Nehemiah Ch1v1-11 - Praying God's Promise Of Protection For God's People

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Date: 08 November 2026

Preacher: Sam Ross

[0:00] I'm going to come and preach for us this morning from Nehemiah chapter 1. Good morning, everybody.

So if you could open your Bibles, please, to Nehemiah chapter 1. Nehemiah chapter 1, that's on page 484 of the Church Bible, if you're using that.
Nehemiah is going to come up to read it for us in just a moment. Just for some context before she does, originally, Ezra and Nehemiah were one book together in the Hebrew Scriptures.
The early church fathers split this book into two sections, Ezra and Nehemiah, which is why we have the book split up in our Bibles today. But Nehemiah must be read as a direct continuation of the book of Ezra.
So we pick up from where we left off last week. The story is this. After Ezra returned from Babylon with a second group of Israelites and taught the law again to the people, at this point, Nehemiah, we now skip forward 12 years after that, and Nehemiah was raised up by God to spearhead the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.
[2:08] And we are about to read his words. Before we read them, let's pray and ask for God's help. Father, thank you that we've already been hearing you speak to us this morning through Scripture, through songs filled with Scripture.

God, as we turn to these words now, help us to hear what you have to say. Speak to our hearts. Show us your will for us in Christ. Amen. Thanks, Evie. Good morning, everyone.
Nehemiah chapter 1. Nehemiah's prayer. The words of Nehemiah, son of Hakaliah, in the month of Kislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.
They said to me, Those who survived the exile are back in the province and are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.
[3:34] When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. Then I said, Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments.

Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you, day and night for your servants. The people of Israel, I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you.
We have acted very wickedly towards you. We have not obeyed your commands, decrees, and laws you gave your servant Moses. Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations.
But if you return to me and obey my commands, then, even if your exiled 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.
They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this, your servant, and to the prayer of your servants, you delight in revering your name.
[5:02] Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man. I was the cupbearer to the king. Thank you, Edie.

Do you ever see your brother or sister in Christ going through a period of intense trouble in their lives and you feel powerless to help?

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You see their vulnerability, whether that's through some serious illness or intense pressure at work or some family situation they're navigating.
And you wonder, how will they make it through? How will they be protected? How can I support them?
This was Nehemiah's situation. He was in Susa, a city in Persia, so far away from the people of God in Jerusalem.
[6:17] His brother comes from Jerusalem with a report of how the people of God are doing there. And this is what he said. Look at verse 3 again.

They said to me, those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down.
Its gates have been burned with fire. When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.
You can hear the devastation in Nehemiah's voice here. Hearing the trouble that God's people are going through, they are vulnerable to attack because of the lack of physical protection.
The walls are broken down. Yet of all the things that Nehemiah could do to help his people, his priority is to pray.
[7:30] I think that's remarkable. And if you read through the rest of the book of Nehemiah, through the story, you'll actually see repeatedly Nehemiah turns to God in prayer.

In this chapter, we're going to deal with two main things. First, a question. How can sinful people like Nehemiah and you and me ever be worthy to approach this holy God in prayer?
And we're secondly going to see an observation. that God protects his people as they pray his promises into each other's lives.
So first, the gracious privilege of prayer drawing near in Christ. Our question again is this, how can sinful people ever be worthy enough to approach a holy and righteous God in prayer?
What qualifies us to speak to him for us, for him to even consider our requests? Nehemiah sees this problem at the start of his prayer.
[8:52] Have a look at verse 5. Then Nehemiah said, Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments.

That's who God is. But then he's faced with the reality of who he is. He and his people have been the opposite of faithful.
Look at verse 6. He says, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer. your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel.
I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you.
We have not obeyed the commands, decrees, and laws you gave your servant Moses. You see, Nehemiah understands he has no right in and of himself to draw near to God in prayer, to be heard by God.
[10:10] And that's why he twice in this chapter pleads for God just to hear him. We need to feel this too. In and of ourselves, we have no right to be heard by God.

Because of the filth of our sin, because of our unfaithfulness to him, we cannot in and of ourselves approach God in his holiness and his perfection.
So how does Nehemiah have the confidence to approach God in prayer here? Well, the chapter just before in Ezra showed us how. And we covered this last week.
Nehemiah, as part of God's old covenant people before Christ, had faith that God would forgive his people because of a sacrifice being made for their sin.
And they knew that the thousands of animal sacrifices that the Israelites made year after year, they knew that those sacrifices didn't actually cover the sin.
[11:24] They didn't truly atone. These sacrifices were merely pointing forward to the true and ultimate sacrifice to come.

Jesus Christ, whose blood would atone for all his people's sin, past, present, future. So Nehemiah, he's looking forward in faith to that final sacrifice, and God had mercy on him and welcomed him and heard his prayers.
We, we look back in faith at that same sacrifice, Jesus Christ, knowing that he was the true Lamb of God.

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And as we put our faith in Christ, we are forgiven of all our sin, and we are given Christ's right standing before God.
Now, just listen to what that means for you and I. This is from Hebrews chapter 10. You can read along with me. It says, Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place, that is God's presence, by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain that is his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, Jesus, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart, and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience, and having our bodies washed with pure water.
[13:16] You see, if you are in Christ today, you can have total confidence to approach a father in prayer.

Cleansed by Jesus' blood, you can draw near to the God of heaven with full assurance that you're welcomed in his presence. You're invited to speak to him, to present your requests, welcomed and delighted in as if you were his very own son, Jesus Christ.
May we never forget that prayer is the gracious privilege given to all those who have been made right with God in Christ?
Friend here today who has not yet put your trust in Christ. May I speak to you for a moment? The truth of God's word is that you stand in God's condemnation for your sin.
Look at Christ dying for you on the cross. His blood was poured out so that you might be forgiven, so that you might be welcomed as a child of God, no longer God's enemy.
[14:45] Christ bids you to come and to repent of your sin and to receive him in faith today and to know the privilege of drawing near to him, no longer ashamed of your sin, made right in Christ, welcomed as his child.

So first, the gracious privilege of prayer. We are heard in Christ. Next, what does this privilege of prayer mean as we support brothers and sisters who are going through their trouble, as was the case for Nehemiah?
Consider with me the humbling priority of prayer. Now, if you look at the very end of verse 11, Nehemiah tells us his job occupation.
He was cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, the emperor of the Persian Empire, the most powerful man on earth at that time. Now, Persian records tell us that out of 13 kings in this Persian dynasty, six of them were assassinated.
In fact, Artaxerxes' father, Xerxes, was. Easiest way to kill a king? Sneak a bit of cyanide into his wine or into his food.
[16:18] Artaxerxes put his life in Nehemiah's hands by making him his cupbearer. And being so trusted, the king would also have looked to Nehemiah as a confidant.

Nehemiah has position, power, and influence. And when he hears that God's people are in great trouble and disgrace in Jerusalem, we are thinking, man, you've got to do something, Nehemiah. You've got to say something. Act swiftly. The people need you. But Nehemiah's first act in verse 5 surprises us because he turns to prayer, fervent, persistent prayer, and fasting.
Now, fasting is when you abstain from food for a limited time to devote yourself more to prayer. And as we see throughout this book, we will see that Nehemiah's priority is always prayer.
And it's a humbling priority. By praying first, Nehemiah humbly acknowledges who really has the power and influence. And it's not him.
[17:43] Like he said in verse 5, God is the great and awesome God. He is the Lord of Heaven. God is the only one who can change his king's heart.

Twelve years earlier, this same king had actually stopped the walls being rebuilt. Nehemiah knows that for all his own relative power and influence, he cannot change anyone's heart, let alone the most powerful man on earth.
That's what drives him to prayer. prayer. That's what should drive us to prayer. In prayer, we access the only power source that can change anything for our brothers and sisters who are struggling in life.
Here's a quote from Tim Keller. He says, to pray is to accept that we are and always will be wholly dependent on God for everything.
In prayer, we humbly declare we don't have the resources to fill the sufferer with new hope in Christ, to give the downhearted new joy in him, to cause the stray to turn back to him.

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[19:09] We can't do it. And yet, think about the opposite. Whenever we don't pray, we actually show we don't really think we need God.

We betray a subtle feeling that I am the key player in this situation, as Nehemiah could easily have thought with his power and influence.
When prayer falls down our priority list, we demonstrate a subtle pride that we can do it alone. Oh, the danger of us thinking that we can achieve any lasting spiritual good in one another's lives, in and of ourselves.
Because when we miss out on prayer, we miss out on God, his power, his work, moving in and through our lives.
Now, maybe you say, Sam, that's just not my experience of prayer. I've prayed and it hasn't happened. Yes, prayer is hard.
[20:28] 99% of the time, prayer is like planting bulbs in the ground. I wonder how many people have done that in their gardens over the last few weeks. You don't see instant results.

You look out your window every day, waiting. Seems nothing is happening. Planting isn't glamorous. It's hard work.
It requires thought and care. you can't guarantee the crop at the end of the day or in four months time. You finish the day of planting, you look back at your garden and it doesn't look like you've achieved anything.
In fact, you've got nothing to show for it. Isn't that what it's kind of like with prayer? Maybe that's why we find it so difficult. We can come away from a time of prayer feeling like we haven't achieved anything.
Like, maybe we would have been better going and doing something practical, something tangible to make an instantaneous difference in a brother or sister's life.
[21:44] To have something to show for at the end of the day and say, there, I've made a difference. If Nehemiah shows us anything, it's that prayer is the most powerful action we can take.

Nehemiah prayed and nothing happened for four months. But at the right time, shoots began to appear through the earth.
And in time, the flower had fully bloomed. When the right opportunity came, Nehemiah spoke to the king. And I don't want to do a spoiler for next week, but God changed the king's heart.
It set in motion a whole chain of events through which God would protect his people. Prayer is not wasted time.
It's not doing nothing. It's the most significant thing that you or I could do for one another. Especially in our trouble.
[22:51] prayer. Making prayer the priority humbles us to see that God is the only one who is able to protect his people. And prayer places our lives in total dependence on him.

And this brings us next to see how did Nehemiah actually pray? How did he do this? We're going to see God's purpose promise in prayer as we pray his promises of protection.
And I want you to notice here, I think the thing that strikes me most about Nehemiah's prayer is actually that his prayers are shaped by God's word all the way through.
Now we've already seen back in verse 5 how he started his prayer. He started his prayer by praising God for what he saw of God's character in his word.
We could call that adoration. That's a wonderful place to start our prayers. Remembering who God is from his word. And then that adoration led into confession which we read.
[24:07] He confessed his own sins. When do we most see our sin? Whenever we see God's purity and God's greatness. So we have adoration.

We have confession. But it's the last part of Nehemiah's prayer which I want us to focus on most. It's his supplication. Because after confessing sin and being confident of receiving mercy, Nehemiah is emboldened to ask God to act on behalf of his people.
And he does this by praying God's promises back to him. Can you read with me from verse 8? Nehemiah says, Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations.
But if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled 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.

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They are your servants and your people whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. You see, Nehemiah knows God's word.
[25:33] He knows what God had promised to do in the past. That if the people return to God, in faith and obedience, God would bring them back to the land.

The promise was there in black and white. And Nehemiah cries out, Remember your promise to your people, Lord. Save, redeem, restore, just as you said you would.
And as you read through the book, you'll see God answers that prayer. The walls are rebuilt in record time, 52 days. could God not have acted to protect the people of Israel without Nehemiah's prayers?
Certainly he could have. We do not have a weak, needy God who needs our help, who needs us to pray. No, he's the great and awesome God, the Lord of heaven.
But here's the beautiful thing for you and I. In Christ, God has chosen to use our prayers as one of the means through which he accomplishes his purposes.
[26:51] What an extraordinary privilege to participate in what God is doing in our brothers and sisters' lives. That means our prayers really matter.

there are things that God has ordained to happen which will not happen until we have prayed God's promises into each other's lives.
That gives us remarkable purpose as believers seeking to support one another in various troubles that we go through.
So Nehemiah, he was praying for physical protection, protection of God's people. What should we pray for? We have brothers and sisters who are going through the fight of their lives against sin. Others are battling ill health that they never saw coming. Others are just under immense pressure with just everyday things.
[27:59] There's just work, family, school, college, finances, and life is just really hard. the Israelites had a physical enemy at their gates.

We have a spiritual enemy at the gates seeking to overcome us, seeking to beat us down, filling us with shame and guilt, ultimately to cause us to give up on Christ.
our enemy fires, fires, fires, lies at us, that God doesn't care for us, that he's not in control, that our life would just be easier if we just didn't follow Jesus.
us. The solution for us is not a wall. We need a spiritual strengthening to withstand a spiritual attack.
If you would turn with me to Ephesians chapter 6 as we finish, that's on page 1177.
[29:18] Ephesians chapter 6. The apostle Paul here is trying to communicate to the church in Ephesus that actually their battle isn't a physical one, it's a spiritual battle that they are in every single day because they belong to the Lord Jesus.

Read with me from Ephesians 6 verse 10. Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, that is spiritual armor, armor, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.
Therefore, put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground.
And after you have done everything, to stand. You see, God's will is that his people would be strong in Christ and protected from the attacks of the evil one.
[31:09] Now, Paul goes on to speak of the armor of God required, among them the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith to fend off the fiery arrows of the evil one.

But I want you to see how vitally he connects this to prayer. Look at verse 18. He says, and pray in the spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.
With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.
That is both our command and our privilege in Christ. in Christ, we are made worthy to approach God's throne and pray for our brothers and sisters in their trouble.
There are brothers whom God will strengthen to stand firm through times of doubt because you prayed Jesus' promise in John chapter 6.
[32:24] And this is the will of him who sent me that I shall lose none of all he has given me but raise them up on the last day. There are sisters who will not lose hope even though they are going

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through a time of deep suffering because you prayed this promise from Romans 8.

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. there will be brothers whom God will enable to stand through temptation because you prayed words like these in 1 Corinthians.
God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. Let's open up God's word. promises that God lays on our hearts to pray over one another's lives.
That is one of God's main primary means of protecting one another. God's will is that all of his covenant people in Christ those united to Christ would be kept safe and secure in him forever. [33:53] As we pray God's word we ask God to protect one another as he has promised. when the shoots of our prayers begin to push up through the ground and the flowers begin to unfurl their petals when God comes through in his promises in our brothers and sisters lives.

We're not going to turn around and say oh me it was all me I prayed for you that's why this good thing has happened no we're going to glory in Jesus the one who made us worthy to approach the father in the first place and the one whose power is sufficient to protect and keep his sheep all the way to their heavenly home just as he promised for all the promises of God find their yes in Christ and that is why through him that we say our amen to God for his glory the glory is his the privilege of praying is ours let's do that now

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