

# Nehemiah's Prayer (1)

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] phone or your computer, whatever you're using, to Nehemiah chapter 1 and verses 1 through 4. Nehemiah chapter 1 verses 1 through 4 as we begin a new series on this marvellous prayer.

When you think about big prayers from the Bible, there are very few bigger than that which Nehemiah prayed in this chapter. We might think of Hannah's prayer, Moses' prayers, and yes even the prayers of the Apostle Paul, but none really best this best of prayers. Nehemiah, this man of whom we really know so little. I am, as I'm sure many of you, I've always been intrigued by this prayer. It's intelligence, it's humanity and humility, it's passion, it's boldness. I've heard many sermons preached on this prayer over the years and I'm sure you have also, all of which to one extent or another have left a deep impact upon us. And so over the next few weeks, I want us to study together, to take time to study together Nehemiah's prayer in this chapter, praying that our studies in him will have the same impact upon us all, that it will help us in Christian prayer to be intelligent, to be passionate, to be humble, and to be bold. Now Nehemiah's prayer begins before Nehemiah prays. It begins long before he ever opens his mouth to God. In fact, Nehemiah's prayer really in this chapter is more of a process than a prayer.

He's all in. So much so that from verses one through four, he asks, he listens, and he then prays. You know, there's so much here for us in every way, especially as we pray together at this weekly prayer meeting where together as one, we plead with God to restore the broken walls of the church in Scotland and to build up her golden gates. Well, there's three aspects of Nehemiah's pre-prayer, as it were, I want us to focus on this evening. First of all, with our mouths we ask, with our mouths we ask, we ask. Then with our ears we hear, with our ears we listen, and then thirdly, with our hearts we pray, with our hearts we pray. First of all then, with our mouths we ask, with our mouths we ask.

At the very end of the chapter, in verse 11, we learn that Nehemiah was cup-bearer to the king, not just any king, but to the mighty emperor of Babylon, the most powerful man in the world.

As cup-bearer to him, Nehemiah would have been a highly privileged servant. He had to use a modern expression, a cushy number in Susa, the second city of the empire. He lived in luxury and he mixed with the rich and the famous of Babylonian society. He ate the finest of food, he dressed in the finest of clothes, and he needed for nothing at all. Everything is going very well for Nehemiah in life.

[ 3 : 3 1 ] But then some men come from Judah, including his brother Hanani. Now one might suppose that Nehemiah would have adopted the attitude as so many of us would have done in that situation. Well, well I'm all right, Jack. I'm living the high life here in Babylon. Well one might suppose that that given the luxury in which Nehemiah was living, he would have tried to forget that he was an ethnic Jew. He's happy. That's all that matters, right? If you're only up, then don't look down. Don't spend time with people who drag you down. But Nehemiah is a model to us in this. He asks these men from Judah how it was back home. Despite the luxury in which he lived, he had not forgotten who he was.

And although he had, he would have suspected that perhaps it would have been bad news, he asked them anyway. I love the way in which the Bible commentator Warren Wiersbe describes Nehemiah here.

He cared enough to ask. He cared enough to ask. Nehemiah could have kept on being the king's cup bader and living the happy high life, but he cared enough to ask how it really was back home. And that's where Nehemiah's prayer begins. With his mouth, he asks. Someone might say, Ignorance is bliss. There may be truth in that, but not for the Christian who cares enough to pray.

Although we may greet each other with the words hello or even hi, we most often greet each other by saying, well, how are you? And I say that we say, how are you? Because we're not really asking, how are you? Because if we were genuinely asking, how are you? We'd have to genuinely listen to someone spoiling our happy day by telling us how sad they are. But you know, this is where genuine prayer begins.

[ 5 : 50 ] With our mouths we ask. We're not saying we're genuinely asking. Even though what we hear might hurt us, let me apply this in our own situation. Are you genuinely asking? Do we care enough about each other to ask how it really is? There are many among us who are lonely, who are grieving, who are struggling, who are anxious, who are depressed and in despair. Do we care enough about them to ask?

Surely this must be the first act of love God has placed in our hearts through the gospel, that we love our brothers and sisters in Christ enough to ask them how it really is with them.

Not so that we can gossip about them, but so we can genuinely pray for them. Chances are, if we're not asking, then we're not praying.

Let me put it even more starkly. If we aren't asking because we care enough to know the truth about them, then our prayers are mere words and worth less than nothing.

With our mouths we ask. Second, with our ears we listen. With our ears we listen. Well, Nehemiah may have asked the question, but the answer he receives is like a hammer blow to him. We read, the remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are destroyed by fire.

[ 7 : 36 ] Perhaps Nehemiah was expecting an answer along these lines. Well, those who remain are in good heart. They're busy rebuilding the walls and the gates of Jerusalem. But no, Nehemiah gets the truth.

Both battles. If the first act of love God has placed in our hearts through the gospel is to ask how it really is with our brothers and sisters in Christ, then surely the second must be that we love them enough to listen to what they are saying, no matter how long or how painful it might be to listen.

If we care enough to genuinely ask the question, how are you? Then we must care enough to genuinely listen when they tell you how they are. The process of Nehemiah's prayer begins before he prays with first his asking and then his listening. He doesn't hear what he wants to hear.

Rather, he hears what is really being said. And those two are altogether different things. David Parker continues to teach me about what he calls active listening. That is listening not in order to respond, but in order to understand. He is a very caring and gifted professional in this area.

Someone you know will listen to what you are really saying, not to what he wants to hear. Such giftedness at times goes beyond the spoken word. For example, someone might say to you, I'm fine. But behind the spoken word is a world of hurt, confusion and anxiety. Active listening waits to hear the answer and then gently probes until it finds the right answer.

[ 9 : 31 ] Are we good listeners? In my experience, listening well is far harder work than speaking well. Anyone can speak to another person.

But to really listen to what another person is not just saying with their words, but is feeling. That's real hard work.

But unless we're willing to engage in that level of hard work, our prayers on their behalf will only ever be skin deep and will lack gospel specificity and application.

The process of his prayer, you see, took Nehemiah first through asking and then listening. And what I'm saying is that if we truly, meaningfully want to pray for one another, we must not make assumptions about each other.

But we must, first of all, ask and then listen. Let me give you an example. We can apply this to the cries of God's persecuted people all over the world. The persecuted church in many nations needs us to listen to them.

[ 10 : 46 ] We dare not assume what they'd say to us. We need to listen to what they really are saying. It may be that if we listen, they'll tell us that they're in fine spirits.

But the Lord is growing his church by bringing in many new believers through the persecutions they are suffering. But that they want us to pray for their fruitfulness, their righteousness and their endurance through the persecutions.

If we do not listen to them, but rather make assumptions, then our prayers are going to be dominated by pleading with God to grant them their freedom from their persecutors.

Something for which they're not asking at all, because they know that if they were not under pressure as a church, then the Lord may well withhold his hand of blessing from among them in their mission field.

So how important it is when we ask, we really listen, just like Nehemiah did.

[12:03] With our mouths we ask, with our ears we hear, with our hearts we pray, with our hearts we pray, third and last. Matthew, I mean Nehemiah 1 verse 4, is somewhat of a worked example of Jesus' beatitude in Matthew chapter 5.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. We read in verse 4, As soon as I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and prayer, and praying before the God of heaven.

So here's a man, and his heart is breaking within him, and that's what drives him to serious fasting, and serious prayer.

It's not so much an intellectual driver, but the sheer impact that the words of his brothers had upon his heart. Now remember, Nehemiah is a man with everything.

He's cut better to the king. He's living the high life, the happy high life, in Babylon's second city. But here he is in his room, and he's weeping, and he's mourning, and he's fasting.

[13:26] As long as Jerusalem's walls and gates are destroyed, there will never be a happy high life for Nehemiah again.

Quite the opposite, in fact. And so having asked about the welfare of Judah, and having listened to the tragic report of his countrymen, a heartbroken Nehemiah weeps, and he mourns, and he fasts, and he prays.

And as we'll see in weeks to come, Nehemiah's prayer is passionate, it's intelligent, it's dignified.

But behind all the theology of covenant, and the language of restoration, there's a man in his room, and he's weeping, and he's mourning, and he's fasting, and he's praying.

He's not composing this prayer from the ivory tower of a theological seminary. He's brokenhearted. He's very far away from home.

And he realizes that all the while he's been living up the high life in Babylon, his family and his countrymen are destitute in Jerusalem.

[14:41] Nehemiah's prayer isn't self-congratulatory, celebratory, or happy. He really doesn't have it all together. He is very far from being composed.

Rather, he is deeply moved, and he is desperately sad concerning the broken-down state of Jerusalem. Many years ago now, myself and some of my fellow presbyters, that's elders in the bounds of this region, visited the island of Col off the west coast to formally shut down the free church there.

And as we stood in that derelict church building, it was a beautiful day, but as we stood in that derelict church building, with its windows smashed, with pigeon droppings over all the floors, and with dusty Bibles lying in rotting pews, we all felt rather like Nehemiah.

Our hearts were shaking. And when the senior member of our visitation committee prayed for the very last time in that broken-down church building which had been deserted, although everything he said was orderly and correct, we could tell his heart was breaking within him.

You see, that's what so often happens when in Weersbe's language, we care enough to ask, to listen, and to pray. Our prayers come from hearts broken by the problems other Christians are facing and the derelict state of the church in Scotland.

[16:22] You see, Nehemiah's prayer begins way before Nehemiah prayed. In fact, it was all somewhat of a process for him. You see exactly the same modeled in the life of Christ and the way he would ask, and then he would listen, and then he would pray and act.

This is genuine gospel prayer. Many Christians hold up Nehemiah's prayer as an example of how to pray, and rightly so, but the truth is that Nehemiah's prayer begins a long time before he starts in verse five.

Rather, his prayer is set in the context of asking and listening. And which of us is ready to weep and mourn the way he did?

With his mouth he asked, with his ears he heard, and with his heart he prayed. That's step one, two, and three of gospel. Prayer. That we love each other enough to ask, how is it really with you?

We love each other enough to listen to what the other person is really saying. And then from a place of deep compassion to pray, to love enough to pray for one another.

[17:49] Amen. Amen.