

# Principles of Prayer

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, hi everybody and welcome to this morning's online message in which we are continuing with our studies in the book of Nehemiah.

And today we're thinking about Nehemiah's amazing prayer in chapter 1 and trying to glean for ourselves what principles in prayer we might discover here that would help us in our own walk with God today.

But before we dig into the text, why don't I pray for us? Lord, thank you very much indeed for your word and we thank you that our Lord Jesus taught that your word is truth and that your truth can set people like us free.

And so we ask, Father, even through this weird online medium of communication, that you would send your Holy Spirit upon our hearers, Lord, that they might discern your truth and your truth might indeed free them to be the people that you call them to be.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. I want to take as a text the very last half of the last verse of chapter 1, which is the final petition of Nehemiah's prayer.

[ 1 : 32 ] And Nehemiah prays these words. Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man. So this man that Nehemiah refers to, we think, is King Artaxerxes I.

Some modern scholars have raised doubts and asked whether this was actually Artaxerxes II. But I think that most scholars, and I'm not a scholar, but I certainly think that it probably was Artaxerxes I, partly because it makes most sense of the implicit timeline of the Old Testament.

So Ezra the scribe goes back to Jerusalem first and restores the temple. And then it's followed up by Nehemiah with his great quest to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem.

Some of you may be asking yourselves, and it's a great question in many ways, but the question is something like this.

Why would I think that a book written 2,400 years ago or thereabouts would have anything to say to me in my modern, sophisticated life in the 21st century?

[ 2 : 58 ] I think that's a great question. And I hope just to show you very briefly in my introduction now that in fact there are factors around at the time of Nehemiah which are not dissimilar from some of the factors that exist now.

And in showing you these, I hope that you will think that Nehemiah might have something to say to us. And Nehemiah was credited, incidentally, with being the person who not only got Judaism into some kind of recovery, but kind of set the tone of Judaism, which means it's lasted the course and is here with us today, thank God.

So, Nehemiah was around at a time of real crisis for the Old Testament people of God.

They were in exile, their temple had been restored, they got news of this, but perhaps in a way that we don't quite grasp.

The seriousness of the walls being at a demolished state was a massive problem at the time.

Nehemiah stopped the earth. Why was that?

[ 4 : 16 ] Well, it was because in those days a lot of regimes were very lawless. They didn't think twice about slaughtering wholesale populations.

And a war around the city was a way of protecting, it was a barrier that meant that the city could prevail when under attack. So, of course, the reverse is true.

When the walls are broken down, the city is very vulnerable. And as we'll see in a moment, Nehemiah is deeply moved when he gets the news that the walls are broken down.

Why would that be? Because he understood the seriousness of it. The big challenge of being in exile is the challenge of maintaining your kind of distinctive identity and culture when you are in a land where the culture and identity is entirely different and based on entirely different principles.

The Old Testament people of God were monotheists. They believed in one God. The people of Assyria and the people of Persia were idolaters and they were what's called polytheists.

[ 5 : 44 ] That is, they worshipped a range of different gods. Sometimes those gods would be animals. Sometimes, as we read in the early chapters of Daniel, they could be effigies of a king, that the king in Daniel insisted that all the subjects should bow their knee to his effigy and those who didn't would be dealt with harshly.

For instance, Daniel and his three friends who were put in the red-hot furnace for their disobedience. The big deal is, in an environment where your culture is completely taken away and transplanted into another culture, how do you retain your identity?

How do you retain your religious culture? That was a massive question for those Jews in exile. And you remember, there's a verse in the Psalms where the question is asked, how should we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

How do we retain our culture and our identity in this very strange place where people don't think like we do? Well, of course, you've only got to say that to realise that our culture has changed and continues to change.

And a lot of those changes have been good changes, but some of them have been changes which have marginalised faith, have certainly cut down the number of worshippers who worship in the 21st century.

[ 7 : 27 ] And of course, as we've thought about before on our Sunday messages, there's a good deal of anxiety around about following COVID. Well, what will the church look like after that?

Will people come back? Well, we really hope you will, but we don't know if you will just yet. So the big issue for the church today is standing in the face of the tsunami of secularism and strange ways of thinking to the minds of many biblical Christians.

How do we retain our identity and our culture when it seems like a lot of the policymakers and decision makers in our country work with an entirely different set of assumptions about what a civilised society would look like?

That's why I think the book of Nehemiah has something to offer us today, because it's dealing with the whole issue of retaining kind of cultural identity.

And retaining cultural identity has always been important for Christians. We've always felt from the days of the early church that the life we're called to lead in Christ with God is a distinctive life.

[ 8 : 54 ] It's different. It's meant to be different. So here we are. Here's Nehemiah. He's heard that the temple's been rebuilt and he gets news at the beginning of chapter one that the walls are still in a state of demolition.

And what does he do? Well, we're told in verse four, When I heard these things, I sat down and wept.

For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. I wonder when was the last time you were moved to tears by something in your life.

I mean, it might have been something, a great sadness. It might have been a big disappointment. It might have been a sappy movie on the TV or at the cinema. What I mean is, when were you so moved with passion that you just broke down?

I remember years ago during the anti-Vietnam demonstrations, and somebody had a placard in one of the many crowds that we observed in the USA on university campuses.

[ 10 : 21 ] And the placard said, War? War? Question mark. It's not worth dying for. Writing his great apologia some years later for the Christian faith, Charles Colson, asked the question, What do people think is worth dying for these days?

Because real passion inevitably is evidenced by sacrifice. Well, I wonder if I were to ask you the question, When was the last time you were so moved with passion for the church?

I wonder what your answer would be. I wonder when you look at the state of the church in the 21st century, and the cultural conditions in which we're forced to think about what we really do believe. When you hear of diminishing numbers, when you hear of financial problems in the church, how moved are you to do something about it?

Well, we're talking today about Nehemiah as a man of prayer. I want to say that he was a man of prayer, but he was also a man of passion and purpose.

[ 11 : 52 ] And also, as we read in the early verses of chapter 2, he was a man who had a plan. He understood that if he was going to get his people from A to B, he needed a plan to do that.

And it was, by all accounts, a very high-risk plan. I'll explain that in a moment. But he understood this, that passion, purpose, planning would go nowhere if it wasn't earthed in prayer.

And in Nehemiah's case, a confident prayer. I mean, this was a guy who didn't think twice about praying that God would grant him success in what he was about to have a go at.

So the prayer is an amazing prayer. And I love the confidence in the prayer, but there are a number of aspects of the prayer which I think are worth reflecting on.

The first thing is, Nehemiah understands that the plight of the people of God in exile was a result of their disobedience and wrongdoing.

[ 13 : 25 ] And so his first move in the prayer is to pray for repentance. Listen to these words.

I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly towards you.

We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses. Listen to me.

I want to ask you this as a serious question, but is there anything in your indifference, maybe, to the church, your lack of concern, your lack of commitment to it, is there anything in there that makes you feel that when you come before God in prayer, you need to begin by confessing the stuff in your life that's not right.

And I know what it's like. I know that it's much easier to confess other people's sins. We can see that very easily in them. But what about your sin? Nehemiah, of course, was bold enough not just to seek God's forgiveness for his sins, but at the same time, he was very happy to pray on behalf of his people, say, you know, we've got this wrong, Lord, and please forgive us, and hear our prayer.

[ 15 : 01 ] Repentance isn't just about saying sorry. I mean, it certainly is, but it also means turning away from your sin, turning away from the life you've been living, and turning towards God.

And there's little doubt when you read Nehemiah's prayer that that is his intent. It's not just looking for a quick kind of sorry about this, Lord, you know, we're human, you know, we might not be perfect, but, you know, we're doing okay, thank you.

No. That's not Nehemiah. Nehemiah starts with a prayer of repentance. Secondly, he prays a prayer of recollection, that he recollects what God has done in his people's past.

Verse 8. Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses. Say, if you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if you exile people, even if you 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 them.

Repentance is followed by a recollection of the way that God has acted in the past. A reminder that with God there always remains open an alleyway called hope.

[ 16 : 35 ] And that's what Nehemiah brings before God. He brings his sorrow at his behavior and then he brings alongside that a recollection of the good things God has done.

I wonder when you pray, can you remember to think back over your life, even if right now your faith feels a bit stale, a bit stodgy?

Can you recall the good times in your life when God acted and you were in no doubt about his action? Well, that's what Nehemiah does. Repentance, recollection, and then Nehemiah wants to pray another prayer and that is he wants to pray for a result.

This is a kind of confidence in prayer that I think many of us don't sit terribly easily with. So he prays, you know, 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.

Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man. Well, we said that Nehemiah is a man of passion.

[ 17 : 56 ] When he got news, he wept. We said Nehemiah is a man of purpose. He knew what he had to do. We said that all this need to be earth in prayer, but we said also this is a man with a plan.

And his plan was he couldn't just go to Jerusalem and start. Who was Nehemiah? He was a layman. He wasn't a priest. He had very little standing in one way except in the court of Artaxerxes where we told, as Clive reminded us last week, he's a cupbearer.

He is, in effect, the kind of, how would you say, the chief of the king's security. And he uses that unashamedly to go before the king and ask permission to leave the city of Susa and go to Jerusalem and begin his task.

And let me just say, this king is not entirely straightforward. He is some bad hair days. He had to quash a revolt against Egypt and he did that in a rather brutal fashion.

This was not a man in whom there was a kind of guaranteed grace. No. This was a man who could be capricious. Could be, get him on the right day, good guy.

[ 19 : 22 ] Get him on the wrong day, you could lose your head. I mean, literally. His plan was to go before him and the answer to his prayer is just staggering.

Not only does the king give him permission, not only does he give him security because travelling was a dangerous business in those days, not only does he do all this, but he helps provide materials, the materials they'll need to rebuild the wall.

And Clive reminded us last week that this task took just 52 days. Some of you know what it's like when you have the builders in the house, you know, they never get out on time, do they?

Well, none of the Amirans, co-hosts, they got the job done and they got it done thoroughly. and they got it done so that the city of God, Jerusalem, was no longer vulnerable.

Here's the most important thing. One, Nehemiah was one man who changed the outcomes of a nation.

[ 20 : 40 ] Two, he wasn't a priest, he didn't have the same kind of standing, he wasn't a prophet, he had none of that history behind him. But he stepped up and he did what was necessary.

Listen to me, the church is in a very challenging time, a bit like the people of God were at the time of Nehemiah.

And God is asking, who will stand up with me? Who will be moved with passion? Who will become a person of purpose?

But most importantly, who will earn that passion, that purpose and that planning in prayer. Prayer which shows God we're dependent on him.

Prayer which releases things that nothing else would release. Prayer which can really make a difference, not just to your life, not just to the life of the church, but to the life of the world.

[ 21 : 48 ] One man and those possibilities. Amen. Amen. Amen.