

The Prayer of Nehemiah

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[0 : 0 0] This morning we looked at Nehemiah chapter 8, where we have the whole community interacting with the Word of God. But here in this chapter, we find a very individual approach. We find Nehemiah as an individual, bringing to God the burden that was laid upon him.

They might ask the question, first of all, who was Nehemiah? Well, Nehemiah was a Jew who was in exile in Persia. The people had been taken, his people had been taken into exile some 70 years before by the Babylonians. But the Persians captured Babylon and the Persian Empire replaced the Babylonian Empire. So we find Nehemiah serving in what we might call the civil service of the Persian Empire. He was a cupbearer of the king. Now we tend to think of a cupbearer simply as a wine waiter.

But in fact, as far as we can see from contemporary records, cupbearers were very important people in the courts of the ancient world at that time in the Middle East. In fact, in one of the apocryphal books called Tobit, we read about one cupbearer who held a very high political position and might be the equivalent of the prime minister. So I think being the cupbearer of the king, he was responsible for security around the king. Literally, he was supposed to taste the wine that the king was given to drink.

But that would have simply been one or probably one of the many tasks that a cupbearer would have. He was a security agent of the king of Persia. And he was stationed in Susa, in one of the palaces of the king. And he may well have been the only Jewish believer there. So if there weren't others, there must have been very few of them. And he nevertheless maintained his faith and was able to continue to faithfully serve his God. And so when his brother, a man called Hanani, came from Jerusalem, he was very anxious to know what had happened to those other exiles who had returned to Jerusalem.

When the Persians took over, they allowed the Jews who wished to return, to return to Jerusalem. And Hanani wanted to know exactly what had happened. And the report that he got from his brother was very discouraging. He said that the gates were burnt, the walls were broken down, and the city was in disarray. It was a very sad situation. A few years earlier, Ezra, who had gone there earlier, had rebuilt the temple, and he had sought to rebuild the walls. But the enemies of the Jewish people, the enemies of Judah around there, complained and said that they were rebelling against the king.

[3 : 3 5] And so the emperor rescinded the permission that he had previously given to Ezra. And so the situation was a very sad situation. And what Hanani, how he describes the situation, he said, the people are in great trouble. And shame, or the word sometimes translated disgrace. It would appear that the foreigners surrounding the state of Judah, in Samaria to the north, and Ammon to the east, and Ashdod to the west, must have been despising the citizens of Jerusalem and scoffing at Yahweh, their God, who had returned them from exile some 80 years earlier, only to abandon them now.

Now this came as a body blow to Nehemiah. He was shocked to the core. And how does he respond? When we read that in verse 4, that he responded through fasting, weeping, and above all, praying.

He tells us that in verse 4, that he prayed for some days. And in fact, it was a much longer period than we might think of a phrase of some days, because if we compare the dates in verse 1 of chapter 1 and the date in verse 1 of chapter 2, we find that four months had elapsed. And so here we find Nehemiah committing his people in Jerusalem to prayer for four long months. And during that time, he is fasting, he is praying, and he is weeping as he brings the situation before the Lord.

Not only is he doing it over four months, but he's doing it night and day. As it were, every spare moment that he had, he was bringing the need of his people before God in prayer. We know from the history of revivals in this country and in other countries that revival has always been preceded by intense prayer. And Nehemiah is an example of that. The work of Nehemiah, which combined with the work of Ezra, did lead to a revival, as we saw this morning in chapter 8, where the people gathered around the Word of God, and where there was a renewal of the covenant, where the people recommitted themselves to serve the Lord. But behind that renewal was the prayer of Nehemiah. And not only the prayer of Nehemiah, but it refers at the end of the chapter to others who were praying to the Lord for his people.

And so this is a reminder of the importance of prayer. If we want to see the church revived, if we want to see the country changed, then prayer is the key. Only God can change the situation.

[6 : 33] And God invites us to become partners with him by calling upon him to intervene in his own way and to redeem the situation. And there are important lessons here because there are parallels between the church in the Old Testament and the church in the New Testament. In fact, the word that is translated assembly later in the book of Nehemiah, when, for example, the people in chapter 8 gather together in assembly. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, that word is the word for church or ecclesia, from which you get the word ecclesiastic. And so there is this link between the church in the Old Testament and the church in the New. Of course, there were discontinuity, there were differences, but there is a link. God's purposes were flowing through the Old Testament church into the New Testament church and beyond. And so if we look at this situation in the light of where we are in

Scotland and in the United Kingdom today, then I think we have to acknowledge that the church in our land is in great trouble and shame and disgraced. We live in an age in which the church is scoffed at in social media, is attacked by new atheists, is often sneered at in letters to the press from members of the humanist society. And as a result of this, many members of the church are losing heart and giving up.

And we find that membership of the church and attendance of the church is declining because it is no longer popular to attend church. Now the question I want to ask you as I ask myself tonight is whether this is a primary concern of ours or do we adopt a laissez-faire attitude and say, well, this is happening and there's nothing we can do about it. Well, if that is our attitude, it's certainly different from the attitude of Nehemiah. Nehemiah brought the situation that he heard about to God in prayer.

And the challenge that we face is to bring the situation confronting the church in Scotland today, to bring it to God in prayer and to do it persistently, to do it with great faith and to plead with God to intervene, to do it not only as individuals but to do it together as we meet for prayer. And so Nehemiah, I think, is asking us or challenging us to develop or to face the situation as a matter of urgency. He resolved to do what he could in his situation. First of all, to pray. That was his first response in chapter one. But then having prayed, he acted, he intervened, and he spoke to the king as we read in chapter two. And God, I believe, is calling us not only to pray, but he's calling us also to act. But tonight I want to focus on the response of prayer and how important that is and how Nehemiah helps us to understand what prayer is and why prayer is important and why prayer is powerful. I think there are four lessons that Nehemiah teaches us. First of all, he teaches us in verse five about the basis of prayer. If we look at his description of God in verse five, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands. He sees God as the great and awesome God. He sees God as all powerful. He sees God as the supreme being of the universe. But he also sees God as a God who keeps covenant, his covenant of love with his people. And that is the basis for prayer. First of all,

God is powerful. Secondly, God is willing. And that is the basis for prayer. That's what makes prayer possible. That's what makes prayer powerful. God is able to answer our prayer. And more than that, God is willing to answer our prayers. And so the basis of prayer is that God can and God will.

[11 : 04] And these two phrases, I believe, are important for us to remember as we come to God praying for our nation, to believe that God can intervene and that God will intervene on behalf of his people. He is the God who keeps his covenant of love with those who trust in him and who obey his word. And so we need to ask ourselves constantly, do we believe that God is powerful and God is willing, that God can and that God will, when we pray to God? What Nehemiah tells us is that God is indeed attentive and his eyes are open to hear the prayers of his servants. As Nehemiah presents them, God can and God will. So these two aspects of God's character are fundamental to the functioning of prayer.

There you have it in just in one verse, the theology of prayer. God is all powerful and God is a God who will keep his covenant with his people. And perhaps we need to ask God to give us a stronger persuasion that he can and he will revive his church in Scotland today. And surely we need to communicate that to the church throughout this land. That God can and God will. That God can turn the situation around.

That God can revive and reform his church. And that God is willing to do that because he's made a commitment in his covenant of love. Made a commitment to his church and to his people. So that's the first point I think that we learn from Nehemiah. The basis of prayer. Then we come to what we might call the ethos of prayer. Let me read from the end of verse 6. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. We've acted very wickedly towards you. We've not obeyed the commands, decrees, and laws you gave your servant Moses. Now notice what Nehemiah says. He doesn't say they. They have sinned against you and acted very wickedly. He says we have done it. And so we find Nehemiah expressing a spiritual solidarity with the people for whom he is praying. He's really concerned for them. He sees himself among them. He identifies himself with them. And he prays for them. And pleads God, asks God to forgive their sins. And so confessing solidarity with the people we pray for as sinners is surely one of the lessons that we can learn and a very important one as we look at this chapter.

It is all too easy for us to adopt a holier than thou attitude to the people for whom we pray. And we pray for them. We don't pray for us. And Nehemiah is inviting us to identify ourselves with those for whom we pray and to sense their sense of need, to sense their danger, to sense their urgency.

And so we're invited to adopt this culture of prayer, if you like, this character of prayer. Here Nehemiah teaches us how we are to pray. First of all, as we've seen, he teaches us the basis of prayer. But he also teaches us the ethos, the culture of prayer, the character of prayer. And when we come to God, we come into the presence of a holy God. And he calls us to confess our own sins and the sins of those for whom we pray. And we do that together and we identify with those for whom we pray.

[15 : 00] But Nehemiah not only prayed, he fasted and he wept. He was burdened. He was heartbroken on behalf of his people. And we must ask ourselves, are we heartbroken tonight concerning the tragic state of the church in Scotland? Do we really feel it? Do we have this? Are we weeping for the cause of God in Scotland tonight? If Nehemiah was here, he would be weeping. And perhaps he needs to teach us to weep.

That's the second lesson. The first is the basis of prayer. The second is the ethos of prayer. The third is the dynamic of prayer. Let's read verses 8 and 9. Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, says Nehemiah, saying, if you're unfaithful, I will scatter you among nations. But if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exile people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my name. And so, what we see Nehemiah doing here is he's quoting, he's quoting the promises of God and pleading these promises before him. He's reminding God of what he has said previously in his word. And he's bringing these promises to God and asking us, asking him to fulfill these promises. And perhaps we need to be bolder in our prayers because the dynamic of prayer is pleading the promises of God. That's the way that prayer operates from our point of view. God has given us his promises and he invites us to plead them before him. Prayer is not the question of going to a cash machine and putting your card in, your number in, and out comes the money. It's not something automatic. It's something spiritual. It's something dynamic. And we are called upon to plead the promises of God and to ask him to fulfill his promises.

And so, we're invited to pray with faith. The faith that God who has given us his promises will fulfill them. That God not only can, but God will. And so, we're called upon to pray believingly. To pray with faith. And to have a faith and a vision that of the difference of what God can make. Without faith, it is not only impossible to please God, it is also impossible to pray. And it's so easy for us simply to utter the words of prayer without believing, without calling upon God and casting ourselves upon his promises.

But the fourth and final lesson that we learn here is what we might call the premise of prayer. Now, the word premise is used to describe the basis of an argument, the basis of a case that a person is making. And sometimes in a legal situation, in a court, a lawyer will make a case and he'll have a premise. That will be the basis of his case. Now, there's a sense in which God invites us to make a case when we pray to him. He invites us to plead. He invites us to intercede. And the basis of Nehemiah's argument was that God had redeemed his people. And what Nehemiah says to God, he said, these people who are in disgrace, who are being laughed and scoffed at, who are discouraged, are your people. You've redeemed them. You've brought them out of Egypt. And that disgrace that they are suffering reflects on you, on your glory, and on your power.

And so, he invites, he looks back to the, back to the Exodus, to the deliverance of the people of God from slavery in Egypt. In verse 10, he describes the weak and troubled community in Jerusalem. He says, they are your servants, your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. And it's important for us to remember that, that the premise of prayer is that God has redeemed, God has a plan of redemption for his church, that God has not abandoned the plan of salvation. He's not abandoned the plan of redemption. And at the heart of that plan is the church. And although the church may often may not be as it should be, at the core of the church are the people of God. The people have been redeemed. And these people, what Nehemiah says, that these people are in disgrace. And that disgrace is bouncing back on your reputation. And so, he is bold in his prayers. He intercedes on behalf of his people. And so, what Nehemiah is reminding us is that God's redemptive purpose continues in spite of the trouble and disgrace that afflict his people, in spite of the problems that confront the church, in spite of the compromises that so often the church is making today. God's redemptive purpose continues. God still has a purpose. God is not abandoning his people. God has promised that he will never leave them and never forsake them. And this purpose of God, this redemptive purpose of God, lies at the center of his purposes for the world. The Bible tells us that not everyone in the visible church will be saved, but those who are saved form the core of the church of God. And it's important for us to recognize that however much the church may have departed from God's Word, at its core are the people of God's people of God. There are people who serve him there. And we need to pray and ask God to honor his promise to redeem his people so that we may see the effects of God's redemptive plan working out in our society today.

[21 : 28] So, this prayer of Nehemiah tells us how we approach God individually. This morning we're thinking of approaching God communally as a congregation. And Nehemiah, or Ezra in chapter 8, has a great deal to teach us about that. But here we find Nehemiah praying alone, praying individually. And the lesson that we learn here is how to pray in what the King James Bible calls the secret place. How to pray when we're alone. How to pray when we close the door. How to pray when we're on our own interceding with God.

And Nehemiah gives us these lessons, these fundamental lessons of prayer. He speaks about the basis of prayer, the ethos of prayer, the dynamic of prayer, and the premise of prayer.

So, in verse 11, we have, as it were, Nehemiah summing up as a kind of conclusion to this chapter. He says, And so, Nehemiah recognizes that he's not the only one who's praying.

And although he was praying alone, and perhaps the only believer in Susa the palace, yet he recognizes that there are other people praying as well. And although he is praying as an individual, he recognizes that he's one, a member of the family of God.

And he invites the Lord not only to hear his prayer, but to hear the prayer of others who revere the name of God, who honor God's name. And so, the basis of prayer is that God can and God will.

[23 : 28] The ethos of prayer is to express our solidarity and our confession with the people for whom we pray as we confess their sins along with our own. The dynamic of prayer is to plead the promises that God has given us in his word.

The premise of prayer is that God's redemptive purpose will be fulfilled, that God's purpose will not ultimately be frustrated, and that God has not lost control of the situation.

These four features of prayer encourage Nehemiah to pray for success and be willing to act, even if this involved taking a great risk.

And if we go on to look, to read in the next chapter, and I hope you'll do that when you go home, you will see that Nehemiah approaches the king with great fear and in one sense with trembling because he did not know how the king would react.

And he not only prayed before he went, but he prayed in the presence of the king. Persian emperors could be quite difficult to know how they were going to react.

[24 : 40] They could, and not only that, but the same, this very emperor had stopped the building of the walls under Ezra just a few years before.

And what Nehemiah was asking the king to do was to rescind one of his decrees. Now, in the culture of the Medes and Persians, that was not, that was a dangerous thing to do.

But he was willing to take the risk. He was willing to put his own life on the line in order that the work of God might go forward.

And so, we're called not only to pray, but we're called to stand up and be counted. Just as Nehemiah did. Nehemiah stood up before the king. He didn't simply pray in his own room.

He went into the presence of the king and at an appropriate moment, he asked the king to intervene. Even if that meant going back on one of his previous decrees.

[25 : 40] That was a dangerous thing for him to do, but he did it. And so God, I believe, is inviting us to stand up and be counted and to make our presence felt in order that we might promote not only in our, promote the kingdom of God, not only in our prayers, but in our lives.

And also, I think, Nehemiah is challenging us to pray that God will give success to modern counterparts of Nehemiah, people, Christians, who are high up in government, high up in positions in society.

Do we pray for them? Just a few weeks ago, there was the parliamentary prayer breakfast in the House of Commons and quite a number of the members of parliament attended there.

The prime minister was there. I wonder how often we pray for the prime minister. Prime ministers mention television every day at the moment. Do we pray for her? It's not a question of whether we support her party.

It's not a question of whether we agree with our policy in Brexit. It's a question that she is the person who has authority to govern in our nation.

[26 : 51] And we are commanded to honour those who have authority over us by praying for them. And it's so important to recognise the importance of prayer. There is a parliamentary prayer breakfast here in Scotland that very few members of MSPs attend.

Very, very few. And that's something that really should concern us. Something that should challenge us to pray for our nation.

So God is, I believe, asking us to give success to those disciples of Jesus, followers of Jesus who find themselves in influential positions in society today.

God is inviting us as those who delight to reveal his name to plead with him on behalf of our nation.

But as we plead we need to be, and as we pray, we need to be willing to become part of the answer to our prayers. Now Nehemiah prayed and recognising that he would be part, probably would be part of the answer to his prayer.

[27 : 59] And so he was committed, committed to the cause for which he prayed. And God is calling us to be committed to the renewal, the revival of his church and of his glory here in this country.

May God grant that we may hear the lesson that Nehemiah is teaching us. Nehemiah is encouraging us to pray and to be willing to act on behalf of our nation and for the glory of God in our generation.

May all of us be willing to respond to his example. Amen. Amen.