and handling opposition well. What a blessing it seemed, to have such a wonderful model to imitate of wise and strategic leadership.



Developing appropriate leadership competencies is vital for leadership effectiveness, and Nehemiah is a great tutor in this. However, I wonder now, with the benefit of thirty more years of reflection on his career, and with much more personal experience of success and failure in leadership, whether there is a far more profound leadership lesson to be learned from him.

Perhaps his own effectiveness was due, not just to strategic acumen, but more significantly to his own spiritual passion, to a heart which was warmed by a deep love for God and for the things which matter to God. Perhaps the reason for his effectiveness was being conditioned by time spent consciously in the presence of God. Why might such a quality be so critical for fruitfulness in leadership? Here are three reasons why this might be the case.

1. Closeness to God leads to keenness of focus

Leadership is significantly concerned with enabling direction to be appropriately discerned. Faced with a plethora of possibilities, it is not uncommon for leaders to feel to an extent paralysed by the range of options before them.

Choosing one course of action over another – determining to invest resource in a particular set of activities rather than others, opting to give priority in one's diary to certain people or projects rather than others – is not always easy. Various factors shape such choices. We may face pressure from others, we may experience the force of internal drivers, we may simply find it impossible to determine where our priorities should lie.

A settled conviction about the nature of God's will serves as a compass giving us a direction of travel and a means of determining more wisely what might be the right



course of action. It focuses our attention, giving us confidence in discerning what might be God's priorities for ourselves and for those for whom we are responsible, and equal confidence in setting aside the things which may not matter quite so much to him.

Nehemiah's conviction about the purposes of God and his focus on seeing those purposes fulfilled is evident throughout his book. It surfaces first in chapter 1 as he makes plans to secure practical support for the initiative he believes God has called him to undertake. Like him, we find such convictions growing within us as we grow closer to God and increasingly think his thoughts after him.

2. Closeness to God enables courage in the face of challenge

Pursuing a particular path, especially if it implies change, or involves a course of action which runs counter to the preferences of others, is not always welcome, and it may also involve the leader running the risk of becoming unpopular, at least with some. The challenges and pain involved in all this may make the prospective outcome seem less desirable to the leader who is tempted to tone down her ambitions for the sake of maintaining peace, and even personal reputation.

Upskilling in techniques of change management will not usually solve this problem. What will make a difference, however, is a deep conviction about the purposes of God and a sense of compulsion to pursue them at all costs. It was such a conviction, the fruit of a developed relationship with God and a familiarity with his presence, which led to the outpouring of prayer and grief from Nehemiah in the first chapter of his book. It was also what drove him to seek a way of being released from his present responsibilities in order to enable God's purposes for his people to be restored.

It was Nehemiah's passion for God's honour which led to his restlessness until the work of rebuilding in Jerusalem was completed, and his refusal to be distracted from it. It was the same passion which led him (Nehemiah 5) to fashion his own life, and that of the community, around the requirements of God's justice, even though this was personally costly to him.

It is not that passionate leaders have carte blanche to impose their own convictions upon others. Rather, such leaders will be motivated to work hard to commend God's ways to their community, to enable others to discern them and embrace them.

3. Closeness to God stimulates hope in others

There are several factors which dispose us to follow other leaders.

We tend to trust leaders who demonstrate themselves to be sufficiently competent not to let us down, and also as being of sufficiently good character to be reliable. We are similarly drawn particularly to leaders who have the capacity to stir up in us hope in God and in his capacity to make a difference. Those leaders whose expectancy towards God is both extraordinary and realistic are especially attractive to us. Their own closeness to God gives us hope of experiencing a similar closeness.

Nehemiah's capacity to encourage the disheartened people of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:17-18) was directly related to his own expectancy, fuelled by personal experience of God's provision and by rich encounter with God. Not only do such leaders enable hope and confidence to be birthed in others, because such hope is fundamentally in God rather than in the person of the leader, these same leaders are better than average in terms of weaning followers off inappropriate dependence upon the leader.

I do not regret the efforts I have made over the years, the books I have read and the seminars I have attended, to grow more accomplished in different leadership competencies. I hope that they have made me a safer and more reliable leader. However, as I reflect back on my own experience in leadership, and as I find myself spending a higher proportion of my time seeking to encourage and mentor emerging leaders, I recognise that what I want for them above all is that they become deep people rather than merely skilled people. Such people will be those who are best placed to lead God's people faithfully in the ways and purposes of God.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Who are the leaders you have been most content to follow? What was it about them that you found particularly reassuring and compelling?
- What might it mean for you to go deeper with God? What practices might you adopt in order to grow in your own closeness to God so that you might increasingly 'think God's thoughts after him'?
- When was the last time you wept, mourned and fasted out of concern for the well-being of God's people?