

Nehemiah's Prayers
Nehemiah 1:1-2:8
ABC 5/24/20

In January we talked about being *devoted to prayer* from Col 4 & I told you we'd be looking at some of the great prayers of Scripture throughout the year. We then spent 3 weeks looking at Daniel's prayer in chpt 9. Daniel's prayer for his people was offered with fasting, in sackcloth & ashes, & ended with the words: **O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen & take action! For Your own sake, O my God, do not delay, because Your city & Your people are called by Your name** (Dan 9:19). The goal for each of us is to pray more this year than we did last year. Prayer isn't to be for emergency use only. Prayer is our oxygen. If you're going to live physically, you need to breathe. If you're going to live & grow & bear fruit as a Christian, you need to pray. Then on March 8th we looked at Col 4 once again & saw what Paul says about prayer & what he requested prayer for. &, yes, I chose that somewhat selfishly. As you know, I left for Ethiopia 4 days later. Hard to believe, that was the last time I saw many of you face-to-face. & I again, thank you for your prayers. God opened up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ. But that door was closed a few days after we got there & you prayed us home. As we've finished the 8 parables in Mt 13, I thought it a good time to look at another great prayer of Scripture. The book of Nehemiah is the 1st book I ever preached through back in 1988. Fortunately, I have no copies or recordings of those sermons! But Nehemiah's prayers are great ones. This morning we'll narrow ourselves to the 1st 2 recorded prayers of Nehemiah, although there are many others throughout the book. (Trivia—longest recorded prayer in the Bible? Neh 9:5-38). The most important thing about Nehemiah is that he was a man of God, & because he was close to God in prayer, he was able to draw from God the wisdom, patience, & perseverance he needed to complete the task God gave him. Nehemiah definitely believed **the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much** (Js 5:16). This wasn't something he just talked about. He prayed. Nehemiah knew that in moments of pain & helplessness we have access to God, the One who can help us make our way through life's toughest times. As you know, Nehemiah went to Jerusalem from the Persian capital of Susa in about 444 BC in order to rebuild the city. It was destroyed 141 years earlier when Babylonian King

Nebuchadnezzar attacked Judah & carried off most of its people. Jerusalem had been burned & its walls torn down. Nothing of value was left. As the decades slipped by, grass & trees had grown up in the deserted streets & pathways & nature had reclaimed the destroyed walls. The only people available to do the work of reconstruction were exiles who'd begun to return to Jerusalem nearly a century earlier. They'd tried to build the wall then & on several later occasions, but they failed each time & were discouraged. But under Nehemiah the job was completed in just 52 days. How did he do it? Nehemiah's testimony is it was accomplished by God working through him & those who helped him. When he 1st asked the Persian king Artaxerxes for permission to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls & Artaxerxes agreed, Nehemiah didn't boast of his skills but said, **the king granted *them* to me because the good hand of my God *was* on me** (Neh 2:8). When he was later opposed by Sanballat & Tobiah, Nehemiah declared, **the God of heaven will give us success** (20). When the wall was finished, he testified that **this work had been accomplished with the help of our God** (Neh 6:16).¹ How was it that this all came about? **1:1-2:8**

People cry about a lot of things. Some cry at weddings or when their kids leave home. Some cry at the birth of their children. Others cry at sad movies. Today we see Nehemiah crying about a broken wall. According to Ezra 4 (11-23), an attempt at rebuilding the walls had been made a few years earlier. But when some Samaritans & others complained, Artaxerxes issued an order to stop it. In Nov/Dec, 444 BC, Nehemiah was serving as cupbearer to this same Artaxerxes at his winter capital in Susa (1:11). The cupbearer was a high position in the court. His responsibility was to choose & taste the wine before it was served to the king to make sure it wasn't poisoned. He would have been well-trained in court etiquette. He'd have to be a friendly companion, willing to lend an ear & even to give advice to the king. Since he enjoyed closest access to the king, he was a highly trusted man. Ancient documents suggest the cupbearer could even be the keeper of the royal signet, in charge of accounts, & even serve as 2nd to the king.² Nehemiah likely lived in the palace with the king. Excavations have shown it was built with cedar, gold, silver, & ivory. The walls were

¹ Boice, J. M. *Nehemiah: an expositional commentary*, pp 9–10

² Edwin Yamauchi, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 4:683

decorated with artistically colored glazed bricks & relief designs of winged bulls.³ Nehemiah would have eaten the best food, worn the best clothes, & lived in comfortable quarters. It was a cushy job! We don't know why he hadn't returned with Ezra 13 years before. Perhaps, like Daniel & his friends, he'd been forced into the king's service as a young man & wasn't free to leave. We read in vs 3 that Nehemiah inquired about the condition of the city & the people & heard **the remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress & reproach, & the wall of Jerusalem is broken down & its gates are burned with fire.** **Reproach** means sharp, cutting, penetrating, or piercing. The people in Jerusalem were experiencing a miserable, depressed, hard time. They're being harassed by their enemies & were living in constant fear of attack. Their lives were like the walls that surrounded them, in ruins. Nehemiah knew most of these facts already. But this graphic, eyewitness description of the scene by Nehemiah's brother devastated him. He wept, mourned, fasted, & prayed for days, asking God to do something about this. When he hears about the distress of God's people & the dishonor to God's name, he can't be comfortable in his job & surroundings. He was willing to give it all up, make the difficult journey to Jerusalem, & try to mobilize the people to rebuild the walls so God's name would be honored among His people. Was it a costly sacrifice? Yes & no. Yes, he had to give up all of the comforts he enjoyed & endure a lot of hardship. But, no, in that he could no longer be happy doing what he'd been doing. He found joy in doing what God wanted him to do. Like Paul, he counted it all rubbish so that he might gain Christ (Phil 3:8).

When we compare the dates of 1:1 with the date of 2:1, we find Nehemiah didn't hear about this need & immediately rush in before the king with his request to go to Jerusalem & rebuild the wall. Rather, he waited on God in prayer for 4 months before the opportunity arose to talk with the king. He wept, mourned, fasted, & prayed for days about what he'd heard. He couldn't put it out of his mind. He couldn't stop praying about it. This tells us he was a man who prayed frequently about everything. Prayer was a habit for him. But I suspect that, in this case at least, Nehemiah prayed for the simple reason that no one but God could accomplish what needed to be done if the walls

³ Donald K. Campbell, *Nehemiah: Man in Charge*, pp 7-8

were to rise again. History tells us prayer made Abraham Lincoln the man he was & for the same reason. He said on one occasion, *I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom & that of those about me seemed insufficient for the day.*⁴ That's what we see in Nehemiah. He was realistic in assessing the problem. He realized the problem wasn't a lack of organization, although they needed someone to take charge, which Nehemiah later did. The problem wasn't a lack of resources, although the project did require them. The root problem was sin. So he prayed & we can learn from him just as we did from Daniel.

1. Attitude of Prayer Nehemiah was an important man even before his success in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. After all, he had access to the king as his cupbearer. While many important people are quite arrogant, we don't see this in Nehemiah. Yes, he was a man of courage & action, as is seen later in the story. But here he humbles himself before God even to the point of tears & fasting. Nehemiah isn't presumptuous & knows that only God can do what needs to be done. Therefore, he comes submissively & seriously. We need people who pray like this today as well.

2. The Prayer (5–11). There's a familiar acrostic for prayer that you've probably heard: A-C-T-S, in which *A* stands for *adoration*, *C* for *confession*, *T* for *thanksgiving*, & *S* for *supplication*. Each of these is present in Nehemiah's prayer.

A. Adoration We see this in vs 5-6a:

I beseech You, O LORD God of heaven, the great & awesome God, who preserves the covenant & lovingkindness for those who love Him & keep His commandments, let Your ear now be attentive & Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day & night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants.

This is a summary of Nehemiah's regular prayers, as is evident by his saying he prayed like this **day & night**. It's a short statement, but it acknowledges several great attributes of God, including His sovereignty, love, faithfulness, & His ability to see & hear all that's going on. He doesn't proceed to the other elements of his prayer until he's reminded himself of the greatness & character of the God to whom he's praying. We see this time & time again in the prayers in

⁴ Quoted by Cyril J. Barber, in *Nehemiah & the Dynamics of Effective Leadership*, p 19

Scripture. We saw it in Daniel 9. How does, what we call, the Lord's Prayer begin? **Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven** (Mt 6:9-10). After acknowledging who God is & praising Him for it, he moves to...

B. Confession He confesses the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I & my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against You & have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses (6b-7). Didn't Jesus teach us to do this? **Forgive us our debts...** (Mt 6:12). Nehemiah knew the sin of the Israelites had caused the judgment of God that resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem. If Jerusalem were to be restored, it would need to be restored upon the basis of a confession of these sins. So Nehemiah is specific about them: **We ... have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.** What's most striking about his confession is he includes himself in these sins, just as Daniel did in his prayer in Dan 9. He takes collective responsibility for the sins of God's people. The reason why they're in the mess they're in, the reason why there's trouble in Jerusalem, is because they've sinned as a nation. There are 2 important principles here. 1st, Nehemiah recognizes the principle of commonality; he is one with the people. His sins are their sins & theirs are his. He doesn't try to distance himself from them. 2nd, he recognizes that he himself is a sinner. There's no sin of the people that led to the fall of Jerusalem of which he isn't guilty or isn't capable of having done in the same circumstances. That's true of all of us. Don't think so highly of yourself, believing there's any sin you're not capable of committing.

The Bible's clear that at the root of all our global & personal problems is sin. Why are there wars & terrorists & natural disasters? Sin. Why is there famine & disease & viruses? Sin. Why are governments & businesses filled with greed & corruption? Sin. Why is the mission of the church not fulfilled? Sin. On the personal level, why do couples argue & have problems communicating? Sin. Why do kids rebel against God & their parents? Sin. Whatever the problem, you can trace it back to sin, either to the original sin of Adam & Eve or to the sins of the people with the problems. If God is going to use us to help lessen any great need, we need to keep in mind, that at the root

of the problem is human sin. But it's not just the sins of others that we need to be aware of. We must be aware of & confess our own sins. Nehemiah included himself with the sins of the people. Staying aware of our own sins keeps us humbled before God & others so that we won't sit on our high horse of arrogance in judgment on them. Nehemiah was a man of prayer & became a great leader because he was aware of the fact he was as weak & as capable of sin as anyone else. Is that true of you? By his repentance, Nehemiah represents his people in a way that brings about God's mercy to them once again. The 3rd element in this & all good prayers is...

C. Thanksgiving Here it's expressed in Nehemiah's review of God's promises:

Remember the word which You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples; but *if* you return to Me & keep My commandments & do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there & will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.' They are Your servants & Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power & by Your strong hand (8-10).

These words aren't an exact quotation of any OT passage, but clearly express the great principle given to them in Lev (chpt 20) & Deut (chpts 28 & 30). God's covenant with them had 2 sides: Blessing & judgment. It was conditional. If the people obeyed God, He'd bless them & establish them securely in the land. But if they disobeyed Him, He'd scatter them. & that's exactly what happened. The northern kingdom was scattered in 721 BC & the southern kingdom in 586 BC. Nehemiah reviews this promise because although it contains a warning of judgment following disobedience (which the people had experienced), it also suggests a time of blessing if the people should repent. Nehemiah reminds God (& himself) of God's promise to gather His people from where He's scattered them for their disobedience. Then he prays, **They are Your servants & Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power & by Your strong hand (1:10)**. 5x in that vs he repeats **you** & **your** as if to say, *These aren't my people, God; they're Your people. Your reputation is at stake*. Like Daniel, Nehemiah bases his prayer on the promises of God. Are our prayers like that? Jesus said, **I will build My church** (Mt 16:18). Do you believe that? It's encouraging when we face situations to remember the promises of God. When we feel lonely we recall that God said He'd never leave nor forsake us (Heb 13:5). When we've sinned for the 1000th time we remember His Word says if we confess our sins He will forgive them (1 Jn 1:9). When we get down on ourselves

for our weaknesses we recall that Jesus sympathizes with our weaknesses (Heb 4:15). So we call on God, not to hold Him accountable to His Word, but to declare to Him that we're standing on His Word. We believe He is faithful. We aren't demanding from God but are clinging to Him. Nehemiah was holding fast to the hope of God's Word that He'd bring His people back to Jerusalem. The 4th & final element in the ACTS acrostic is...

D. Supplication How does Nehemiah close his prayer? Having acknowledged God's greatness, confessed his own sin, & thankfully reviewed God's promises, he now gives his petition to God: **O Lord, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant & the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your name, & make Your servant successful today & grant him compassion before this man (11). This man** he refers to at the end was King Artaxerxes, whom Nehemiah introduces in the next vs, the 1st vs of chapter 2. Nehemiah recognizes the king is key to anything happening & that God is the key to changing the king's heart. President Harry Truman referred to leaders as one *who has the ability to get other people to do what they don't want to do, & like it.*⁵ But if you've ever tried to get someone to do what he doesn't want to do & to like doing it, you know how difficult that is. How do you get people to change their minds? Generally, you can't, but God can, even in the case of kings. From a human point of view, Artaxerxes was the only person who could help solve the problem. He'd given the order to stop the building process in the 1st place & he'd be the only one who could reverse it. This explains why Nehemiah prayed so specifically & asked God to **grant him compassion before this man (1:11)**. Prov 21:1 puts it this way: **The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes. Channels** refers to canals or irrigation ditches that run in various directions from a main source of water. We could read it this way: *Like irrigation canals of water is the heart of a king in the hand of Jehovah.* The writer is saying the heart of the king, where all decisions are made, is in the hands of the Lord. God determines the decisions of the king's heart. **He turns it** is more vividly translated as, *He causes it to bend.* In other words, *Like irrigation canals of water is the heart of a king in Jehovah's hand. He causes it to bend & incline in whatever direction God pleases.* Hudson

⁵ Donelson Forsyth, *Group Dynamics*, p 247

Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission, knew this secret. He rightly states, *It is possible to move men through God by prayer alone.*⁶ Did you also notice, it's not just Nehemiah praying? It's also the **prayer of Your servants**. He's not in this alone. He's enlisted other believers to pray with him. & they all were delighting **to revere** or **fear** God's **name** (11). What are God's people like? They're those who delight to fear God's name. I love that. Delight & fear or reverence together. Do we delight to revere our God? Do we show that in our prayers to Him?

3. Persistent Prayer Chapter 2 begins with a date that, when compared with 1:1, shows 4 months passed between the time Nehemiah heard the report of Jerusalem until his opportunity to speak to the king. During that time, Nehemiah was so burdened by the news that he wept, mourned, fasted, & prayed for God to do something about the situation in Jerusalem. We're impatient people & 4 months is forever for us to wait. But compared to other men in the Bible whom God used, 4 months was a pretty short wait. Abraham waited over 25 years for God to give him Isaac. Joseph spent time as Potiphar's slave & then 2 years in prison before God elevated him to 2nd under Pharaoh. Moses spent 40 years in the desert before God used him to bring Israel out of Egypt. David spent his 20's running from King Saul. Paul spent 3 years alone in Arabia & more years in obscurity in Tarsus before God began to use him in a more significant manner. Those whom God uses must learn to wait on Him. But waiting is the hardest part! What must we do while we wait? Be like Nehemiah & pray. Obviously, this wasn't a one-shot deal. It's a summary of what Nehemiah prayed over & over again during those 4 months as the burden for God's glory & God's people in Jerusalem weighed upon him. Throughout the book, we find Nehemiah praying no less than 11 times in 13 chapters (1:5-11; 2:4; 4:4, 9; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31). Many are just sentence prayers, but they reflect the fact that in any & every situation, Nehemiah looked to God in prayer. He's an example of a man who prayed without ceasing (1 Thes 5:17). Again, **without ceasing** doesn't mean non-stop, which would be impossible. The word is used of a lingering cough & of repeated military assaults. It means prayer should be something we return to again & again. Perseverance in prayer is a characteristic of all mature Christians.

⁶ cited by Charles Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick*, p 43

Note Nehemiah's prayer in 2:4. The king notices that Nehemiah is sad in his presence, which was a breach of protocol. Kings liked to be surrounded by happy people. This could have caused Nehemiah to lose his job or even his life. Some think he deliberately staged this sadness to get things moving. I don't see that. I think his request in 1:11 was a daily prayer for 4 months. But on this particular day, Nehemiah inadvertently let his sorrow over Jerusalem show on his face, leading to this encounter. The gravity of his situation is seen in that he was **very much afraid** (2:2). It was the opportunity he'd been waiting for, but when it actually came, he was terrified. How did he handle it? **So I prayed to the God of heaven. & I said to the king....** It had to be a silent, instantaneous cry of, *Help, Lord! Or, Lord, give me wisdom!* It's like Peter sinking into the water & crying out, **Lord, save me** (Mt 14:30). This quick, popcorn prayer rested on 4 months of extended praying. Nehemiah had an instinct of prayer in a critical moment because he had a life of prayer before it. It's because he was always praying. This statement about his instinct for prayer here is only true because he's spent 4 months praying for this moment. Let me turn that around: if you're not always praying, if you don't have a pattern of prayer, you can't guarantee in a crisis that your 1st reaction is going to be one of prayer. This shows that Nehemiah depended on the Lord in every situation. One reason God makes us wait on Him is to teach us to depend on Him in prayer. If He immediately granted everything we ask for, we'd grab the goodies & forget God. But when we wait on God in prayer, we learn to seek God Himself & to depend on Him in ways we'd never learn any other way. &, when the answer finally comes, we realize it's because of one reason: **the good hand of my God was on me**. Thus we give Him all the glory He deserves. Waiting reveals our impatience & teaches us to be patient. Patience is a fruit of the Spirit that God wants to develop in all of His children. Nehemiah's waiting on God in prayer in chpt 1 was remarkable in light of his natural bent for swift, decisive action, & *it shows where his priorities lay*.⁷ He didn't hear about the scene in Jerusalem & immediately rush into the king's presence asking for a year's leave of absence because God had called him to Jerusalem. No, for 4 months he concealed this burden from the king

⁷ Derek Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah Tyndale OT Commentaries*, p 78

& presented it to God in private, until God finally opened the opportunity to talk with the king. Only then did Nehemiah move ahead.

Do we see the needs of others & grieve over them? Nehemiah saw the need & wept. But even more important than his tears was the fact that he prayed, since it's God alone who's able to change hearts, move kingdoms, & provide for our needs. The kings of Persia were absolute rulers. Their word was law. & they were difficult. That's probably an understatement. Since their policies were resented by those they ruled, they were almost always in danger of assassination or revolt, so they were usually suspicious of any wrong moves or apparent lack of loyalty by their underlings. We see a trace of this in Neh 2:2, when the king notices that Nehemiah is sad & asks about it. **Why is your face sad though you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart.** Nehemiah wasn't overcome with gratitude that a person as important & busy as Artaxerxes should take notice of & be concerned for him. Rather, as he tells us, he **was very much afraid**. He had a right to be. Persian rulers didn't like their people to be gloomy in their presence. To be sad in the king's presence was dangerous enough. In addition, Nehemiah wanted to go to Jerusalem & rebuild its walls. But it was this same king who earlier had stopped work on the rebuilding of the walls. Nehemiah's plan meant asking him to reverse his own policy. The king asks what Nehemiah wants & he realizes that after months of prayer the decisive moment has arrived. He's ready to speak. But before he speaks, he utters a quick prayer to **the God of heaven** (4).

Dependence on God doesn't eliminate planning any more than it eliminates hard work. But while Nehemiah was planning, he was also praying. After the king had granted his request to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls & had agreed to supply him with the necessary letters of requisition, Nehemiah acknowledged that in the final analysis his success wasn't due to his own planning but to God: **the king granted *them* to me because the good hand of my God *was* on me** (8). Nehemiah had done everything he possibly could, but when he achieved success he acknowledged it had come about not because of his wisdom but because God had been with him.

Artaxerxes grants Nehemiah's requests. Not only did he grant them, but he seems to have exceeded what Nehemiah asked for since he also sent army officers & cavalry along with him. God

supplied over & above what Nehemiah could've expected. God will provide beyond what we ask Him for too. Haven't you found that to be the case? It's true that God doesn't always answer our prayers when or how we expect Him to. There are willful, stubborn prayers that shouldn't even be prayed. But when we pray in God's will & wait on Him to answer in His own time, we find that what God does is perfect; it's that **good & acceptable & perfect** will Paul writes of in Rom 12:2 & it's so often beyond our expectations. As Paul also says, **God is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us** (Eph 3:20).

The rest of the book of Nehemiah is an account of how he, through God's power, overcame one obstacle after another. There was overt & covert opposition from enemies. There were problems within the ranks that could've stopped the work. But Nehemiah persisted & the wall was completed in 52 days! If you try to do anything in service for the Lord, you will face obstacles & opposition. You have to realize that you'll encounter problems & commit yourself to God & His purpose to endure. & you do that through prayer.

Let me leave you with what Chuck Swindoll says about why prayer is important. 1st, it makes us wait. We can't earnestly pray &, at the same time, rush out ahead of God. We have to wait till we finish praying. 2nd, it clears our vision. It enables us to see situations through God's eyes & not just through our own. 3rd, it quiets our hearts. We can't continue to worry & pray at the same time. That's true isn't it? One will force the other out, depending on what we choose. & 4th, prayer activates our faith. & with that faith comes an attitude of hope & peace which replaces the petty & critical attitude that comes when we don't pray.⁸ May our time together looking at Nehemiah's prayer encourage us to do the same.

⁸ *Hand Me Another Brick: A Study of Nehemiah*, p 15