

February 25, 2024

INSIGHTS FROM THE PRAYERS OF A FAITHFUL MAN

Nehemiah 1-2

(5 of 9 in a series through Ezra-Nehemiah)

Prayer is as difficult as it is necessary. I doubt that anyone would argue with its necessity, and only a few would challenge the idea that it can be difficult. One thing that makes it difficult is that it doesn't appeal to our flesh. Perhaps we might think that applies to all disciplines of the Christian life, but I don't think that's quite true. If you read your Bible and even memorize Scripture, it can serve to puff you up. Your Bible knowledge will show itself, others might be impressed, and you start to think real highly of yourself. But it's hard to imagine prayer working that way. Jesus tells us to pray in our closet, where we're not seen, and no one praises us. It certainly doesn't lead to prestige. So it's one discipline that is not only challenging but does nothing to earn you earthly praise. And yet, prayer is nothing short of the divinely prescribed means through which the Lord works in our world to bring about the furtherance of his kingdom. He explicitly commands us to pray daily, "Let your kingdom come." He tells us that all the nations will have people come and bow the knee to Jesus as Lord, but he tells us to pray that he'll send laborers into the harvest. And I could go on. Suffice is to say that prayer is an absolute necessity in the Christian life. Yet, as I've noted, it can be as challenging as it is necessary.

So, if you struggle with prayer, the good news is that the Bible often reminds us of the importance of prayer, gives us models for what faithful prayer looks like, and—as we examine these texts—indirectly exhorts us to prayer. So we need to bring ourselves back to these texts that hold up prayer before us and exhort us in it often. And one such text that does this for us is the very passage we're looking at this morning: Nehemiah 1-2.

But, first, let's orient ourselves a bit with where we are in the story. A number of weeks back, we began a study through the books of Ezra-Nehemiah, and I mentioned then that these two books were traditionally seen as one book as they tell one story. Therefore, when we pick up in Nehemiah, we're continuing the story we've seen to this point of the exiles in Persia heading back home to rebuild the temple and restore life back in Jerusalem. And the last thing we saw was Ezra being sent back to Jerusalem and attempting to instruct the people there in the law of God, rebuke them if necessary, and bring them in line with what God's Word commands of them. Ezra was doing this as the book of Ezra ended with the people of God turning from their sins and separating themselves from foreign wives who were following false gods. That was about 458 BC.

Now, as the book of Nehemiah opens, we've moved forward about thirteen years to 445 BC. Artaxerxes is still king, and we're in the twentieth year of his reign. And we're introduced to a new character named Nehemiah who had an important and prominent role in the Persian kingdom as the cupbearer to the king. We know this from the last verse of chapter 1 (v. 11).

The cupbearer's job was, well, kind of like it sounds. He would serve the king his food and drink. But, more importantly, he would taste it before serving it so as to make sure it wasn't poisoned. After all, a king always had enemies, and poisoning him would be an easy way to take him out. However, because he had a cupbearer, any attempt to poison him would be thwarted as the cupbearer himself would be poisoned, and the king would then pass on that day's menu items. This also meant that the cupbearer would be someone greatly trusted by the king.

But the book of Nehemiah doesn't take us through Nehemiah's rise to the role of cupbearer or his adventures in tasting the king's food and drink daily. The story, rather, continues to focus the reader on what's going on in Jerusalem. The story begins with a man named, Hanani, whom Nehemiah identifies as "one of my brothers" (whether meaning his literal brother or just a fellow Israelite, I don't know) coming to him with a report on how things were in Jerusalem. And the report is given to Nehemiah in 1:3 as we're told, "And they said to me, 'The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.'"

Now, it could be that this report about the wall of Jerusalem being broken down and the gates being destroyed by fire is simply a report about how things have been since all the way back in 586 BC when Babylon first destroyed the city and hauled off the exiles nearly a century and a half earlier. But I doubt it. I can't be sure, but I'm going to guess that this report is of a more recent tragedy.

Remember back in Ezra 4 when people were opposing the building of the temple during the reign of Darius, and we noted that in the middle of that chapter that Ezra flashed forward to a time one hundred years into the future when people were opposing the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem? We were told in Ezra 4:7-23 that during the days when Artaxerxes reigned some people who didn't want the Jews rebuilding the city wrote a letter to the king, telling him that the Jews were "rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city . . . finishing the walls and repairing the foundations" (4:12). And they noted that historically the Israelites had been a rebellious people, obviously suggesting that they were rebuilding the walls in order to shield themselves as they planned to go to war with the king himself. Therefore, Artaxerxes had issued a decree that the walls and the city were not to be rebuilt until a decree be issued by him. Then, that section ended with these words, "Then, when the copy of King Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their associates, they went in haste to the Jews at Jerusalem and *by force and power made them cease*" (4:23).

Now, my guess is that when the text says, "by force and power made them cease," that means that these enemies of the Israelites, with the king's decree in hand, tore down any of the wall that had been rebuilt and burned the gates that had been restored. And now, as Nehemiah opens, this is the news he's getting. Any advance in rebuilding the wall or the city had been stopped and all rebuilding destroyed. It could be a good while after that initially happened, but the report serves to tell Nehemiah that no more advance in being made in restoring Jerusalem. And it crushed Nehemiah as we're told that he "wept and mourned for days" (1:4).

But that's not all he did. He began to pray, and it's here that I want to focus us this morning by looking at some aspects of prayer that are crucial as we seek to imitate the faith of Nehemiah in our text. And the first thing I want to note is that prayer ought to be a consistent and faithful practice in our lives.

Prayer should be a consistent and faithful practice in our lives

That is, we ought to pray regularly and faithfully and press on with endurance any time we're tempted to grow weary in it. Let me show how Nehemiah does this. We read in 1:4, "As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven." Now, when the text tells us that he did this "for days" and "continued fasting and praying," how many days is he talking about exactly?

Well, I think we have our answer if we follow the flow of the text. In 1:4 we're told he prayed for days and continued praying. Then we're given the content of his prayer in 1:5-11, which we'll look at shortly. Then, chapter 2 begins with a time marker, starting with the words "In the month of Nisan" (2:1), which is around March or April. And the events of chapter 1 took place "in the month of Chislev" (1:1), which is around November or December. What this means is that for four months Nehemiah made it a pattern to pray for the Lord to enable the walls of Jerusalem to be rebuilt. And not only did he continue fasting and praying for these days, but he notes that he prayed for the people of Israel "day and night" (1:6). So, he prayed twice a day, every day, for four months.

Again, we'll look at the content of his prayers in a second, but for now let's not move past the fact that he faithfully prayed for this issue that gripped his heart twice a day for four months. This is a model for us. As believers, when we find ourselves burdened over an issue of great importance—such as the rebuilding of the wall for Nehemiah or perhaps the holiness of our children for us—we should make it a regular part of our prayers, and our prayers should be uttered daily, faithfully, and consistently.

Now, it will be the case later that Nehemiah utters a spontaneous prayer as he's before the king, and that's glorious and something we should repeat as well. But the pattern and discipline we need to develop in our lives is a daily, established routine of prayer. I'm not saying it has to be morning and night, but without a plan to pray consistently I doubt that we'll ever become faithful in prayer. There are just too many demanding things that can crowd it out and many more things that appeal to our flesh. But, if we establish a schedule to pray daily, what should our prayers look like? This brings us to our second point: prayer should be based on God's Word.

Prayer should be based on God's Word

The content of Nehemiah's prayer is given to us in 1:5-11. He starts the prayer with praise of God, describing how glorious and good he is, moves on to confession, and then makes his request. But I want us to see two things. First, as he's describing how good and glorious God is,

he describes him as the “awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments” (1:5). Well, when Moses instructed the people about God’s law in Deuteronomy 7:9, he’d said, “Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments.” That is to say, Nehemiah quotes verbatim from Deuteronomy 7:9 in his prayer. And he isn’t the only one. This exact description of God is found in the prayers of Solomon at the dedication of the temple (1 King 8:23) and Daniel when he prays for God to restore his people from exile (Daniel 9:4). So, Nehemiah is basing his prayer on what God has revealed in his Word. He declares back to God who God has revealed himself to be in his law. And it doesn’t stop there.

He continues on in his prayer, saying in verses 8-9, “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 outcast 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.’” Here, Nehemiah is simply quoting from Deuteronomy 4:25-31, the text we heard read earlier in the service. He’s reminding the Lord of the promises he made to his people. But we could simply say that he’s allowing his prayers to be informed and guided by what God has revealed to us in his Word.

This is key for us in prayer. The Lord has revealed to us who he is, how he acts, and what he has promised. This should serve in guiding our prayers. For example, we know that for those whom he has justified, he also predestined them to be conformed to the image of Christ (Rom 8:29-30). Therefore, this should be a faithful aspect of our praying for one another. When someone is struggling, we can say, “Lord, you have said that your plan is to make your people like Jesus. As I pray for my brother (or sister) in this situation right now, I’m praying that you’ll make him more like Jesus in these ways.” That’s a prayer that is informed by God’s Word, even praying back to God what he has promised. Now, this doesn’t mean that we can’t pray for something God hasn’t promised. For example, God hasn’t promised he’ll heal each person from cancer, but we’re right to pray that the Lord would heal a loved one of this terrible disease. And yet, even then, we pray for healing because we know that our God has revealed to us that he is gracious to us, gives us what we don’t deserve, has the power to heal, and is willing to heal on occasion, as we see in the Scripture. And so even this prayer for healing would be based on what God has revealed to us in his Word.

For this reason, a good practice is to read our Bibles and then let it inform and guide our prayers. This can also help you focus yourself in your praying. It will keep your mind from wandering or simply opting to pray what comes to your mind only. So, these are our first two notes—pray faithfully and consistently, and allow your prayers to be informed and guided by God’s Word. Third, prayer should be based on God’s infinite power and goodness.

Prayer should be based on God’s infinite power and goodness

Perhaps this need not be said because simply to make requests to God in prayer means that you're assuming God is able and willing to answer you, which assumes he's powerful and good. But I think sometimes we don't ask for glorious and great things because we begin to doubt God's infinite power and goodness. For example, I know that abortion is far from being eradicated in our land, but was there ever a time that you thought that Roe v. Wade being overturned was too great a thing to ask God to do in prayer? And yet that's happened. God did that. Perhaps some of us find ourselves unwilling to ask God to do something like overturning homosexual marriage in our country (which is so desperately needed because it institutionalizes fatherless or motherless homes for the children brought into those homes). And the reason we don't ask is because it seems too much to think could happen. Well, in those moments, we're not trusting in the goodness and power of God as we pray.

Let me show you how Nehemiah prays with a belief in the power and goodness of God. At the end of Nehemiah's prayer in 1:11, he says, "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, when you read that, your question is, "What man is Nehemiah referring to?" Then, he immediately answers us by telling the reader, "Now I was cupbearer to the king." And it's at this point that you realize that Nehemiah is praying in light of the fact that he's planning on talking to the king about the issue. And, honestly, if you've been following the story to this point, this should make your heart start racing with nervousness. Here's why.

Remember, the reason that the walls are broken down and gate burdened (the very issue that is troubling Nehemiah) is because Artaxerxes had received an appeal from some enemies of Jerusalem saying that Jerusalem was historically a rebellious people who were seeking to revolt against the king's rule over them. Moreover, if you're happily part of the Persian Empire, then why build walls anyway? The enemies had obviously suggested that it would be to shield themselves from Persia itself should Jerusalem decide to revolt. And Artaxerxes had looked back in history, seen a pattern of revolt, and decided that these enemies were right and the wall should not be rebuilt. He'd issue a decree that it be stopped. And now Nehemiah was going to go talk to that king about the need for the wall to be rebuilt, contrary to the decree he'd made sometime earlier!

This feels like Nehemiah has a death wish. Why in the world would he risk bringing up this topic to the king, asking him to reverse his decree, when the king could easily see this as betrayal on Nehemiah's part? Well, obviously it's because he loves the Lord, his people, and Jerusalem. But it's also because he's praying that the Lord will do a miracle and believes that God is powerful and good enough to do this very thing.

And sure enough, chapter 2 begins by telling us that he was in the king's presence one day, looking sad (which was a violation of etiquette when in the king's presence), and the king asked him why he was sad. And Nehemiah admits at this moment, "I was very much afraid" (2:2). So, he answers by first asserting his loyalty to the king, saying, "Let the king live forever." But then

he adds, "Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" And this elicits a question by the king, as he asks, "What are you requesting?" And the text tells us that Nehemiah prayed (silently and quickly) once more and then asked the bold request, saying, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it" (2:3-5). And then, after telling the king how long it'd take, he requested letters (after all, it'd been opposed and then stopped by the king himself) and some timber. Then we read the glorious words: "And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me" (2:8).

That is, God is powerful and good, and this is the kind of thing that the Lord is sometimes pleased to do for his people who ask him, trusting in his power and goodness and looking to see God's kingdom furthered and name exalted. So why don't we remember God's goodness and might and start praying bold prayers for God's honor. It may be that we'll tell similar stories as Nehemiah's one day, saying, "This happened for the good hand of our God was upon us." But let me add one more thing. Prayer should be accompanied by a readiness to obey.

Prayer should be accompanied by a readiness to obey

Everything about Nehemiah's actions after the king grants his request suggests that he knows he'll face opposition. We're told in the rest of chapter 2 that he happily accepts the king's army and horsemen to accompany him on the journey (2:9), and then we're told that Nehemiah got there and inspected the walls. But his inspection (we're told repeatedly) happened "in the night," "by night," and "in the night" (2:12-13, 15), as he told no one what he was doing (2:12, 16). He's acting carefully and shrewdly because he anticipates opposition. But he's no coward. We read in 2:17 that after his inspection, he gathered the Jews with him and told them, "Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem." And sure enough, we're told that some of their enemies "jeered at [them] and despised [them]" (2:19), but Nehemiah answered their challenges, saying, "The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem" (2:20).

Nehemiah wasn't a man who wanted to stay on the sidelines, praying. He prayed fervently. He prayed consistently. He prayed in light of God's promises and who he knew God was. And he prayed, ready to act in obedience as soon as the Lord opened the door. We cannot pray with a lazy heart. We must pray for great things, saying, "And, Lord, spend me in this work however you want."

Prayer in a hard work. But it's a necessary work. And what might happen if we became a more faithfully praying people, praying in light of God's Word, praying boldly in light of God's character, and praying with a readiness to obey? My guess is that we might be able to say to others, "The God who sent his Son to live, die, and be raised for us has his good hand on us. Look at what he has done in answer to our prayers." So let's boldly approach his throne even as we boldly come to the table this morning. Amen.