

God's Powerful Vision for Your Life:

The BIG Idea

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ISBN 978-0-9976118-0-9

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DEDICATION

To our son Greg, who joined Jesus way too early. He lived out BIG Ideas and left an example and legacy for dozens of his peers, and their parents.

He would have been side by side with Nehemiah, immersed in the tough work of wall building – and the significant work of people building.

I pray his BIG Ideas continue on in me, and the lives of others.

CHAPTER 1

800 MILES

Nehemiah 1:1-11

Congratulations!

You are a Leader.

You've been appointed to a new position. You've been elected to a new team or committee.

Or, you've been hired to a new job, and you're the top dog, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), the Prez, the big Kahuna, Numero Uno. Excitement awaits you. Fresh challenges. New adventures.

A chance for you to make your mark in an agency or field or industry.

An opportunity to make a positive difference in the lives of people. You are going to rewrite history.

And, you are scared witless.

You've never been a leader before, at least not in this sense. Or, not at this level.

With the adventure, challenge and excitement, you're trembling inside, like the time you stepped onto your first roller coaster ride. Or, your first kiss, which is a roller coaster ride with *lips!*

Or, your first road trip with friends. There's excitement and terror pulsing through your veins all at the same time.

Condolences

You're the leader.

You've been chosen to revive a dying organization. Or, you were in the wrong place at the wrong time. You missed the meeting and in your absence someone nominated you to be *in charge*.

You weren't even there to defend yourself.

Your new job wasn't at all what they described in the job interview. You've been *volun-told* for a new project – one that nobody else wanted.

My condolences.

This isn't what you signed up for. This was part of the fine print that no one pointed out. It's like the feeling after your minor first car wreck. You feel fine at first and then your legs tremble uncontrollably. You're light-headed. You feel a little sick to your stomach.

Understandable. And...unavoidable.

Since you are now a leader, voluntarily or involuntarily, I have someone for you to meet. Whether it's a role you chased, because you were excited and clueless, or you were trapped like a rat on a sinking ship, pay attention here.

My associate will clear a path for you in your leadership position.

This heroic historical figure will be able to help you make sense of leadership and your role as a leader. He will give *you* ideas, tips, and approaches to enhance your leadership no matter who you are, where you are, or the group you are leading.

His name is Nehemiah.

He lived and led 2,500 years ago. His confidence, philosophy, methods and ultimate success changed the course of history, including mine. He was a leader with passion, ingenuity and boldness.

You can be, too. Let's read a bit from his biography.

Nehemiah 1:1-11

The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

They said to me, “Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.”

When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days, I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

Then I said: “Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant of love with those who love Him and keep His commandments, let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer Your servant is praying before You day and night for Your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s family, have committed against You. We have acted very wickedly toward You. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws You gave Your servant Moses.

Remember the instruction You gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to Me and obey My commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.’

They are Your servants and Your people, whom You redeemed by Your great strength and Your mighty hand. Lord, let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of this Your servant and to the prayer of Your servants who delight in revering Your name. Give Your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.”

I was cupbearer to the king.

Really? A waiter? Someone who worked in the king’s kitchen?

Doesn’t sound like a leader to you?

Just wait.

Let's look at the situation in which Nehemiah found himself.

Let's begin by checking out the distances between these locations in terms of mileage:

Columbus, Ohio to Orlando
Denver to Phoenix
Montreal to Charlotte
Naples, Italy to Paris, France

800 miles

A quick trip by today's air travel standards. Longer and perhaps more tedious if you drive. An ordeal if you had to walk that distance.

What gets you amped up about traveling 800 miles?

Vacation?
Family reunions?
Family funeral?
An excellent meal?
A new job or career opportunity?

What excites you enough to travel 800 miles?

When I was a boy, my family traveled each summer from our home in central Indiana to Northern Wisconsin. The distance of our journey was 650 miles.

We would jam our family of four into our Ford station wagon, along with all our suitcases, rods and reels, and snack food for the drive. Then, we'd head north to my grandparent's house a short distance away.

Two hours. I was already bored.

After a late breakfast, we'd all pack into the car again, this time with my grandmother and grandfather. We'd head toward Chicago, where my Aunt Marge and Uncle Jack lived.

More time in the car.

The BIG Idea

More sitting.

Not good for a boy eight years old. I recall one year, we left the trusty station wagon in the garage and took my dad's new luxury sedan. I had to sit on Grandma's lap, wedged in the back seat, leaning sideways, against the side door, the handle stabbing my back and the window creasing my shoulder.

I felt like I was crammed inside a can of tuna.

After a very short period of time my leg started to cramp up. I asked the question every young boy demands on a family road trip, *Are we there yet?!*

My Dad gritted his teeth and gripped the steering wheel.

I recall the ride to the rented lake cottage in Wisconsin being filled with road constructions, National Guard convoys and bumper-to-bumper traffic jams. To intensify the agony, Dad turned off the air conditioning so the car wouldn't overheat.

With the windows down, we were treated to the humid, sticky July heat that hung on our bodies like a sweaty stalker ignoring a heat-seeking restraining order.

The aroma...no...stench of diesel fumes from the long-haul trucks filled our noses. Nothing about the trip itself was a good memory for me. It was a mobile toxic waste dump through the Gobi Desert, only with humidity.

However, once we arrived at the cabin, all the frustration and misery of our journey from Hades disappeared. The gentle breeze in the birch trees, the comforting sound of the thumping waves against the docked boats and the distant call of a Loon magically erased the memory of the 650 mile ordeal, seemingly in an instant.

What horrible car ride?

There is nowhere on the face of the planet where I feel closer to God than on a lake in the North Woods. I know that God is always close to me. But in the wondrous calm and stillness of the trees, water and wildlife, I have a deeper appreciation of His creation and His love for me.

Despite the rigorous, brutal journey in my eight year-old mind, I'd go back every time.

The end result was always worth the journey.

Nehemiah was so motivated about his project that he traveled 800 miles. He did this without any modern conveniences, no air-conditioning, no convenience store snacks, no smooth roads, and probably a lot of it on foot.

He traveled 800 miles to do what he believed he was supposed to do. Something he couldn't shake, ignore or avoid.

800 miles to rebuild a wall around Jerusalem.

800 miles to rebuild a people.

800 miles to lead an effort that God had uniquely called him to do.

It was his time to be a leader to those who desperately needed one.

Nehemiah, as far as we know, was never a leader before this time. He was new to this position.

Perhaps, just like you.

His story of success is worth your time to read and imitate. The following pages will change your life as a leader.

That is my promise to you.

Now, for the back story...

God's Chosen People, the Israelites, were once a mighty force in the ancient world. The Old Testament and other literature are filled with examples of how God blessed His people when they were obedient and followed His principles and commandments.

There were also very unpleasant consequences when they did not obey God. As a result of their disobedience, there were tortuous examples of God's people being beaten, captured, and murdered by their enemies.

Whether you believe the literal words in the Old Testament or not, the historical fact of the Jewish people and their roller coaster of captivity is well documented.

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Nehemiah's story as a new leader opened in what is now the modern-day city of Shush, near the far western border of Iran. This is about 450 years before the birth of Jesus and the Roman Empire. Most scholars believe Nehemiah is one of the last books written of the Old Testament.

Approximately 160 years before, the Israelites were taken over and captured by the Babylonians. Remember Nebuchadnezzar, the king of the Babylonians, that guy Daniel, the lion's den, and the three guys in a fiery furnace that lived to tell about it?

The Babylonians were, in turn, conquered by the Persians.

Each time a new king was victorious, God's Chosen People, the Israelites, were scattered throughout the new kingdom, serving as slaves and laborers for that empire.

This is probably how Nehemiah's family ended up in Susa. Nehemiah's forerunners had likely been taken captive and relocated from Israel and Jerusalem to the Persian capital – 800 miles away.

There's no clear record that Nehemiah had ever lived in Jerusalem. In fact, it's highly likely that Nehemiah had never even *visited* Jerusalem, the city of his ancestors.

But, that did not dampen his passion for God's holy city.

When Nehemiah heard from a group of travelers that Jerusalem was completely destroyed, he was moved to save it. The city where God's People were to live, work, and worship was completely run-down and unlivable.

The biblical narrative confirmed that the **walls were broken down and the gates were burned by fire (v. 3).**

How would you feel if you learned that your family's home, your high school or home town was destroyed by an earthquake, tornado, tsunami or in this case, by a violent act of terrorism?

Think of the recent devastation of hurricanes Harvey and Irma. You've no doubt seen the photos and news clips. I believe Jerusalem was in the same condition. Thousands stepped up to help the communities destroyed by the hurricanes.

Nehemiah found himself in this heart-wrenching situation. His spirit was as crushed and shattered as the broken and crumbled walls of Jerusalem.

And most significantly, he had never been there!

He'd never experienced the vitality of the city market. He'd never worshiped in the Temple that King David founded and King Solomon built.

It would be like me constantly hearing about the joy and beauty of the North Woods from my family, but never experiencing it for myself.

We read that after hearing of the state of Jerusalem, that Nehemiah, **...sat down and wept. For some days, I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. (1:4).**

By the way, if you look closely at the *days* that Nehemiah fasted and prayed, it was actually four *months!*

The month Kislev (Neh. 1:1) runs from approximately the middle of November to the middle of December in our current calendar. The month Nisan (Neh. 2:1) correlates with the middle of March to mid-April.

So, Nehemiah's idea percolated and simmered for four months while he fasted and prayed.

Some days, huh?

Talk about an understatement!

Nehemiah was so moved that he was unable to eat...really?

What is so important in your life that you cannot eat because it's not going well?

Hand me just about anything, Oreos, a burger, pizza with extra cheese...I'm IN!

In your professional life, when was the last time your board, trustees or elders were so distraught over a situation in your organization that they couldn't eat?

The BIG Idea

When was the last time YOU were so bent out of shape that you couldn't eat?

What was so terrible that it made you sick?

I mean, this is *serious* folks.

I see many people in positions of influence, leadership and power, overseeing people and programs that they could easily walk away from. They were unemployed and somehow landed a job in an organization with a cause they couldn't embrace.

Don't get me wrong; a job is important. I've been unemployed and under-employed, and personal income is a necessity. The point here is that a person in leadership had better be *driven, motivated and amped up* by the organization's cause.

Who wants to lead a group of people in a cause they don't care about?

So, let's reverse this concept and ask some questions:

What makes you excited?

What problems challenge you to solve them?

What cause, mission or need would make you travel 800 miles to tackle it?

I bet you have a Big Idea inside you. It's a feeling or insight that will not go away. You can't ignore it. You can't avoid it. You cannot escape it.

Here are some possibilities...do any of these strike a passionate chord in you?

Bolstering and helping the homeless.

Caring for the aging and physically challenged.

Furnishing needed items for international immigrants and refugees.

Leading people in joyous and inspired singing at a church.

Teaching others how to teach.

Equipping people with the financial skills to earn, save and spend effectively.

Supporting women with an unexpected pregnancy.

Assisting people displaced and traumatized by a natural disaster.

Restoring green space for community recreation.

Rehabbing homes and improving neighborhoods.

Comforting people who are at the end of their life.

Helping young couples be better parents to their kids.

Helping single moms and dads manage their children, job and life.

Building a wall around Jerusalem.

On a personal level, as a leader, what's your mission? What gets your heart beating fast? What problems haunt you? What problems beg you to help find a solution? What solution causes you to smile wide in the car when you are all by yourself? What would cause you to fast and pray for four months?

I think I know what drove Nehemiah.

He knew the history of God's people and God's promises. He knew his people were devastated in Jerusalem. He knew that what was happening to the Israelites needed the grace of God to heal and restore them.

Nehemiah knew God's promises.

In **Nehemiah 1:5-11**, he begs God, agreeing that the Israelites were in slavery because they had not obeyed Him. Nehemiah understood the consequences that would happen when the Israelites did not follow God.

The wall around their beloved city had been devastated.

Like the Apostle Paul's protégé in 2 Timothy 1:5, it is likely that Nehemiah had a God-fearing and obedient family member.

Young Timothy had a devout grandmother who taught him the promises and principles of Scripture. It appears that the same family situation and history was present in Nehemiah's life.

Someone in his life had taught him God's law and His promises.

The BIG Idea

Someone had instilled in him the need to rebuild that wall.

Without that physical protection, the Israelites were in serious danger of being overthrown by other countries as a result of their disregard and disobedience towards the Almighty God.

Sin, going against God's wishes and guidance, had put them in this precarious position. Nehemiah's heart for God and his prayer for the blessing to rebuild the wall were the only hope the Israelites had to survive in the future.

Two practical thoughts here for us:

1. Your faith drives how you lead. Your values, convictions and choices should be based on a faith in what is good and right. That faith should also be based on a Higher Power. My moral compass is based on the God of the Bible and the historical person of Jesus Christ. Your moral compass might be linked to something else.
2. Hang on to that value and belief that guides you. Follow it in your everyday life and as the foundation for all your decisions. And, read on to see how Nehemiah, someone who believes in God, can lead and get results.

Because of my faith in God and His Son Jesus, I have survived a devastating death in my family and several personal crises. My trust in Him has enabled me to experience personally powerful, life-transforming events.

Whatever has happened to me, both good and bad, I have never let go of my faith. My God of grace has gently seen me through every heartbreak and headache.

I encourage you to always stand by your faith and be dead-set and driven by your mission.

Nehemiah didn't sway from his God or his mission. He is a worthy example for us to follow.

We're just getting started!