The challenge that Nehemiah faced as a leader to his people, although a politician in a foreign land, was a question of identity. The Jews in Babylon had begun to set up study and social centers for the perpetuation of their people and religion which would become the synagogue. In a foreign land, they sought to retain their identity. Simultaneously, their greatest risk was becoming lazy, culturally assimilated, and compromising. At the same time, their relatives who still lived in Israel were impoverished, oppressed and had simply acquiesced to their conditions, living miserable, broken down lives, just like the walls around them. Their identity was as a poor, hapless people with little for which to live. The challenges of exile are always matters of identity. The applications for us are stark.

"It is vitally important that Christians see themselves as exiles and aliens rather than primarily as American citizens. Only as exiles and aliens can we live and love in the world in the remarkably compassionate way of Christ, especially in extraordinarily conflicted times. Nichama Tee has done extensive research into the character of the people who rescued Jews from the Nazis, risking their own lives in the process. She was lecturing recently and after the lecture the audience was given an opportunity to ask questions. One person made mention of Christian rescuers. Tee replied, "Only a certain kind of Christian became a rescuer." And what kind was that? It was the Christians who were less well integrated in their society, independent and willing to stand up for those in need. In other words, the Christian rescuer was not an ordinary citizen but what Paul called an exile and alien.

In our hearts, in our lives, in the way we are church together, it is the new creation that we proclaim, demonstrate and celebrate, a new creation brought about by the cross of Christ. It has not been brought about by our efforts, our accomplishments, or by our forebears but by the sacrificial work of God in Christ alone." (Craig Watts, pastor of Royal Palm Christian Church, Coral Springs, FL)

The report Nehemiah heard about the exiles who remained in Israel and his response to it, shapes the direction of his story.

Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire." As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. Neh. 1:2-4

It is easy to go quickly to his prayer, but if we do we miss why he was so motivated *to pray!* Although the conditions were terrible, he did not condemn the people for their plight, rather he identified with them and empathized with their pain. No leader who fails to take time to genuinely enter into the human condition of the people whom one leads will likely have influence over their rescue or reprieve. For Nehemiah, it wasn't just a spiritual condition (it certainly was that), but there were real lives who felt pain, hardship, loss, suffering, poverty, and oppression.

Nehemiah didn't *have to* engage with that, but he *was compelled to!* The word translated as "trouble" in verse 3 is translated as "sad" in 2:1 and 2:2. The people were in a state of continual sadness, despair and emotional depletion. It was not much different than how we've come to understand the feelings of slaves in our country or the plight of people of color in America until long after the civil rights movement. Great leaders empathize with the people that they lead by identifying with their situation. That requires real vulnerability because one has to find a place within oneself that relates to their situation and engaging in listening conversations. Sympathy stands distant and offers pity. As leadership expert Dr. Brene Brown says, "Empathy drives connection, sympathy drives disconnection." Nehemiah got personally engaged with the condition and challenges of his people and it drove him to risk his position, wealth and even his life to make a difference for the Jews and Jerusalem. He was wealthy and comfortable, but that is not what mattered most to him.

The image of a shepherd in the Bible reflects this truth. In the west, we see and hear of sheep dogs and ranchers who drive flocks of sheep to places they are supposed to go, whether to eat or for shelter. It's utilitarian and results oriented, so that the sheep owner can get the maximum return on investment with the least amount of time and expenditure of practical and personal resources. Biblically, a shepherd lives *among* the sheep, and leads them to water, food and shelter. He speaks to them and even fights for them. He or she is out in front seeing the needs and potential threats and guiding the journey that the sheep must take. **Psalm 23:1-3 "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."** Jesus said it this way, **"My sheep hear my voice and I know them, and they follow me." John 10:27**

Isn't it amazing to see the character of Christ demonstrated in a politician so many millennia ago? The reality is that the need for biblical leadership has never been more needed than it is today. "Sympathetic" methodology has limited value to a people who are in despair, and it creates no lasting change to conditions. Throwing a bone at a need doesn't change hearts nor engender true followship. The ancient Roman empire was changed by an army of Christians who without status, position or power empathized with the need all around them and did something about it. So did Nehemiah, and so can you! Where is the need you see most at hand in your world with which you can get involved with and that you can begin to address? Aren't you glad that Jesus "came near" to our plight to redeem and rescue a people with eternal need? God didn't just send a message, He sent His Son to live among us.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Next Bible Study will be

February 11, 2025

Topic: A Higher Power