

“Getting Serious About Prayer”

Nehemiah 1:5-11

On November 19, 1863, a man by the name of Edward Everett, who was said to be one of the greatest orators of his day, stood to speak before thousands who had gathered to listen to him and one other speaker dedicate a cemetery for Union soldiers killed in the Battle of Gettysburg. Everett was the first to speak, and he gave a powerful speech that lasted nearly two hours long, only to be interrupted periodically by cheers and rounds of applause. After Everett sat down, the second speaker stood, slightly adjusted his wire-rimmed glasses, and proceeded to speak for two minutes, then sat down. A member of the press corps leaned over and whispered to a colleague, “Is that all?”

The next day, newspapers around the country praised Edward Everett’s speech and had it printed on their front pages. Yet nearly 150 years later, no one can recall a word from his speech. But I would say that nearly all of us are familiar with some of the two minute speech. It began with these words:

“Fourscore and seven years ago, our father brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal...”

At the time, the press gave the speech brief coverage. Some criticized its brevity. But over time, President Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address became known as one of the greatest and most brilliant speeches ever given.

Most of the first chapter of Nehemiah consists of a simple prayer that Nehemiah prayed upon hearing the troubling news that Jerusalem lay in ruins and the people were living under reproach. It is not a long prayer, and from start to finish, you can read it in less than two minutes.

Though it is brief, Nehemiah’s prayer got heaven’s attention.

The book of Nehemiah is the record of the rebuilding project of the war-torn city of Jerusalem after centuries of neglect. In 536 B.C., Cyrus the Great, king of Persia, allowed the Jews who had been taken into captivity in Babylon to return to their native homeland and rebuild the temple that Nebuchadnezzar and his armies had destroyed. It was the custom of Cyrus to appease the gods of those nations whom he had subdued. Of course, we know that the one

true God was working in his heart, and this had been foretold many years prior through the mouths of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah.

The first group of exiles who returned to Jerusalem in 538 B.C. were led by a man named Zerubbabel. Approximately 90 years or so before the events of Nehemiah, Zerubbabel and those who returned with him from exile made it their mission to rebuild the temple, and we read about them in the first few chapters of the book of Ezra. The temple was the central component of worship in Old Testament Israel, and for that reason its reconstruction was given first priority. In the third chapter of Ezra, we are told that once the foundation was laid, the people shouted for joy. However, many of those who were old enough to remember the first temple wept because it was nowhere near its former glory.

About 75 years later, a second group of exiles returned under the leadership of Ezra. He was a scribe and wanted to ensure that the law of God and the proper worship of God be restored among the exiles. Evidently, Ezra began the work of rebuilding the city itself along with its walls, and he encounters serious opposition.

The work that Ezra tried to initiate was brought to a screeching halt, and things remained in a mess for the next 13 years until God calls Nehemiah to lead a third group of exiles to Jerusalem and launch a major rebuilding project. The first six chapters of Nehemiah record the details of the project, while the last seven record the revival that took place among the people under the leadership of both he and Ezra.

The book of Nehemiah is an ancient blueprint for getting things done God's way. Not only is it a book that articulates some very helpful principles of leadership, but more importantly it reveals the necessary steps to experience spiritual revival and renewal, and we learn from the very first chapter that it all begins with **prayer**.

God placed a call upon Nehemiah's life, and the task that God called him to was impossible. The rebuilding project of Jerusalem's walls was too great a task for him to meet in his own strength. We learn from Nehemiah that with a divine call also comes divine enablement. God equips and enables those He calls. I

If you remember from the first few verses we have already looked at, Nehemiah had a burden for the work of God. When he received word that the city still lay in ruins even after two groups of exiles had already returned, his heart was gripped by a sense of overwhelming responsibility.

He couldn't remain content as the king's cupbearer in the plush palace of Susa. He had to do something about what he heard.

Nehemiah was not content to remain passive when the remnant living in Jerusalem were living under such a reproach.

The burden that Nehemiah had brought him to his knees in a place of total surrender before God. He understood that before any great work for God will ever be accomplished, it must first be bathed in prayer.

The first thing that Nehemiah did was to take his burden to God. We will see that he was a man who prayed about everything. He prays here in chapter 1 for the simple reason that no one but God could accomplish what needed to be done if the walls of Jerusalem were to ever rise again. Amazingly, what had not been done in 143 years is completed in only 52 days.

If we are going to get serious about prayer, then there are four or five principles that we must learn about prayer from Nehemiah.

1. Prayer is an ACT of worship

“And I said, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love Him and keep His commandments...”

Nehemiah's first response is to hit his knees in worship. He knows that the situation demands the help of God rather than man. His faith is in a sovereign God who has all power and has all resources at His divine disposal. He knows that God is sovereign, and that man is servant.

Some people approach prayer as if God is servant to man, like some cosmic bellhop or genie in a lamp. Prayer is not our manipulating and controlling God, but is instead God controlling and guiding us. It is not about me getting my will done in heaven, it is about God getting His will done on earth.

Oswald Chambers, “My Utmost for His Highest” (8-28) - *“Prayer is not a normal part of the life of the natural man. We hear it said that a person's life will suffer if he doesn't pray, but I question that. What will suffer is the life of the Son of God in him, which is nourished not by food, but by prayer. When a person is born again from above, the life of the Son of God is born in him, and he can either starve or nourish that life. Prayer is the way that the life of God in us is*

nourished. Our common ideas regarding prayer are not found in the New Testament. We look upon prayer simply as a means of getting things for ourselves, but the biblical purpose of prayer is that we may get to know God Himself.”

Notice what Nehemiah says to God as he begins his prayer. He starts by acknowledging the truth that:

God is transcendent

He is the Lord God of heaven. You will notice that Nehemiah’s prayer follows the same outline for prayer that Jesus gave to us in the model prayer of Matthew 6. Although we come boldly before His throne, we always acknowledge that He is righteous, holy, and infinite.

The fact that He is God in heaven is not so much a reference to His dwelling place as it is to His divine attributes. It is a way of expressing the truth of God’s transcendence and sovereignty.

He is majestic

As the great and awesome God, He is more than we could ever fully comprehend in our finite minds. The right kind of praying places God on His throne and humanity at His feet.

Psalm 99:1 - “The Lord reigns, let the people tremble; He is enthroned above the cherubim, let the earth shake! Exalt the Lord our God and worship at His footstool; Holy is He.”

He is both loving and terrifying. He is both gracious and holy. He is all merciful, and at the same time, all powerful and just. Without this proper perspective of God, we will not pray with the proper priority.

He is faithful

Notice that Nehemiah recognizes God’s faithfulness. He always keeps His covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep His commandments.

Prayer that has God’s attention is prayer in which one’s attention is God. Such prayer has a proper balance of boldness and humility.

2. Prayer is an ATTITUDE of total dependence

“Let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, to hear the prayer of Your servant that I now pray before You day and night for the people of Israel Your servants...”

Once you understand that God is sovereign, and your heart is intent upon worship, then you can easily trust Him with the details of your life. Those who use prayer as a means of manipulation only reveal that they have no faith.

Paul teaches the Philippians this same truth:

Philippians 4:4-7 - “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Nehemiah understood that he was helpless apart from the power of God in his life. His prayer reflects an attitude of trust and total dependence upon God.

Someone has said that a prayerless Christian is like a bus driver trying alone to push his bus out of a ditch because he doesn't know that Clark Kent is on board.

John Piper - *“Until you believe that life is war, you cannot know what prayer is for. Prayer is for the accomplishment of a wartime mission. It is as though the field commander (Jesus) called in the troops, gave them a crucial mission (“Go and bear fruit”), handed each of them a personal transmitter coded to the frequency of the general's headquarters, and said, “Comrades, the general has a mission for you. He aims to see it accomplished. And to that end he has authorized me to give each of you personal access to him through these transmitters. If you stay true to his mission and seek his victory first, he will always be as close as your transmitter, to give tactical advice and to send in air cover when you or your comrades need it.”*

But what have millions of Christians done? They have stopped believing that we are in a war. No urgency, no watching, no vigilance, no strategic planning. Just easy peacetime and prosperity. And what did they do with the walkie-talkie? They tried to rig it up as an intercom in their cushy houses and cabins and boats and cars - not to call in fire power for conflict with a mortal enemy, but to ask the maid to bring another pillow to the den...We have so domesticated

prayer that it is no longer, in many of our lives and churches, what it was created to be - a wartime walkie-talkie for the accomplishment of mission commands.”

In this way, prayer is not so much the communication of our will to God as it is first the surrender of our will to God.

3. Prayer is an ACCEPTANCE of personal responsibility

“...confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against You. Even I and my father’s house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that You commanded Your servant Moses.”

An attitude of pride in one’s life leads that person to shift blame to everyone else around him or her. True humility before God accepts personal responsibility and is quick to make confession.

Notice how this is seen in Nehemiah’s life. Pay careful attention to the words “I, my, we” in the text. The first thing that Nehemiah says is, “Lord, I am responsible. Not only do I want to be part of the solution, but I am confessing that I am part of the problem.” This kind of praying takes guts.

Nehemiah is not simply confessing the sins of others, but is showing solidarity with his fellow countrymen. Maybe for the first time in his life he is struck by the fact that he was not supposed to be in Susa—he was supposed to be in Jerusalem.

Our fallen nature likes to shift blame to someone else when there is a problem. We can come up with countless ways that a person has shown stubbornness and unwillingness to change, but very seldom do we consider our own part in the problem.

Consider how this often plays out:

- husbands and wives
- personal friendships
- within the church

Do you want to experience real power and closeness with God in prayer? You can’t without getting totally honest before Him.

Psalm 51:7 - “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.”

Brokenhearted people are those who are used by God to restore and bless a broken world. They understand His greatness and their guilt.

But it doesn't stop there, for they also understand something about His grace! They understand the truth of 1 John 1:9, which reminds us that if we confess our sin, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from **all** unrighteousness!

4. Prayer is an ASSURANCE of divine promises

“Remember the word that You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, but if you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make My name dwell there.’ They are Your servants and Your people, whom You have redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand.”

Not only is prayer an act of worship, an attitude of surrender, and an acceptance of personal responsibility, but notice also that prayer is an assurance of divine promises. Nehemiah goes back to Scripture and builds his prayer on the truth that God has revealed. He quotes from at least ten different passages from the Law of Moses where God made promises to Israel.

It is as if he is saying, “Lord, I am opening up the Book before You. These are the very words that You spoke, the promises that You made to Your people of old. I am claiming these promises right now, Lord.”

He uses the covenant name of God, translated as “LORD” in all caps because it represents the promise keeping nature of God. He calls upon the covenant keeping God of Israel to remember His promise.

One of the benefits of knowing redemptive history is this—because God has done it in the past, you know He can do it in the future.

John Calvin - *“From past events and benefits received, the godly reason even as to God’s future kindness, and infer that He will also take care of them for the future. Having therefore*

experienced God's kindness, let us also learn to hope for the future, and since He has shown Himself to be so kind and bountiful, let us steadfastly fix our hearts in the hope of future assistance." (comments on Is. 26:12)

Paul says that this was true of Abraham's faith:

Romans 4:20-21 - "No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised."

Nehemiah had a firm grasp upon the truth of Scripture, and the truth of Scripture had a firm grasp upon him. He is not seeking explanations, but rather is trusting in promises.

Effective prayer must be saturated in the truth of Scripture. When we fill our minds and hearts with the promises of God's Word and confess these in prayer, it strengthens our faith and resolve.

5. Prayer is ASKING specific requests

"O Lord, let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who delight to fear Your name, and give success to Your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man." Now I was cupbearer to the king."

It is only after Nehemiah has spent time in worship, confessed sin and taken personal responsibility for Jerusalem's walls, and filled His mind and heart with God's truth, that he begins to make his specific request known to God.

Instead of speaking in broad generalities, Nehemiah makes specific requests. He specifically requests for God to touch the heart of King Artaxerxes so he could make the walls of Jerusalem his focus. He first seeks the favor of heaven's King before he does an earthly king!

Oswald Chambers - *"Ask, and you will receive..." (John 16:24). We complain before God, and sometimes we are apologetic or indifferent to Him, but we actually ask Him for very few things. Yet a child exhibits a magnificent boldness to ask! Our Lord said, "...unless you...become as little children..." (Matthew 18:3). Ask and God will do. Give Jesus Christ the opportunity and the room to work. The problem is that no one will ever do this until he is at his wits' end. When a person is at his wits' end, it no longer seems to be a cowardly thing to pray; in fact, it is the only*

way he can get in touch with the truth and the reality of God Himself. Be yourself before God and present Him with your problems— the very things that have brought you to your wits' end. But as long as you think you are self-sufficient, you do not need to ask God for anything. To say that "prayer changes things" is not as close to the truth as saying, "Prayer changes me and then I change things." God has established things so that prayer, on the basis of redemption, changes the way a person looks at things. Prayer is not a matter of changing things externally, but one of working miracles in a person's inner nature."

When it comes to getting things done God's way, it all starts with prayer. Here's what prayer does:

- it teaches us patience
- it gives us perspective
- it brings us peace
- it makes us productive

Right now in your life, what do you need to take to God in an altar of prayer? Through the blood of Jesus, the way into the throne room of heaven has been opened up for you. There is nothing in your life right now that is too big that a sovereign God can't handle.

*I must tell Jesus all of my trials;
I cannot bear these burdens alone;
In my distress He kindly will help me;
He ever loves and cares for His own.*

*I must tell Jesus! I must tell Jesus!
I cannot bear my burdens alone;
I must tell Jesus! I must tell Jesus!
Jesus can help me, Jesus alone.*

If we are going to get things done God's way, then we must get serious about prayer.