

Fervent Prayer

Nehemiah 1:1-11

Prayer is hard work. I don't think that I need to convince any of you of that. Prayer requires your full effort, your diligence, your labor. It takes energy, concentration, commitment. And time, along with discipline and planning. It doesn't just happen. You have to work at it. Prayer is exercise. Paul calls it wrestling. We read in,

Col. 4:12 Epaphras, who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God."

Laboring fervently is translated "struggling" in the ESV, with a good emphasis upon the work that is required. Prayer is the exertion of a struggle, a wrestling match, and I expect that the times when you pray the most fervently are probably the times you have the greatest struggles in your own life, those times of greatest distress. That is,

I. THE CONTEXT FOR FERVENT PRAYER.

Those are the times when you pray the most earnestly. Times of trouble.

At any moment, many things might cause us trouble. We certainly know that as a church, whether it is the families struggling with flu and other sicknesses, or the more lifelong struggles that we see with both Don Johnson and Larry Johnson. There are frequently other matters that lay heavy upon my heart as a pastor, bearing in my own soul the burdens of so many of you. Burdens relating to my calling to watch over and care for your souls as God's sheep. Burdens related to health, to family life, marriages and children, to jobs, to personal conflicts. Burdens of unbelieving friends and family, of decisions, and of

significant life changes.

And the burden of sin. Dealing with my own sin, and the sins of others. And that is what faced Nehemiah, whose account we begin to study this afternoon. About 13 years had past since the events at the end of Ezra, when the people so courageously confessed their sin and repented of their evil in taking foreign wives. Thirteen years passed, and Nehemiah arrives on the scene. Actually, our text today describes his thoughts before he arrived in Judah. While he was still at the Persian capital of Susa.

These events are closely tied to what we have studied in Ezra, and in the Hebrew manuscripts, Ezra and Nehemiah are actually combined as one book. So what does Nehemiah discover, as he inquires into the condition of his people Israel? To put it simply, bad news. He discovers that the people living in Israel are doing very badly.

v.1-3

They are in distress and reproach, trouble and shame, according to verse 3. And what does he do about it? Well, shortly, as we'll see in chapter 2, he heads off to Israel to be involved personally. He goes to supervise the rebuilding of the wall and the gates. But he does something first. He prays.

And that's our sermon this afternoon—the situation Nehemiah finds and the prayer he offers because of that situation. And I want you to notice just how profound a prayer this is, just how relevant a prayer it is. Just how godly a prayer it is. And I am convinced that the best way to learn to pray is to study the biblical examples of godly prayer, such as this one. First,

I. THE CONTEXT FOR GODLY PRAYER.

That's easy. You pray the best when you are desperate.

When things are beyond your control, outside of your ability to hand the situation. When you are at your wits end. Why, you pray because you have no other alternative. For Nehemiah, that meant this,

v.3

Externally, the problem is obvious. The wall is broken down. The gates are destroyed. Perhaps there are circumstances of your own life that would be well illustrated by that description of Jerusalem. Perhaps the inward condition of your heart and should could well be illustrated in that way. The broader words he chooses are translated, “trouble and shame.” We could use the words,

A. Distress and reproach.

They are strong words in the Hebrew. Descriptive words. Distress, trouble, hardship, affliction. I don’t need to define those words, do I? They might mean something different for every one of you, in terms of the particulars, but in general we all live in the same context.

And reproach. Or shame. Insults, dangers, enduring mockery. That situation is repeated in,

Neh. 2:17 “Then I said to them, “You see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire. Come and let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer be a reproach.”

A little more specific information. Remember that the Babylonians had come to Judah and destroyed the nation, forcing the people into exile. The city walls were destroyed, along with the city gates. And, of course, the temple. So now the people of Israel are back, but their condition gave continuing evidence of their slavery and poverty. And, without walls or gates, they were

also very vulnerable and subject to attack from the outside. And surely they lived with the constant, daily scorn of those who mocked them and their religion. Surely, their God would have seemed pitiful and powerless to the unknowing observer. They were the subject of scorn and ridicule, and deep reproach. They had no respect, and it would seem outwardly, that God would not be glorified by such a sorry state of affairs among his people.

Distress and reproach. That about sums it up, doesn’t it? That about sums up our lives, and life in this age. This is an age of distress and reproach. For we live in a fallen world. And often, that is the only satisfactory answer to the situations and predicaments we often find ourselves in. Jesus told us about life in this world.

John 16:33 “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

So the world will be filled with distress and reproach. And so we grieve. In this context,

B. Spiritual grief.

v.4

That is an appropriate reaction to the troubles of this world. We are not supposed to be Stoic, nor cold-hearted. We are not designed to be flippant in the face of the trials of life. Nor superficially happy and light-hearted. No, Nehemiah took the situation seriously, and he wept. He mourned. He saw the condition of the people of Israel, and he grieved for them with the same sorrow and grief that he would have had upon the death of a loved one.

In my own heart, I bear a great love for Christ’s church, and I

have occasion often to see or hear of churches that have faced great harm. Some have been divided, some have shut their doors. I hear of churches that endure the troubles of unfaithful ministers, or divisive or immoral members. They endure the presence and exposure of heinous sin. I hear of great trouble and my heart really does grieve.

I have known a variety of cycles of such grief in the years of my pastoral ministry now, in several different churches. Time of distress and reproach. It causes grief. Sadness. Sorrow. I have felt that grief for dysfunction and disorder among God's people, and I have shed those tears that Nehemiah identifies in verse 4.

But notice so clear what he did in the midst of that grief. Notice how he responded to distress and reproach. Read the words again,
v.4

He prayed. And to intensify his prayers, he fasted. Fervent prayer. Earnest prayer. Vital prayer. My goal today as we study this prayer is two-fold. First, for instruction, that you and I might learn more effectively how to pray. And then, motivation. Encouragement, exhortation, to go about that job of praying ourselves.

So let's look more closely at,

II. THE CONTENT FOR GODLY PRAYER.

I'll begin with,
v.5-7

Notice where the prayer begins, with God. And, in particular, with a rather theologically defined God. The prayer begins with doctrine, with a definition of God. And that is what is so often

missing or lacking in the prayers of God's people today,

A. Proper knowledge of the character of God.

To pray well, you have to know God well. So what do we know about God?

v.5 "Lord God of heaven..."

That means a lot of things, but certainly included would be a reference to his identity as a spirit. God is not flesh and blood. God is not a man, and he is not a creature. His home is in heaven. He is, therefore, the creator of heaven and earth. He rules the world which he created, for heaven is his throne.

With reference to this very temple which Nehemiah is so concerned about, we read this through the prophet Isaiah,

Is. 66:1 Thus says the Lord: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest? 2 All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the Lord. But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word."

So Nehemiah doesn't pray to some unknown power. He has no sense of an unidentified higher power. There is no disrespectful irreverence, so prevalent today in the prayers of many people. No casual reference to some good buddy. Rather, he addresses the God of heaven!

The God who is great and awesome. Great means exalted above all others, high and lifted up. And awesome really ought to be translated "terrible." The word isn't as comfortable as our modern usage of awesome has become. The word here doesn't have reference to our own experience of God, which is what "awesome" usually refers to, something that causes me to marvel

or get excited. It is so much more. God is awful. Full of awe and majesty. God is terrible, that is, full of honor and worthy of our fear. Fearful, fearsome, glorious in majesty.

Just a few biblical references for God in this context.

Deut. 10:17 “For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality nor takes a bribe.”

Ps. 96:4 “For the LORD is great and greatly to be praised; He is to be feared above all gods. 5 For all the gods of the peoples are idols, But the LORD made the heavens. 6 Honor and majesty are before Him; Strength and beauty are in His sanctuary.”

Ps. 48:1 “Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised In the city of our God, In His holy mountain. 2 Beautiful in elevation, The joy of the whole earth, Is Mount Zion on the sides of the north, The city of the great King. 3 God is in her palaces; He is known as her refuge.”

That’s the God to whom we pray. High and exalted in glory. Great and awful in his presence. And faithful, the “great and awesome God” according to verse 5. The God about whom Nehemiah says, “You who keep Your covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments.”

God keeps covenant. Remember the description of the sins of the people from Ezra, they broke faith. God is just the opposite. God never breaks faith. God keeps covenant. He keeps his promises, and Nehemiah especially notes God’s promise of steadfast love!

So it is God the all-powerful, and God the all-loving. God who rules the world with authority. And God who loves his covenant

people. He shows them mercy. The Hebrew word is *chesed*, the fullness of his covenant faithfulness, his full and perfect lovingkindness.

So evaluate this for a moment. Prayer requires that you understand God’s power and the exalted nature of his glory. And that you understand the faithfulness of his lovingkindness. It is those two things together that give you the right and full sense of God, the God to whom you pray.

Secondly, Nehemiah demonstrates with his prayer,

B. Proper knowledge of the character of man.

Knowledge of God and the knowledge of man. That’s theology. That’s doctrine. That’s our faith. Knowledge of God and knowledge of man. So what is that proper knowledge regarding man? That’s easy to answer. Sinful. Man is sinful. And if you are going to pray well, you have to know and understand that full well.

v.6-7

We’ve looked at this the past two weeks, so I won’t spend too much time here today, but the obvious point is that we come before God with the conscious humility of the awareness of our own sin. As high and as exalted is the character of God, so is the lowliness and sinfulness of man. And so Nehemiah, like his godly predecessor Ezra, prays a prayer of confession of sin. Corporate confession. He pleads to God for help, but makes no effort to excuse or downplay the sin of God’s people.

We need to learn from that example. Because we do tend to downplay the sinfulness of sin. We do tend to rely upon excuses and rationalizations. We do tend to shy away from the full and unqualified expressions of our own sinfulness.

Not Nehemiah. He comes confessing “the sins of the children of Israel,” according to verse 6. He confesses to God that the people “sinned against you.” And he includes himself in that confession, “Both my father’s house and I have sinned.”

And he goes into more depth in verse 7. “We have acted very corruptly against You.” And specifically, We “have not kept the commandments, the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.”

He just laid it out on the line. With no explanations nor justification. We did it. And we’re guilty. Nehemiah understood the nature of man. As did Isaiah,

Is.64:6 “But we are all like an unclean thing, And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; We all fade as a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, Have taken us away. 7 And there is no one who calls on Your name, Who stirs himself up to take hold of You; For You have hidden Your face from us, And have consumed us because of our iniquities. 8 But now, O LORD, You are our Father; We are the clay, and You our potter; And all we are the work of Your hand. 9 Do not be furious, O LORD, Nor remember iniquity forever; Indeed, please look—we all are Your people!”

People of God, to pray properly, you need to know the character of man. You need to acknowledge the sinful character of man. And because of that, you need to know something else. Along with Nehemiah, you need to have a,

C. Proper knowledge of God’s promises. v.8-10

Beloved, that’s such a good prayer, when you say to God, Remember. “Remember what you promised...” “Remember, I pray, the word that You commanded Your servant Moses.”

Who of us could possibly think we could ask God for something and expect to receive it? After all, he is great and awesome and we are poor and sinful. What could we possibly expect from him?

Well, in a word, we can expect him to keep his promises. So, if you’re going to pray, you ought to pray the promises! That is, pray for things that he has promised to give or to do. That seems easy, doesn’t it? But it such a great lesson in learning how to pray. If you read a promise in the Bible, then look at a particular situation and don’t see the fulfillment of that promise, then ask for it!

Jas 4:2 “You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.”

“You do not have because you do not ask.” Not Nehemiah. He understood God’s promises. He knew God well enough to know what those promises were. He knew the Scriptures. He knew the warning of verse 8, quoting from Leviticus 26. The warning about being scattered as the punishment for sin. But he also knew the promise of restoration in verse 9, quoting from Deuteronomy 30.

v.9 “...but if you return to Me, and keep My commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I will gather them from there, and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for My name.”

Nehemiah has such a great prayer, and such a simple one. He knows God’s promise, and repeats it. Then he says to God, “There they are. There are your people. Now, keep your promise.”

v.10

Thus, his prayer,

v.11

Nehemiah shows us,

D. Proper boldness to seek God's blessing.

Seems impertinent, doesn't it? Too demanding. No, it isn't!

Our prayers are to be confident. Our prayers are to have this boldness, to seek God's blessing. They come with humility and the sincere declaration that we are God's "servants who desire to fear your name." But with that humility, such boldness. "Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy."

Similarly,

v.6a "...please let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, that You may hear the prayer of Your servant which I pray before You now, day and night, for the children of Israel Your servants."

Lord, give me success! That's what he prays. Specifically, grant the cupbearer of the king success and favor in the sight of the king, according to verse 11. And let this wall be rebuilt!

Let me bring all of that into our own context, with reference to Jesus.

Heb. 4:14 "Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Likewise,

Heb. 10:119 "Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, 21 and having a High Priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful."

People of God, draw near to God with fervent prayer! With confidence. And as you do, learn from this godly and faithful example of Nehemiah. Let his confidence be yours as well. In the context of distress and reproach, however that may evidence itself in your own life; in the midst of the grief and sorrow of that distress, pray to God with confidence! Know his character, his glory. And know your own lowliness and sinfulness. Then come to God, knowing his promises of covenant mercy and faithfulness. Come to God with boldness, and pray to seek his blessing.