

THE PRAYER OF NEHEMIAH

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Scripture: Nehemiah 1 (NLT)

As I have prepared these sermons on prayer, I have been stimulated and inspired to think differently; to look at my own prayer life and ask some hard questions. And I pray that it has for you, that it has helped you be challenged in your own prayer life because the truth is that sometimes we can get into a rut, that our prayers become so common or so much by rote that we pray without really thinking. That concept has been challenged a lot in the prayers that we have looked at.

I like this quote by Phillip Brooks that says, “O, do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be stronger men! Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks! Then the doing of your work shall be no miracle, but you shall be a miracle. Every day you shall wonder at yourself, at the richness of life which has come to you by the grace of God.”

How true! That as our prayers get closer and closer to God, as we push Him, in a sense as we call out to Him with impossible things because He is a God who can do those things, then our lives get transformed and we see the richness of life that comes to us through the grace of God.

Today we are going to look at the prayer of Nehemiah. For context, the setting for the book of Nehemiah is around 444 BC. The kingdom of Israel has been split into two – the northern kingdom consisting of ten tribes has been taken into captivity by the Assyrians, and they are located in Samaria. The Southern kingdom of Judah consisting of two tribes has been taken captive by the Babylonians and they are located in Babylon.

Last week we saw that Daniel, as he was poring over the scriptures, saw that God had said that this captivity would last for about 70 years and the time was nigh. So he began to pray that they would be able to return back home. We saw that the Persians had now come and overrun the Babylonians, and two groups of people, in fact, were allowed to go back. One under Zerubbabel in 538 BC, and the second led by Ezra in 458 BC. They had gone back and met with great resistance from the Samaritans who had settled in the land. In spite of that, they had managed to rebuild the temple. It took them close to 21 years to bring it to completion. But they were having a difficult time. Then we catch up with Nehemiah as he engages with this whole situation.

Nehemiah 1 (NLT)

¹These are the memoirs of Nehemiah son of Hachabiah.

In late autumn, in the month of Kislev, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes' reign, I was at the fortress of Susa. ²Hanani, one of my brothers, came to visit me with some other men who had just arrived from Judah. I asked them about the Jews who had returned there from captivity and about how things were going in Jerusalem.

³They said to me, “Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been destroyed by fire.”

⁴When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven. ⁵Then I said,

“O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps His covenant of unfailing love with those who love Him and obey His commands, ⁶listen to my prayer! Look down and see me praying night and day for Your people Israel. I confess that we have sinned against You. Yes, even my own family and I have sinned! ⁷We have sinned terribly by not obeying the commands, decrees, and regulations that you gave us through Your servant Moses.

⁸“Please remember what You told Your servant Moses: ‘If you are unfaithful to Me, I will scatter you among the nations. ⁹But if you return to Me and obey My commands and live by them, then even if you are exiled to the ends of the earth, I will bring you back to the place I have chosen for My name to be honored.’

¹⁰“The people You rescued by Your great power and strong hand are Your servants. ¹¹O Lord, please hear my prayer! Listen to the prayers of those of us who delight in honoring You. Please grant me success today by making the king favorable to me. Put it into his heart to be kind to me.”

In those days I was the king’s cup-bearer.

What a wonderful prayer! But first, I want us to pay attention to Nehemiah – the care and concern, his attitude, the fervency with which he prayed. All of these things I think, are important in our understanding of prayer.

Nehemiah enquired about the situation in Judah.

The first thing he did when he met the people who had returned from Judah was enquire of them how things were in Judah. How are the people? He was asking them questions, and they replied, “The survivors who are left from captivity in the province are in great distress and reproach. Things are not going well.” The word ‘great distress’ actually means in affliction, in adversity. They are in trouble. Life in Judah was very difficult because the Samaritans were constantly provoking the children of Israel.

And then they were in reproach, which means shame and rebuke, and they were not able to accomplish anything because of the adversity that was coming to them by the people there. So they were just living like that; the walls were down, they were living in shame and reproach.

Then they said, “The city is also in ruins; the wall of Jerusalem is also broken down and it’s gates burnt with fire.” The walls of Jerusalem were broken down and its six gates were burnt. A city with no wall and no gates was a very shameful existence for any people. The message that it sent to everybody was that you can run over us any time you want because the first line of defense was always the wall around the city, a tall wall that they could then defend against enemies coming to attack them.

But Jerusalem had no walls; there were no gates through which one could enter in with some amount of pride, and life was very uncertain because of all of this. They had tried to rebuild the wall but were stopped Artaxerxes, who had been pressured by a man named Rehum, his commanding officer (Ezra 4). The Samaritans sent a letter to the king claiming that the Jews were rebuilding their walls so that they could rebel against him. Hence the king ordered them to cease the rebuilding. So, the news that comes to Nehemiah is that people are living in great reproach and they are very distressed. These are uncertain times; there is no joy, no peace among the people who returned to live in Jerusalem and in Judah.

What was Nehemiah's response?

"When I heard these words, I sat and wept and mourned for many days. I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven."

He sits down.

This message so touched him, he was so connected with the people there, that when heard about the kind of life they were living, it tore into him. We see that he sat down, he wept, he mourned, he fasted, and he prayed. The bible, especially the Old Testament, says that sitting down was a sign of humility. He sat down; it wasn't that he suddenly felt tired or exhausted, and so decided to sit down. No! It was customary for the Jews to sit down when they mourned for something. Unconsciously, Nehemiah was actually imitating the Jewish captives who had been in exile in Babylon years before. Being seated revealed this humble position. So, he sits down, he bows low; he's humbled himself before God.

He weeps and he mourns.

He weeps and he mourns for many days. We might think that there is not too much difference between weeping and mourning. But weeping happens over a single incident; we cry and then it's over. However, Mourning – it's the heart. It's something that takes a long time to go away. It's an affliction of the heart when the heart has been grieved. And that's what came to Nehemiah. He wept and he mourned for several days. His heart was broken over the situation in Jerusalem.

As we go through this, I want us to be thinking about the kind of prayers that we are making, the attitudes that we come with. As we read in that first quote – to be able to ask for impossible things, the things that are beyond our own scope. As Nehemiah looked towards God, he knows that the only thing that help in this situation is for God to come through. So, he sat down, he wept, he mourned.

Then he fasted.

In his intense grief and concern for the People, Nehemiah decided to fast.

I thought to myself: how much he must have cared for the people in Judah that his response to this news was so drastic. It wasn't that he heard it and said: Okay, I'll pray for you. Sometimes, that is our response. We hear about things and then we say, "I'll keep you in prayer." No! He was so concerned about them; they were his people, his brothers and sisters. I'm sure he hadn't met them, and yet, he was so deeply concerned about them. I was challenged, as I thought about how he responded, to ask myself too about how I pray for the things that are around me. Does it tear me up, does it break me? Do I weep over the cause of the issue, fast, mourn for what's going on?

That's a whole different type of prayer. And the starting point of that is to have care and concern for the issue. In this case, it was the people and their lifestyle that was surrounding them. I wonder what your issue is? What are the issues that surround you that you are hearing about? Are they moving you? Are you concerned about them, concerned enough to go before God and cry, mourn, weep and fast? That's what Nehemiah did. He humbled himself before the Lord on behalf of his people.

In the book of Isaiah, chapter 58, we read: Is it a fast that I have chosen, a day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head like a bulrush and to spread out sackcloth and ashes? Would you call this a fast and an acceptable day to the Lord? is this not the fast that I have chosen – to lose the bonds of wickedness to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free and that you break every yoke? And that's what Nehemiah centered on – to invite God to break the yoke, to lift the heavy burdens of His people in Judah.

And so, he prayed. Nehemiah 1:5-11
There are four components to this prayer.

I. HE PRAISED GOD

He started with praise. We praise God not because God needs to be praised. He doesn't need anything from us beloved. We praise God because it helps us to understand who God is. We praise God because it allows us to look above the situations and circumstances that confront us which are impossible and we look to the God for whom nothing is impossible. We praise Him, and in praising Him, we see our problems in light of who He is.

I love this quote by Joni Eareckson Tada. She says, "Often, praise is a sacrifice because we don't feel like praising. A sacrifice of praise will always cost you something. It will be a difficult thing to do; it requires trading in our pride, our anger, and most valued of all, our human logic. We will be compelled to voice our words of praise firmly and precisely, even as our logic screams that God has no idea what He is doing. Most of the verses written about praise in God's word were penned by men and women who faced crushing heartaches, injustice, treachery, slander and scores of other intolerable situations."

A sacrifice of praise will always cost you something. So we bring the sacrifice of praise into the house of the Lord, as the psalmist says, but into this moment with God.

II. HE CONFESSES

He confesses before God. This kind of follows along that acronym that we were taught in Sunday School: ACTS – Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. So, he praises God and then he confesses. Only after confessing our sin can God restore our relationship and our fellowship. Only after confessing can we get rid of the static that is in the middle, and then be able to reach God.

1 John 1:8 says, "If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." Nehemiah carried on with that when he said, "We have sinned against You. I and my household have sinned against You." He set the way; he almost paved the way so that God could wipe away that sin and be able to hear him clearly. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." 1 John 1:9

The Lord promises to restore us after we humbly confess our sins. Daniel had prayed in a similar fashion a hundred years earlier. Ezra had prayed the same way. And now Nehemiah too takes the responsibility for the corrupt behavior of the children of Israel.

III. HE REMINDS GOD OF HIS PROMISES

Having confessed the nation's sin, Nehemiah reminds the Lord of His covenant with Israel, and we see that so clearly. He says, "Please remember what You told Your servant Moses. 'If you are unfaithful to Me, I will scatter you among the nations.'" And that's what God did. They were unfaithful and God scattered them. Then he says, "But You also said, 'If you are return to Me and obey My commands and live by them, then even if you are exiled to the ends of the earth, I will bring you back to the place I have chosen for My name to be honored.'" So, he reminds God about it.

Time and again, we see how the saints have always reminded God of something He said. And it's not because God forgets. No! It's to be able to:

- a) Mine from scripture and take scripture and use it in our prayer to God because then we are centered in the will of God. To be able to very clearly know that this is the will of God.

- b) To give us that confidence that this is what God has said. If we pray in accordance with His will, He hears us and He answers. It reiterates for us the confidence we need as we come before Him.

IV. HE MAKES HIS PETITION

Hear what his petition is. “Please grant me success today by making the king favorable to me. Put it into his heart to be kind to me.” I read this and I thought of how often those are the exact words that we need in our lives. So often we face a situation – maybe it’s an office situation, facing a boss or a difficult deadline, and we need favor from the person that we’re going to meet. To be able to pray as Nehemiah did: Give me favor with this person as I go to meet him or her. Put it into their heart to be kind to me.

What a wonderful prayer! And a prayer that we ought to be using too. Because God can do this for us – give us favor with people, help them to be kind as we talk to them about different issues. That was the prayer that Nehemiah prayed. He brought adoration and praise, he confessed and then he reminded himself of what was already spoken by God. Then he brought this supplication to God. This heavy thing, how am I going to help? If I am going to go before the king, I need favor. I need him to be kind to me. That was what he brought before God.

POST-PRAYER ACTION

- After Nehemiah took the prayer to God, and I want to stress this, he acted on it. Having prayed, asking for favor, asking for kindness, he then went before the king. And it was a terrifying experience, as we read in the second chapter. But if you see his words, they are bold and honest. The king asks him, “Why are you so sad?” and he says, “I’m sad because this is what is happening in my homeland.”
- Secondly, he also had a plan of action. The moment the king said, “How can I help you?” he replied, “If it pleases the king, and if you are pleased with me, your servant, send me to Judah to rebuild the city where my ancestors are buried. Then the king asked, “How long will you be gone? When will you return?” Again, he had done his due diligence; he had the answers. And if you’ve read the book of Nehemiah, you know that he went there. He was met with great favor along the way. He had great opposition in getting the remnant to rebuild the wall, but got it rebuilt in 52 days.

Somebody remarked that in these 10 or 11 verses, the word prayer was mentioned about 10 times. Constantly, he kept saying, “The good hand of the Lord was upon me, and so I prayed.” He soaked the whole issue in prayer.

That’s a beautiful lesson for us, and yet, it goes back to the starting point where he heard what had happened. Nehemiah went to God in prayer, went to the king, went back to Jerusalem, all because he cared for the people. And that’s the starting point even for you and me, that we must learn to care and be concerned for people.

Steve Caswell puts it like this: “Abraham cared and rescued Lot from Sodom. Moses cared and delivered the Israelites from Egypt. David cared and brought the nation and the kingdom back to the Lord. Esther cared and risked her life to save her nation from genocide. Paul cared and took the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire. Jesus cared and died on the cross for a lost world.” God is still looking for people who care, people like Nehemiah, who cared enough to ask for the facts, weep over the needs, pray for God’s help, and then volunteer to get the job done. Here am I, Lord, send me!

QUESTIONS TO ASK OF OURSELVES

Do we care?

Do we care about the troubles of our brothers and sisters, our families, our communities, our cities, the world? Do we care? Are we living in a little place, our little world, and not worried about anything else? We ought to be concerned about the things and the people around us – our families, our community, our city, our nation and all the nations of the world. What are the needs? How can I be praying? My heart should be breaking for all of those needs. And there are so many needs.

I was just looking at hunger statistics and UN's World food program. Executive director, David Beasley says this, describing conditions as a matter of life and death. He cited calculations by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, that for every COVID-19 death prevented, 80 children may die from a lack of routine vaccination. What a staggering statistic!

World Vision's statistics says that 1 in 5 children, roughly 149.2 million, are stunted by under-nutrition, malnourished. 66 million primary school age children attend classes hungry across the developing world. 500,000 children go blind every year from Vitamin A deficiency. Those are needs around the world. Maybe you can't go there; maybe not even give financially. But is your heart broken for these people, for these children who are suffering? We need to be able to engage with the world that we have been placed in, and then look to God and say, "Lord, I plead for these children." Do we care, beloved? Are we concerned?

Do we pray so fervently?

Do we grieve, do we mourn, do we fast? Do we humble ourselves and go to God and say, "Lord, please hear my prayer?" Twice in this prayer he says, "Please Lord, hear what I am saying." And his demeanor is something that we also need to put on. He wept, he mourned, he fasted and he prayed for this.

So beloved, as we end this, we look at the prayer of Nehemiah beyond the way in which he prayed. I want us also to think about what all we pray for, who all we pray for. Can we expand the ones we think about and pray for so that we are not looking at a small group that only has to do with us, but the world at large? Because that is what God's world is, and that is the world he has put us in to make a difference, to be able to care and have concern for the needs all around, and to pray with great fervency and diligence. May we accept this as a challenge from the Lord today?

Heavenly Father, we confess that we often do not pray for needs beyond ourselves. open our eyes and help us to see the needs. Draw us into that love that You have for the world. Help us to have that love so that we can have care and concern and be able to do something. Just as Nehemiah not only prayed to You, but he acted Lord, knowing that You would come through for him, I pray that Your holy presence would rest upon each one, that You would stimulate us to a greater more in-depth prayer life. in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.