

# **Leadership Qualities: Problem Solving**

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By the time of Nehemiah, the political, social and spiritual conditions of Jerusalem were in shambles. Sometime around 587 BC, Jerusalem was destroyed, along with Solomon's temple. This was the third Babylonian campaign into Judah, and each time the Babylonian armies took more and more Israelites captive, resettling them in Babylon. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were among those taken during the first invasion.

About 70 years after the first invasion, Cyrus, king of Persia (who had since conquered the Babylonians), gave the Jews permission to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. Under the leadership of Zerubbabel, Israel seemed on the verge of becoming a blessed nation again. But the people refused to turn away from the same sins God had judged their ancestors for in the days of Nebuchadnezzar. The temple was not maintained properly. The people weren't offering sacrifices. They had adopted many of the religious practices of the surrounding nations.

It's no wonder that when Nehemiah heard about the state of affairs in his homeland, he was moved so deeply that he wept. His concern over the condition of Jerusalem consumed him. But rather than launching some ill-conceived plan to save the day, Nehemiah waited for God to reveal what his next step should be. He prayed and planned and prepared. When God finally said, "Now, go and rebuild the city of Jerusalem," Nehemiah was ready to demonstrate the leadership ability God had been cultivating in his heart.

## ***Nehemiah's Problem-Solving Ability***

One way in which individuals prove their leadership ability is by using their problem-solving skills. Nehemiah certainly demonstrated his capability in that way. When the walls of Jerusalem

began to take shape, Nehemiah's enemies tried to sidetrack him from the project with a number of different strategies. First, they tried to lure him out of Jerusalem by repeatedly inviting him to a summit:

When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it – though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates – Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: “Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono.”

But they were scheming to harm me; so I sent messengers to them with this reply: “I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?” Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer.

Nehemiah 6:1-4

The enemies of God's people knew that if they could distract the leader, it would impede the progress of the entire project. Seeking peace with his neighbors would not have been a bad thing to do, but it wouldn't have been the best thing. It would not have been the “great project” that God had called him to complete. So, Nehemiah rejected their invitations and focused his attention on the job at hand.

Next they accused Nehemiah of leading a revolt against King Artaxerxes – a potentially devastating lie:

Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter in which was written:

“It is reported among the nations – and Geshem says it is true – that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: ‘There is a king in Judah!’ Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us confer together.”

Nehemiah 6:5-7

The custom of the times was to roll a letter up, tie it with a string and seal it with clay. But this letter was “unsealed.” Sanballat intentionally neglected to seal the letter so its contents would be

known by everyone who handled it. His purpose, of course, was to spread the rumor that Nehemiah was trying to establish himself as the king of Judah.

This wasn't true, but since when are people that interested in the truth when there's a hot rumor to be spread? This rumor put everything in jeopardy. If the people believed it, they would openly oppose Nehemiah's leadership since they had no intention of cutting ties with the Persian government. If word of this got back to the king, Nehemiah would be in even more serious trouble – back in Susa with a rope around his neck.

We might think Nehemiah would be completely justified in going on the defensive. The workers were already looking for an excuse to quit, and kings never have gone easy on those who entertain ideas of treason. Nevertheless, Nehemiah remained focused on the job at hand:

I sent him this reply: "Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head."

They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, "Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed."

But I prayed, "Now strengthen my hands."

Nehemiah 6:7-9

He didn't allow himself to get caught up in what might happen. Instead of being derailed, he confronted his enemies quickly, prayed to God for strength and continued his work.

Finally, Nehemiah's enemies tried to intimidate him into violating the law of God by urging him to seek refuge in the temple:

One day I went into the house of Shemaiah...who was shut in at his home. He said, "Let us meet in the house of God, inside the temple, and let us close the temple doors, because men are coming to kill you – by night they are coming to kill you."

Nehemiah 6:10

Only priests were allowed into the part of the temple that housed the altar. Nehemiah wasn't a priest. To violate God's law in this way would discredit Nehemiah in front of all the people in Israel. Not only would this be a violation of the Law, it would also undermine his authority as a

leader. When word got out that the governor was hiding in the temple, the people would lose their confidence in his ability to lead them.

Again, Nehemiah refused to be distracted from his work. He solved the problem by obeying God and seeking his strength:

But I said, “Should a man like me run away? Or should one like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!” I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me.

Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, because of what they have done; remember also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who have been trying to intimidate me.

Nehemiah 6:111-14

If Nehemiah had been leading from a selfish posture, he would have had every reason to run and save himself. But Nehemiah knew it was better to serve God than preserve his own life. Compared to the “great project” to which he had been called, the threat of assassination was trivial. Nehemiah wouldn’t even leave his great project to save his own life; he knew there was something at stake that was bigger than his safety.

As a leader you will face problems. They can’t be avoided. In fact, Dave Anderson – founder and chairman of the Famous Dave’s restaurant chain – suggests that “If you want to get ahead, go to your [people], and say, ‘You got problems? Give me some.’ Instead of running away from problems like most people, go after them.... That’s the way to get ahead, by solving problems.”<sup>1</sup>

The existence of problems is non-negotiable in a fallen world. The only controllable factor in the face of problems is your response. If you follow Nehemiah’s model and are careful to (1) maintain your focus, (2) confront any false accusations against you immediately and with

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in John C. Maxwell, *Failing Forward* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), pp. 202-203.

integrity and (3) pray to God for strength and wisdom, you'll find, as Nehemiah did, that God is ready, willing and able to help.

Think about who the Sanballats, Tobiahs and Geshems in your life are, and remember that no matter how powerful the opposition may seem, God is an invincible ally. How much more effective to ask God, the One who sees and knows all, for help than to try to formulate a solution on your own!

### ***Solving the World's Biggest Problem***

The greatest example of problem solving in action can be found right in the pages of the Bible. God took the ultimate problem – the chaos and destruction wrought by human sin – and transformed it into the beauty of holiness through his creative power to solve even the worst of problems. In this best of all stories, God made it possible for those who were previously his enemies to become his beloved children.

Immediately following his introduction to his epistle to the Romans, Paul launches into a description of the greatest problem in human history – God's judgment on humanity as a consequence of our *unrighteousness* and *self-righteousness*. The human solution to the problem of guilt and estrangement from God has always been a tedious series of variations on the same theme – human effort and works. Man-made religious systems always reduce God to a human level or assume that people can bridge the gap themselves. However, because “Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin” (3:9), the problem is of such vast proportions that only God can solve it.

The real problem is internal, not external. Jesus said that all the sinful behaviors and habits are inextricably connected to the heart. We can clean up our act, but we need outside

assistance to root out the evil in our hearts. Any attempt at total self-improvement is like trying to hold ourselves in midair by pulling on our shoestrings.

God's solution is so creative and innovative that no one else could have thought of it or imagined it. It has been common in religious institutions that humans would sacrifice something to the gods or to God, but the idea that God himself would take the initiative and come looking for lost people, that is unique to Christianity. That *God himself would offer the sacrifice for us* is unheard of in any religion other than biblical Christianity. 'For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering' (8:3). By declaring us righteous by his unmerited favor through the price that Christ paid on our behalf, God overcame the estrangement caused by sin and transformed us from condemned criminals into joint heirs with Christ.

In the movie *The Last Emperor*, the young boy anointed as leader of China lives a life of luxury with thousands of eunuch servants at his beck and call. "What happens when you do wrong?" his brother asks. "When I do wrong, someone else is punished," the young emperor answers. To demonstrate this, he breaks a bowl and one of the servants is beaten.

In Christianity, God reverses this. In the movie, the emperor does wrong and a servant is beaten; in Christianity, the servants do wrong and the Emperor is beaten! The grace of God and his gracious offer of salvation in Christ is without a doubt the most creative approach to problem solving ever imagined. It took a God of unbounded imagination to come up with it. We can never comprehend the cost of his innovative plan; we can only scratch the surface of God's grace, and his graceful approach to problem solving.

For the godly leader, life and leadership are transformed in the face of this awesome and amazing reality. There has been no greater problem, and no greater problem solver, in the

history of humankind. Is there a pressing problem that has been awaiting your action? God is waiting to help you in your business, in your family, in your personal life.

### ***Focus on the Solution, Not the Problem***

If God is the utmost problem-solver, what resources does he provide for his people to solve the problems they encounter? He offers us resources that transcend our own; the problem is that we are generally disinclined to lay hold of them. We typically attempt to solve our own problems without appealing for divine provision, only calling on God when we're in real trouble. For some reason it doesn't occur to us that the God of the Bible knows much about business or investments or staffing issues. We go to God with our emotional problems or our family disputes, but we doubt his competence in other areas. Some aren't even convinced that God is concerned with such mundane areas of our lives as mortgage payments and vacation planning. There is untapped wisdom to be found in taking *everything* to him.

We have a tendency to think that God is only concerned with the mid-sized problems in our lives. We may think there are some problems that are too trivial for him to be interested in. On the other hand, we also assume that there are some problems that are too big to take to him. There is a great biblical example of two people who responded to a problem that seemed insurmountable, found in Esther 3:1-5:8.

The book of Esther recounts a fascinating story filled with intrigue and suspense. Esther was an orphan who had been raised by her older cousin Mordecai (2:7). When she was old enough, the Persian King Xerxes selected Esther as his queen (2:17). Because of his convictions, Mordecai refused to kneel down in deference to Haman, a sinister official in Xerxes' court (3:2-5). Haman devised a cunning plot that resulted in a decree to execute all of the Jews in the Persian Empire (3:6-15).

It appeared that all would be lost. The Messianic line was in danger of extinction, and God's people were powerless to defend themselves. Mordecai was at first overwhelmed by the magnitude of the situation, but he soon began to focus more of his attention on the solution than on the problem.

Although the name of God is not directly mentioned in this book, it is evident that Mordecai concluded that God had sovereignly elevated Esther to a position of royalty so that she would be in a position to counteract the deadly edict. She held the fate of history in her hands. But to act could cost her very life (4:9-11). She was the queen of the most powerful empire on earth and enjoyed all of the privileges that such a position afforded her. Why should she risk her life to persuade the king to change a decree?

Mordecai's answer to Esther's fears was clear and concise:

“Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?”

Esther 4:13-14

Esther's solution was marked by radical dependence upon God (4:16), as well as careful thought and creativity. Realizing that an appeal of such magnitude required precise timing, she carefully planned the most appropriate approach for making her request (7:3-6). After Haman's downfall, she requested that King Xerxes allow her and Mordecai to write a decree that would overrule the effect of the previous edict and permit the Jews to defend themselves throughout the provinces of the empire (8:1-17).

Esther and Mordecai demonstrate for us how much energy should be invested in dwelling on a problem as opposed to planning the solution. They also remind us that creativity and timing are essential in successful problem solving.

## *Solving the Right Problem*

Exodus 32:1-35 delivers a wealth of information about problem solving and deserves careful study. Here we find out the two most important summary principles for problem solving from a great leader who solved great problems: Moses himself.

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, “Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.”

Aaron answered them, “Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.” So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.”

Exodus 32:1-4

Aaron faced a serious problem, but he failed to resolve it. When he realized that his “solution” was creating a bigger problem he acted again: “When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, ‘Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord’” (v. 5). But this time his action only caused the situation to careen out of control:

When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned.... Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies.

Exodus 32:19a, 25

Moses inherited the problem after it had escalated into a crisis, but he did solve it (vv. 20-35). This brief study in contrast reveals some important principles about how a godly leader approaches problems. Aaron attempted to solve the wrong problem; Moses addressed the right one. Aaron attacked the functional problem; Moses confronted the character problem. Aaron focused on activity; Moses on the morality that was driving the activity (vv. 21, 30).

The details of this chapter yield a wealth of information about problem solving and deserve careful study. Stepping back from the situation, we see two summary principles. First, lasting solutions come from addressing “why” questions – character questions – instead of “how” questions. Second, great leaders achieve greatness because they solve great problems. Lesser leaders limit their energies to addressing lesser problems.

Volumes have been written on problem-solving technique. The Bible isn't one of those volumes. What it does do, however, is demonstrate to us that the most damaging problems are not solved by correcting behavior. The problems that most need to be resolved can only be solved by a change of character, a change of morality, a change of heart. The wisest leaders will help their followers to apply God's grace and power to solve the fundamental human problem of sin. Observe Moses in verses 30-32:

The next day Moses said to the people, “You have committed a great sin. But now I will go to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.”

So Moses went back to the Lord and said, “Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin – but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.”

See how one of history's greatest leaders defined and solved problems. In all of our reading about problem solving, we must begin where Moses did.

### ***Getting Your Hands Dirty***

Leaders must face and solve problems. Daniel provides us with a stunning example of problem solving ability in Daniel 5. King Belshazzar had given a banquet for thousands of people. During the course of their drunken festivities, the king desecrated the gold and silver goblets that his father had taken from the temple in Jerusalem.

Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand

as it wrote. His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way.

The king called out of the enchanters, astrologers and diviners to be brought... Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king what it meant. So King Belshazzar became even more terrified and his face grew more pale. His nobles were baffled.

The queen, hearing the voices of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet hall. "O king, live forever!" she said. "Don't be alarmed! Don't look so pale! There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your father he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. King Nebuchadnezzar your father...appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. This man Daniel, whom the king called Belteshazzar, was found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding, and also the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles and *solve difficult problems*. Call for Daniel, and he will tell you what the writing means."

Daniel 5:5-12, *emphasis added*

Daniel was promoted to an enviable leadership position. He influenced Babylonian and Persian kings who ruled over great empires. Belshazzar promoted Daniel because he could "solve difficult problems" (vv. 12, 16). One criterion that determines the greatness of a leader is the degree of difficulty of the problems which the individual is willing and able to tackle and solve.

Donald Schon opened his book *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, in this way:

In the varied topography of professional practice, there is high, hard ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solution. The irony of this situation is that the problems of the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant to individuals or society at large, however great their technical interest may be, while in the swamp lie the problems of greatest human concern. The practitioner must choose. Shall he remain on the high ground where he can solve relatively unimportant problems according to the prevailing standards of rigor, or shall he descend to the swamp of important problems and nonrigorous inquiry?<sup>2</sup>

Never is this distinction more significant than in the leadership-practitioner's role. Great leadership is willing and able to roll up its sleeves, get down in the dirt and tackle life's toughest issues. Daniel did that. And Daniel ranks among history's premiere leaders.

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<sup>2</sup> Donald Schon, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987), p. 3.

In his book on biblical leadership, Lynn Anderson discusses the level of involvement shepherds demonstrated in the first century:

Shepherds in Bible days were not day laborers who showed up for work in the morning at a stranger's pasture, put in eight hours, and then went back home. Rather, a shepherd lived with the sheep – day and night, year after year. Shepherds helped birth the lambs. They led their sheep to pasture during the day and protected them at night. The sheep knew their shepherd's touch, recognized his voice, and followed no other shepherd. There was a genuine relationship between the shepherd and the sheep. In fact, through long time and frequent touch, the shepherds *smelled* like sheep.<sup>3</sup>

Leaders are shepherds, mentors and equippers – all of these descriptions demand relationships. A leader's authority does not come from title or position; it comes from character, competence and a willingness to invest in other people's lives. As Greg Johnson points out, "We aren't the *persons* of God but the *people* of God."<sup>4</sup> Our new life in Christ is to be lived out in the context of community, under the authority of others, with our destinies interconnected to theirs. It's one thing to be able to solve problems for yourself, but, as we have seen, biblical leaders use their problem-solving ability to assist others and advance God's kingdom purposes.

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<sup>3</sup> Lynn Anderson, *They Smell Like Sheep* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing, 1997), p. 126.

<sup>4</sup> Greg Johnson, *The World According to God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), p. 189.