

Praying the Foundation

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 00] Good morning. Welcome to Church of the Advent. My name is Tommy. I'm the rector here and delighted to be together this morning.

We are continuing to look this week at the book of Nehemiah, and the text is printed in your bulletin if you'd like to follow along. We started a series last week in the book of Nehemiah.

Now, looking at this man that God has called to do quite an amazing thing, God has called Nehemiah to do two things at the same time, to physically lead in the rebuilding of God's city and to also lead in the spiritual rebuilding of God's people.

Both are in need of renovation. And we find ourselves in a similar place in the life of our church here at Church of the Advent. We are physically renovating a building at 5th and Q Northwest so that it can become a home for us, a home for worship and spiritual formation and ministry to the wider community.

And at the same time, this is a year of spiritual renovation and renewal. We as a community are preparing for this next season of life. We've been through a lot of challenges over this past couple of years as a church, and we are in transition and change is hard.

[1 : 24] It's always hard. And we're looking ahead and asking what kind of, not only what kind of building do we hope to inhabit, but what kind of people will we be when we inhabit that building?

And will that be good news for the community? So this is a year for us to reflect on all of that. So we're seeing what we can learn from Nehemiah. And here's the thing that we're going to look at this week.

Nehemiah is often celebrated as an example of effective leadership. And to some extent that's true, although as we will see, he is by no means perfect.

People often overlook what I believe is the most important quality in Nehemiah, which is not his leadership style. It's his prayer life. It's the fact that Nehemiah was a man of prayer above everything else.

In fact, we have nine recorded prayers from Nehemiah in this book. And so we're going to be looking at that first prayer that he prays in the opening verses this morning.

[2 : 27] But let me ask you this question as we dive into this. How would you answer someone if they were to ask you, how is your prayer life? What would come to mind? What would you say?

What would you feel if somebody were to ask you, how is your prayer life? I love the writer Anne Lamott. I love her honesty. And she has a saying. She says, the two best prayers I know are help me, help me, help me, and thank you, thank you, thank you.

And I think probably for many of us, that would encapsulate our prayer life, right? You get to a point where you're sort of desperate and all else has failed. And so you're crying out to God, help me, help me, help me do something.

And then times when you feel like God comes through, you say, thank you, thank you, thank you, you know. Not so with Nehemiah. Nehemiah has a rich prayer life. And we see here in chapter one that the way Nehemiah prays has a distinct shape to it.

There are distinct elements to his prayer that, as I reflect on my own prayer life, I think are often missing from my spontaneous prayers when I pray to the Lord. And this is the same general shape that we see in the Lord's prayer that Jesus explicitly gives to us as his disciples to teach us how to pray.

[3 : 41] This is essentially going to be prayer 101. This is spring training for prayer. But if you're anything like me, this is something that I constantly need to come back to again and again and again.

And what we're going to see in the shape of Nehemiah's prayer is a pattern that the people use different ways of remembering this. Often you come across this when people use the acronym ACTS, A-C-T-S.

That as we look at Nehemiah's prayer, we see four distinct elements. Adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and then finally supplication. A-C-T-S.

And so we're going to look at this. And I want to say right off the bat, this is not a magic formula. This is not something that we have to follow rigidly. On the other hand, if we regularly include all of these elements in our prayer life, our prayer will not only have the potential to change the world, but it will actually have the power to change us.

So let's look at this. And we're going to ask God to help us as we open His Word together. Lord, we come to You in prayer knowing that You desire and You delight to converse with us.

[4 : 56] Lord, that You have spoken through Your Word and Spirit, and You invite us to respond to You, Lord. And You delight when we come to You.

You delight when we listen to You. You delight when we bring our supplications to You, Lord. And so even as we pray, we know that You're a God who above all desires a relationship with us. And we pray that this morning we would learn more of what it means to have a relationship with You, Lord, to belong to You as we do. And we pray that if there are people here who have never prayed in their lives, they've never even thought about praying, they don't think they knew how to pray, we pray that this morning You would encourage those of us to maybe tentatively reach out to You for the first time.

And we ask that You would respond, Lord. We are here to encounter You, and it's in the name of Your Son, Jesus, that we pray. Amen. So first of all, as we look at Nehemiah, we see that just the context of this is that Nehemiah has just heard devastating news.

He's just heard news that God's city lies in ruins. He's just heard that God's people are destitute. And it breaks his heart. And it breaks his heart so much that it says he falls to the ground and he weeps.

[6 : 16] And the first thing he does is to pray. I mean, it's worth noting that for Nehemiah, prayer is a reflex. It's a natural instinct.

He falls to the ground and he weeps, and what comes out of his mouth is prayer. Now look at where he begins when he prays. If something this bad happened in my life, if I got the kind of news that made me immediately collapse to the ground and start weeping, my first impulse, to be totally honest, would probably be to say to God, how could you?

How dare you? Where were you? Why me? Why this? Why now? Those are the kinds of prayers that would reflexively come out of my mouth, along with a whole lot of other stuff.

Nehemiah pauses long enough to shift his attention away from the crisis, away from the pressing issues, away from himself, away from his needs, which are very real, and he shifts his attention for a moment just to focus on God himself.

He begins by praising God for his character. He's just heard horrible news, and yet he begins by praising God for his character and his faithfulness.

[7 : 34] He says in verse 5, 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.

See, this is so important because it immediately grounds prayer in what is true and real. Nehemiah is beginning, he's grounding his prayer in what is true and real.

By pausing to reflect on who God is, what that does when we do that is by pausing to reflect on who God is, it immediately reminds us that God is God and I am not.

I'm immediately saying, you're God and I'm not God. You're the great one, not me. You're the awesome one, not me.

You're the one who keeps your promises. I don't always keep my promises. You're the one whose love remains constant and steadfast.

[8 : 38] My love can be fickle and conditional. It reminds us that we're not the ones here to judge what can happen or should happen.

It reminds us that we're entirely dependent on him. It immediately grounds his prayer in what is true and real. It reminds us of something that is extremely important to remember when we face crisis.

And that is that we can't always understand God's motives. We will not always be able to understand God's motives. But we can always trust God's character.

We're not always going to understand God's motives, but we can always trust his character. And a relationship with God based on faith doesn't ultimately depend on our ability to understand a God whose ways are higher than our ways.

It hinges on whether or not we trust him, even when we don't understand the why. And Nehemiah, that's where he starts his prayer.

[9 : 46] And I've often found that when I'm feeling anxious about something, if I'm sort of getting worked up and anxious and I'm feeling stressed, if I just spend a few minutes simply praising God for his attributes, that will immediately start to bring my anxiety down.

Because a lot of our anxiety is simply the result of us trying to control things that we can't control. And we're trying to get a grip or a grasp. We're trying to manage this thing.

And we can't. And it causes anxiety. And by pausing to remember who God is, it reminds us, oh, I don't have control over that. But God does. And I trust his character.

But even if there were no tangible benefits to this, the more you grow in your faith, the more you grow in maturity, the more you realize that the point of prayer is not whether it benefits us or not. The point of prayer is connection with God. And what Nehemiah does is he begins in a place of praising God partly because he knows that God alone is worthy of our praise.

[10 : 58] God alone is worthy of our adoration. And if we were to do nothing in our lives but praise God and praise his attributes, we would only be giving God what he is owed.

So this is the first element of Nehemiah's prayer. He pauses long enough to praise God for his character. And then what we see is this.

After you spend time reflecting on God's character, that naturally then turns your attention to seeing your own character by contrast.

Right? So Nehemiah's attention then turns to himself. And this is a principle that we come back to again and again and again in the Christian life. The more clearly we see God, the more clearly we are then able to see ourselves.

That's why prayer is really one of the only entryways we have into true self-knowledge. Because prayer leads us into a kind of self-knowledge that is rooted in something objective and real.

[12 : 01] When we see who God is, we can then begin to see ourselves more clearly by contrast. So Nehemiah praises God for his faithfulness, and then he immediately becomes conscious of his own unfaithfulness and that of God's people.

He says in verse 6, 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, 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 by your servant Moses. Now what's striking about this, what's striking about his confession is that it is not only personal, I and my father's house have sinned, but it's also corporate.

It's a corporate confession. He confesses on behalf of the sins of Israel. Now this is a concept that's been debated a lot recently because of the conversations around racial injustice in our country and to what extent do white Americans bear collective responsibility for the injustice that has been committed in our past and present.

And what we've seen is that Western people in general have little to no concept of corporate evil. Western people, some actively oppose the idea of corporate evil.

[13 : 31] This is something that makes immediate sense in other cultures that are more communal. But we tend to be so individualistic in the West that we have a hard time with the notion that we might actually be held accountable for things that we didn't personally do wrong.

The thing is though, this idea shows up again and again and again in Scripture. So it's something that we can't get around. We have to figure out how to make sense of it. In Joshua chapter 7, Achan sins by stealing things that don't belong to him.

But his whole family is held responsible. In Daniel chapter 9, it goes further. Just like Nehemiah, Daniel repents not only on behalf of himself or even his family, but on behalf of his entire race, on behalf of the nation of Israel, his ancestors.

In Romans chapter 5, Paul goes a step further. Paul goes way beyond the idea that you're responsible for what other members of your family have done. And he goes beyond the idea that you're responsible for your culture or ethnicity or your ancestors.

The Apostle Paul says that we are responsible and we are condemned for what our first ancestors did. Adam and Eve. He says we're responsible and guilty because of their sin.

[14:50] By virtue, in other words, by virtue of being a member of the human race, we are responsible for things that we didn't individually do. And the point is, there's a couple points here.

Number one, we are not simply the product of our individual choices made in a vacuum. As much as we would like to think that we are that independent, to a large degree, you and I, we are shaped by our family.

We are shaped by our ethnicity. We are shaped by our ancestors. I just dug up an Ancestry kit, Ancestry.com kit, that somebody gave me, I don't know, like two years ago.

And I just, I lost it. And I didn't think about it again. And we were doing some cleaning before the start of the fall. And found it, came across it. And so I just sent it in. And I'm waiting on the results. And as I'm waiting on the results, I started trying to fill out my family history. Something that my mom has always been into, but I've never really had much interest in until now. And I've started kind of tracing these lines of lineage back to the 14 and 1500s.

[15:56] And I'm seeing all kinds of things, all kinds of people. And it's had me really reflecting on to what extent do I not know it, but to what extent am I a product of things that have happened over time in all of these families, dynamics, right?

The places they occupied in society and how that impacted their children and their children and their children, right? And it's got me reflecting a lot on that. We are the product of our families and our ancestors to a great degree.

We're a product of the culture that we live in and the place that we occupy within that culture. But we have to go beyond that. When we look at what the apostle Paul is really saying, he's saying, listen, we all live inside systems, within systems, within systems that are all corrupted by sin.

And beyond family and culture, we are all guilty by virtue of being a part of the human race. We've inherited sin. We've inherited culpability for sin that on our own we can't deal with.

And here's why this matters for our prayer life. If you spend time reflecting on that, it will deepen and it will intensify your confession of sin. Because, again, this is just me, but I think you're probably maybe at least able to resonate with this.

[17:13] If I sit down and I confess, say I confess during daily prayer or during the Sunday worship service, during that time of confession, I am very tempted to only think of the things that I know I did wrong over the last maybe 24-hour period.

And I will confess those things. But if I'm only confessing the things that I know I've done wrong, then that makes it much easier for me to continue believing what my heart wants to believe, which is that I'm mostly a good person, but I occasionally mess up.

That's what I want to think. That's what I want you to think about me. But God knows better. Right? Corporate confession reminds me that sin is inescapable apart from Jesus.

It is hardwired into me on a genetic level in a way that I cannot escape. It touches and it corrupts every aspect of my life, even when I think I'm at my best and my most altruistic, selfless, loving version of myself.

Sin is warping that to some extent. Sin is warping that to some extent. That's the kind of confession we need. Because the good news is this. Not only is there such a thing as corporate sin, there's such a thing as corporate salvation.

[18:34] See, not only are we held responsible for sin we didn't personally commit, we are also saved by righteousness that we didn't personally earn. And when it comes to that, our only hope is to allow somebody to represent us.

Right? Not only in sin, but also in salvation. We're saved simply by being associated with Jesus Christ. His righteousness is transferred to us. It's not a result of anything that we personally did, but we are beneficiaries of it regardless.

Right? So here's how it works. The more seriously we take sin in our lives, the more powerfully we will experience grace and forgiveness. And there are a lot of people who are sort of sleepy Christians, sleepy, nominal, half-awake Christians, who it's been a very long time since they've experienced any real sense of God's grace or love, and that's because it's been a really long time since they've ever really reflected on the sin in their lives.

And if you want to experience this in your own life, if you want to experience spiritual revival, one of the first things you can do is to spend time in confession.

Really confessing. Right? This is why, if you look at all the great revivals throughout history, if you look at all the great revivals, they all have lots of things that are very unique to them.

[19 : 56] Like, each revival is kind of different and unique in a lot of ways. One thing they all share in common, they all were preceded by a great spirit-driven movement of repentance.

They're all preceded by God's people being heartbroken over their sin and crying out to God for mercy. And then the Holy Spirit floods in and revival happens. So that's confession.

So we have adoration, we have confession. Then we see Nehemiah move to thanksgiving, clinging to God's promises. So just to remind you, here's where we are. There is a crisis in Jerusalem.

Nehemiah is heartbroken and he's weeping. And yet he has not even mentioned it in his prayer.

After taking time to praise God and then to confess his own sin and the sin of his people, he then turns his attention to give thanks for God's deliverance and to give thanks for God's promises.

He's saying, God, remember these wonderful promises that you've given your people. And this may seem counterintuitive. You know, when you're facing a crisis, the first thing you do is to turn to God and say thank you.

[21 : 07] But it's exactly what we need in times of crisis. Because a lot of us, when we are facing stress, when things are getting hard, we're facing hardship and adversity, most of us instinctively shift into what we can think of as a scarcity mindset.

You know, you're stressed out and you're overwhelmed and you immediately circle the wagons and you immediately pull in your resources and you immediately hunker down and you shift into a scarcity mindset.

What does that mean? It means you start to become more and more preoccupied with the things that you perceive that you lack. So you start focusing on not having enough time, not having enough money, not having enough resources.

You know, so you start thinking a scarcity mindset. You're thinking, you know, I don't have enough time to do my job well and to be a good parent. And I'm failing at both. You know, I just don't have enough time in the day.

And so I'm failing in my job and I'm failing as a parent. Or you focus on, you know, I don't have enough money to even make a dent in this debt. So what's the point of even trying to pay it down?

[22 : 18] Or I'm not capable enough to do what's being asked of me, so why even try? There's no way I would ever be able to succeed at that, so why even put my name in the hat, right?

And of course, the more we think this way, the worse we feel, right? We begin thinking in hopeless, trapped ways, and that leads to feelings of hopelessness, feelings of being trapped.

And then we act out of those feelings and we do things that reinforce it, right? And people who get stuck in a scarcity mindset, they tend to be people who compare themselves constantly to other people.

People who they perceive have more than them in these various ways. They tend to feel threatened when their friends or people around them, their peers, are successful. They're threatened by that because it highlights their scarcity.

They tend to be very stingy with their money and with their time because they don't feel like they have enough of it. They tend to struggle with feelings of anxiety and depression caused by these loops of thinking, right?

[23 : 22] This defeatist way of thinking. And you ask again, well, what does this have to do with prayer? Well, the single number one best way to break out of a scarcity mindset is gratitude.

It's gratitude. It's gratitude. It's taking a moment to look at all of the things in your life that represent God's blessing and God's provision for you.

The fact that you woke up this morning. The fact that you have breath in your lungs. The last meal that you ate. The people closest to you in your life.

You know, there was a study done recently in which people were asked to spend one week, just one week, where over the course of that week, they would take five minutes a day to write down three things they're thankful for.

So just one week, five minutes a day, write down three things you're thankful for. They didn't have to be big things. They didn't have to be epic things. They just had to be concrete and specific.

[24 : 26] So I'm thankful for the delicious Thai takeout I had last night. You know, I'm thankful that my daughter gave me a hug. I'm thankful that my boss actually noticed and complimented my work.

You know, whatever it may be. The point is it had to be three specific things each day for one week. A month later after this was concluded, the researchers followed up and they found that those who practiced gratitude were significantly happier and less depressed than the control group. Incredibly, after six months, those effects remained. So six months later, after just spending one week, five minutes a day doing that, six months later, the effects remained. And the researchers had to explain this and the simplest explanation is this, that the simple practice of giving thanks each day over the course of a week primed their minds to focus on the good things they have rather than on the things they think they lack. It got them out of the scarcity mindset. It just, it refocused their attention away from the lack and the scarcity and it refocused their attention toward the things that they have. [25 : 37] So they just started noticing the blessings and provision rather than the absences. That's the only difference. So this is just five minutes a day for one week. Imagine how different our lives would be.

Imagine how different your outlook would be if we did this every time we prayed. If we simply took some time to thank God for the things that He has given us. And again, it's wonderful that this is beneficial. But even if it weren't beneficial, even if there were no psychological or emotional benefits at all, the truth is, we should be thanking God every single day continually because everything that we have comes from Him. Right? This is all His. He's entrusted things to us as stewards, but it belongs to Him. So we have adoration. We have confession. We have thanksgiving. Now finally we come to Nehemiah's request. Supplication. Which simply means bringing our needs and requests before the Lord. [26 : 43] Now I want you to do an experiment. You don't have to do it right now. Sometime over the next few days, here's what I want you to do. The next time you sit down to pray, and if you've never prayed before, try sitting down to pray.

The next time you pray, before you pray, right? And this works especially well if you know what you're praying for. Maybe there's a test coming up or a big presentation you have to give or something that you're waiting on, right? And you want to pray about it. Before you pray, take out a little piece of paper and write down all of the things that you're going to ask God for. All your supplications. Write that out first. Then put that to the side. And then spend some time adoring and praising God for His character, confessing your sin on as deep a level as you can, and then thanking God for all the ways that He has blessed and provided for you. And then come back to supplication. And see if there isn't a shift between what you would have said, what you would have asked God for, if you just went right into it, versus where your heart is now. [27 : 50] You will be surprised how often what you end up asking God for changes significantly if you take time to do these other things. And I think maybe that's why Nehemiah prays such a massive, bold prayer.

Nehemiah asks God to give him favor with this pagan king who could have him tortured and killed like that. And he asks God to give him favor so that this pagan king will let Nehemiah leave the court, take Persian money and resources, and go lead in the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem, which represents a nation that the Persians dominate. He's saying, God, make it possible that this king will simply hear this request and say, sounds good, instead of having him flayed and killed. To even suggest such a thing puts Nehemiah's life in danger. We're going to look more at that next week. But here's the thing I think. I think Nehemiah knows that our God is someone to whom we can bring any and every supplication no matter how big or small. Right? Sometimes you will spend time adoring, confessing, thanking God, and then you realize, I don't actually need to ask God for anything because all I needed was to be reminded of who God is. [29 : 09] And now that I remember that I trust Him, I don't even need to ask for anything. Other times it might be the opposite though. Other times you might do that and you might say, the thing that I was going to ask God for is way too small.

Why do I think God is so limited in what He can do? Now that I've reflected on who He is and all that He's done in history, my prayers need to get a whole lot bigger. And I think that's what happens

here with Nehemiah. And Nehemiah realizes you can bring any prayer to God, any supplication, no matter how big or small.

Because when you pray to the God of the Bible, you're not asking God to do something for you on the basis of your merit. You're asking God to do something for you on the basis of His mercy. And there is a vast difference. And this is something we need to be reminded of again and again and again because I think a lot of times we default into an approach to God that assumes it's based on our merit.

So maybe you come to God and you say, God, I've done all these things for you. I've gone to church faithfully. I serve at the homeless shelter.

[30 : 12] I give 10% of my money away to mission and ministry. I pray every day. The least you could do for me is this. I've done all these things for you, God.

The least you could do. Can you please just give me this one? I've never asked you for anything, God. This is the only thing I'll ever ask you for and I've done all this for you. Give it to me. That's coming to God on the basis of merit. Or we might also say, God, I know I've been a horrible Christian and I know you're really fed up with me.

And I know I don't go to church. I don't pray. I don't do any of that. If you do this thing, I'm so sorry and if you do this thing for me, I promise that from now on I'll go to church every week. I'll pray. I'll give my money away. That's also a merit-based request, right? God, on the basis of my merit, on the basis of my goodness, please give me X, Y, Z.

But our God, unlike other religions, doesn't deal with us according to our merit. I mean, if He did, we wouldn't have any hope. God deals with us on the basis of mercy.

[31 : 17] And here's the difference, right? Merit, and this is how virtually all other religions work, ancient or modern. Merit-based prayer says this. God, give me what I deserve because of my goodness.

Give me what I deserve because of my goodness. Give me what I'm owed. Mercy-based prayer says, God, give me what I don't deserve because of Your goodness.

It's completely opposite. And God's goodness has no limits. If I'm asking on the basis of what I've done, I don't have a right to ask.

If I'm asking God on the basis of His goodness, there's no limit to what I can ask. There's no limit because His goodness is limitless. So there's no request that is too small.

God, help me find a parking place. I do pray for that. You live in D.C.? I do pray for that. And I will tell you, the most consistent answer of prayer in my life is probably parking spots. I experience God goodness every day on the streets of D.C.

[32 : 22] But there's no request too big. You know, I love that. I love that phrase that comes out of the Harvard Business Review or something. You know, I can't remember who first coined it. Y'all probably do. Big, hairy, audacious goals, right?

That we should always set these big, hairy, audacious goals for our businesses, right? I love the idea of a big, hairy, audacious prayer. Just the biggest, craziest prayer you could possibly think to pray.

Why not? God's goodness is limitless. It doesn't mean He's going to give it to you. God doesn't give us everything that we ask for. He gives us the things we would ask for if we knew everything He knows.

But here's the thing. Every time you come to God with your supplications because you know He's good, you honor Him. You honor His goodness. It glorifies His name when you come to Him with your supplications.

Every single time. It delights Him. And how much more are these things true for those of us who know Jesus Christ? We have access to God in a way that Nehemiah never could have imagined.

[33 : 29] Jesus says, because of what He's done, when we come to God, we can say, oh Lord, oh awesome one, that's great, but Jesus says, no, call Him Father. Every time you pray, you're crawling into the arms of your Father.

and He delights, He delights in that. When we confess our sin to this God because of Jesus, we're confessing to a God who has already forgiven that sin. He's already paid the price for it.

He's already dealt with it. When we give thanks, we're giving thanks not only for the blessing and provision we see in our lives, but we're looking back and we're giving thanks for the cross, which secures our safety, secures our belongingness to God, secures our future.

