

Qualities of a Leader: Genuine Prayer

1. Examine Nehemiah 1:1-11 and 2:1-8 and gain a sense of the background to the book of Nehemiah by asking the following questions: who, what, when, where, why?

With the passing of King Solomon, the nation of Israel split into the Northern Kingdom (Israel – 10 tribes) and Southern Kingdom (Judah – 2 tribes) about 931 B.C. The Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrians around 722 B.C., taken captive to Assyria in two deportations, and there was no record of their return to the land. Judah fell to the Babylonians led by Nebuchadnezzar around 586 B.C. Under Nebuchadnezzar, the Jews of Judah were taken captive to Mesopotamia in four deportations (the Babylonia Captivity - 2 Chron 36:18-20). The captivity of Judah would last for 70 years until Zerubbabel led the first return to Jerusalem.

Cyrus the Great conquered the Medes, Lydians, and Babylonians (549, 547 and 539 B.C respectively). Considered a wise and tolerant leader, he supported the restoration of Temple in Jerusalem by allowing Zerubbabel to lead the first return of the Jews.

In 445 B.C., Nehemiah was the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, who succeeded King Darius as ruler of the Media-Persian empire. Nehemiah was a trusted servant who tasted and tested the food and wine before it was consumed by the king and queen.

Chisleu is the month of December

The wall around Jerusalem has been down about 150 years

King Artaxerxes is a non-Believer

Susa is the winter capital of the Media-Persian Empire, which is the best place to be in winter

Jerusalem is 800 miles away from Susa

2. Given the background to the book of Nehemiah, what is so unusual about Nehemiah's response to Hananiah in Nehemiah 1:4?

Nehemiah had no reason to care for Jerusalem.

He had the comforts of a kingly standard of life (food, shelter and status).

He was far removed from the problem in distance (800 miles) and time (150 years).

Yet he genuinely cared for Jerusalem and his people, and mourned for their dire spiritual state. Despite the very threats to his spiritual life, Nehemiah cared about his faith and recognized that the Jews have not been faithful to the Mosaic Covenant.

Nehemiah's first action was to take time to focus on God and seek His direction.

Qualities of a Leader: Genuine Prayer (page 2)

3. Examine Nehemiah's prayer and identify the elements of it (Neh 1:4-11).

The elements of Nehemiah's prayer can be seen as:

Praise: he first praises God (v. 5).

Confession: he confesses on behalf of his people, emphasizes his personal sin in the matter and identifies the exact nature of their sin (v.6-7).

Claims God's Promise: he reminds God of His promise in the Mosaic Covenant (v. 8-10)

Specifically, Nehemiah referred to God's promises to Moses in Deuteronomy 30:1-3.

Petition: Nehemiah petitions for his own personal success! Nehemiah petitions for success in taking care of the problem by first seeking divine help in gaining the king's approval (v. 11).

Nehemiah recognized Artaxerxes' inconsistent support of the Jews, because he had temporarily halted the rebuilding of Jerusalem (Ez: 4:7-24), and later allowed it to continue (Ez 6:14). Artaxerxes would later authorize Ezra to lead the second return of the Jews (Ez 7:1-28).

Nehemiah's prayer is unusual in that he clearly recognized his sin and offered himself to be the one who would lead the rebuilding of the wall.

4. How do you know if Nehemiah's prayer was genuine? How would you determine if your prayers were genuine?

There were several pieces of evidence of this:

1. Nehemiah truly sought God's guidance and **waited for God to change** the heart of Artaxerxes.

Artaxerxes was not aware of Nehemiah's request to go to Jerusalem until the month of Nisan (April), which was 4 months later! Nehemiah did not try to manipulate the king by revealing his sadness of Jerusalem (Neh 2:1). When Artaxerxes did become aware of Nehemiah's countenance, Nehemiah prayed just before answering the king's inquiry (Neh 2:4).

2. During the four months, Nehemiah prepared himself for God's call and developed a plan for the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls.

So thorough was Nehemiah's planning that he was able to tell the king how long he would be away and what materials he would require (Neh 2:6-8).

3. Nehemiah did not doubt who made this happen and did not claim any credit for himself (Neh 2:8).

Qualities of a Leader: Genuine Prayer (page 3)

4. The most significant evidence is that Nehemiah, now governor of Jerusalem, directed his people to:

Listen to the Law (Neh 8:1-18)

Confess their sins (Neh 9:1-37)

Publicly agree to uphold the Law (Neh 9:38 – Neh 10:1-38)

In Nehemiah's initial confession (Neh 1:4-11), he rightly determines that Israel's failure to uphold the Mosaic Law was the cause of Jerusalem's destruction. His prayer was not simply "I'm sorry," but a genuine contriteness, which he sought to remedy upon the completion of the wall. His effort of separating his people for the rededication of their lives to God was the ultimate evidence of Nehemiah's genuine heartfelt prayer, which God knew and honored in his selection of Nehemiah as the leader who would rebuild the wall.

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