

WEEK 3 >>

WHAT MAKES A LEADER?

 **WATCH:** Why does leadership matter? - Lloyd Cooke

Nehemiah was cupbearer to the king in Persia – he was a senior government official, with great responsibility. Together with many around him he was far away from home in an alien land. Nehemiah had to make sacrifices throughout his life to follow this path. He had to give up his position with the king to return to Jerusalem. He got up in the middle of the night to examine the walls; he faced opposition to his task but he remained strong.

He did all of this because he trusted God and followed His call. He was unsatisfied with how things were, he had a heart to see things change, and he was not prepared to settle for things staying the same. He was committed to returning the people of Jerusalem to worshipping God, and led the people through many trials to see this worshipping community return. He pushed for what he wanted but was also respectful. He prepared spiritually – he prayed, fasted and listened to God.

Moses had a rather different response when he heard God's call. David Brooks writes: "When God called on him to lead the Israelites, Moses threw up a flurry of reasons he was the wrong man for the job: I'm a nobody; I don't speak well; I'm not brave". God did not allow Moses' excuses to take hold.

When in Exodus 4:14 Moses cried: "Please send someone else" God's response was not to berate him for his squirming – although we are told His anger burned. Instead God found a way forward by offering that Aaron could go with him and speak to the people on Moses' behalf. Once the job was thrust upon him: "he became a great leader. He became the ultimate model for reluctant leadership."

There are many different paths to, and models of, leadership. We are not all going to be standing on a stage at the age of 15, telling thousands of people about the charity we started in our bedroom (but some of us are). And while some people will be called to great sacrifice, leaving behind country or family, some of us are called to become leaders right where we are.

Nehemiah felt a call on his heart, waited for an opportunity to present itself, then gave up a fairly cushy job in order to undertake a mission that required vision and leadership. Moses exhibited tremendous courage in facing his fears and going to Pharaoh time and time again to ask him to free the Israelites. He showed fortitude when they wandered in the desert – even when his own people abandoned the mission and melted down their jewellery to build a golden calf, he stuck at it. He pressed on towards a goal that he would not see fulfilled in his lifetime.

Perhaps like Moses we don't feel like we are the right people for the job. Or like Nehemiah, maybe we feel God's call, but we're still waiting for the opportunity to make it happen. Hebrews 11:17-40 powerfully demonstrates that we must act "by faith". Even when we're feeling uncertain, inadequate or scared, we act in faith of what God has planned (even if it's not always what we expect).

The Message version of 1 Corinthians 1:26-27 puts it like this: "Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don't see many of 'the brightest and the best' among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these 'nobodies' to expose the hollow pretensions of the 'somebodies'?"

Our biblical heroes were not perfect people. Esther was scared to face the king, Joseph's early life was filled with arrogance, and David committed adultery and organised murder. But when they followed God's will, amazing things happened. These heroes were leaders who faced hurdles in their path and had to work out how to navigate systems and structures that ran counter to their deepest beliefs. It's a lesson we must not forget in our own culture.

There are also plenty of examples of biblical figures who tried to lead in their own way, and failed epically – take a look at the stories of Jonah, Samson and Saul. There is a difference between being flawed and doing God's will anyway, and allowing our flaws to take us away from the positions into which God would place us.

 **READ & REFLECT ON SCRIPTURE**

READ: NEHEMIAH 1-2 Why did Nehemiah return to Jerusalem? What were the defining principles of his mission? What was Nehemiah prepared to do to achieve his goal?

READ: EXODUS 3:1-15 Why was Moses reluctant to take on responsibility? What led to him accepting the task? What characteristics of Moses do we most think about when we think of him as a leader? How do Moses' characteristics compare to how we generally talk about leaders? How do we overcome reluctance?

READ: 1 CORINTHIANS 1:26-31 Do you identify as one of the "foolish things of the world"? How does that make you feel? What does it mean to "boast in the Lord"? How does this give you authority?

DISCUSS

For Christians, an important part of public leadership is working out how to engage with culture without submitting to societal norms that stand against our faith. Daniel is often held up as an exemplar of non-compromise. However, this is a false impression – not only was he willing to make compromises but he was willing “to almost embrace his exile in a way that secured influence”, writes James KA Smith. Consider how Daniel integrated into the idolatrous culture around him:

- He learned the language and literature of the Chaldeans;
- He served in an administration that had destroyed his nation and enslaved his own people;
- He served as a chief advisor to an idolater.

Smith continues: “His faithfulness did not find expression in an enclave of purity, nor did it require him to insulate himself in some holy huddle that protected him from compromise. Instead, he was *faithful amidst compromise* [emphasis added].”

- Why did Daniel accept some aspects of Babylonian culture and not others?
- How do you feel about the idea of faithful compromise?
- What opportunities do you see for this in your own life?
- What are the dangers? Where must Christians *not* compromise?

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

It is easy to say “That’s not my strength – that’s for someone else to do”. But there is a difference between gifting and character: while gifting comes from God, character can be developed. It can be easy to privilege one at the expense of the other. It is necessary to put in work to do this, but putting in the effort early on will pay off in the long-term if situations become challenging.

Create profiles for each person in your group. Write down the giftings and character traits each person has – include good traits they already have, and things that they can work to improve. Then, discuss ways you could develop your character traits.

LISTEN TO GOD

Take some time out in silence and solitude to listen to what God has to say to you. If you’re struggling to hear Him, try saying this short prayer:

Lord, help me to be faithful to your call to leadership. I want to be an effective voice for you. Show me the places where I can step up and lead. Help me to know where to step back and allow others to lead instead. Amen.

TAKEAWAY CHALLENGE

There are many different types of leader. Our challenge is how we respond to God’s call to leadership. What kind of leader are you? Consider these questions:

- Do you identify more with Nehemiah, the go-getter or Moses, the reluctant rebel? What lessons can you learn from them and other biblical leaders?
- Think about different leaders – both good and bad - who have influenced you. What made them good or bad?
- Are there times you have avoided leadership responsibilities? Are you hesitant to use the word ‘leader’ about yourself?
- Are you allowing others to lead as they are called to, or are you preventing this by taking on too much leadership? Where can you practise good followership?
- Do you have a long-term vision to which you are committed? What steps could you take to move towards it? How can you develop your character to become a more effective leader?

LEARN MORE

For links to these articles, go to thepublicleader.com/ctw3

Against the flow: the inspiration of Daniel, Interview with John Lennox, August 2015

Faithful Compromise: The lost art of brokered effectiveness in our public life, James KA Smith, March 2014

Developing a personal profile plan, Danny Webster, 2014

Are you a reluctant hero or the Chosen One?, Abi Jarvis, December 2016