

Nehemiah's Prayer (2)

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[0 : 00] Turn with me this evening to Nehemiah chapter 1 and we'll read verses 4 and 5.

Nehemiah chapter 1 verses 4 and 5. As soon as I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

And I said, 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.

O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commands. When I was a young Christian in the Free Church of Scotland, our denomination was privileged to have what we called at the time senior statesmen.

To some extent, we still do have senior statesmen in our denomination, but the difference is today that regrettably nobody listens to them. So they've stopped speaking and we're the worst off for that.

[1 : 10] But in my younger days, we always looked to them for guidance and for wisdom. Well, I'll never forget as a student in Aberdeen, hearing for the first time one of these senior statesmen of the church.

His name was Clement Graham. And by the time I knew him, he was a very old man. He stood up in the pulpit in Aberdeen. And when I looked at him, I secretly resented that he had been asked to preach and not some younger, trendier minister with whom I could more easily identify.

Someone who was hip, cool and spoke my language. You see how shallow I was in my younger years. Well, it took me all of five minutes to realise my mistake.

Having sung a psalm, he called us to prayer. And it was then, as I listened to him pray, that my prejudices were not to clean out of the park.

The longer he prayed, the more I repented of my youthful arrogance. My mouth opened in wonder. My heart was strangely warmed.

[2 : 22] And my mind was satisfied. As word by word, sentence by sentence, he led me and all the other students in Aberdeen Free Church to the throne of grace in prayer.

And I'll never forget one of Clement Graham's stock phrases in prayer. He was a colossus of an intellect. I'm convinced he would have reached the highest echelons of university research had he so chosen to do.

And yet in prayer, he used this phrase, the God with whom we have to do. I can still hear his voice spoken through his misshaped mouth, for those of you who remember him.

Thou art the God with whom we have to do. This is the God to whom we pray. Not a God of our own imaginations, whom we can twist around our little finger.

But the one true and living God with whom we have to do. Well, although he's long since passed into his reward, Clement Graham did me a service I will never be able to repay with this simple phrase.

[3 : 38] Thou art the God with whom we have to do. But in his own particular way, he was saying something that godly people have been praying for many thousands of years.

Because they did not pray to a God of their own imaginations. They prayed to the one true and living God who had revealed himself in the face of Jesus Christ.

Nehemiah was one such man who, though he lived very long ago, has so much to teach us about how to pray. And as we shall see this evening, the God to whom we pray.

Thou art the God with whom we have to do. Having fallen on his knees in mourning sorrow at the ruined state of Jerusalem, Nehemiah prays, 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.

This is the God with whom he and we have to do. And it's a fine example of how to begin in prayer. Not with ourselves and not with our needs, but with God and with his awesome greatness.

[4 : 53] Let me suggest that as we approach the God with whom we have to do, we are first coming to a God who is. And secondly, we're coming to a God who does.

This is where to begin your prayers this evening. First of all, then, he is the God who is.

He is the God who is. Nehemiah's prayer begins. O Lord God of heaven and earth, the great and awesome God. Here's where to begin our prayers.

With the greatness and the awesomeness of the Lord, the God of heaven and earth. This is the God with whom we have to do. The great and awesome God.

He was great and awesome in his love and in his power. He is great and awesome in his love.

Whenever you read the word Lord in capital letters, it refers to the personal name, as it were, of God.

[6 : 09] The covenant name Yahweh. This name is the banner of his love. It is the standard of his commitment. It is the flag of his faithfulness.

And so when you read the word Lord in capital letters, you are to think of the God who loves you infinitely and who is infinitely committed to you.

Lord means love. When you approach God, you're praying to the one who is great and awesome in his love.

Let that be the first pillar of your prayer. That he is great and awesome in his love because he is Lord. Never doubt that because doubting his love for you is like a slippery slope that leads to despair.

Remember, Nehemiah is praying on behalf of a ruined Jerusalem, but he never stopped doubting that God loved his people, else he would not have prayed for them.

[7 : 14] If you're tempted to doubt the greatness and awesomeness of God's love for you, look to the cross. On which in love, God gave his one and only son for us.

Measure your circumstances in the light of his cross, not your cross in the light of your circumstances.

This is the God with whom we have to do. Whether you like it or not, whether you want to kick against it or not, whether you want to be angry with him or not, you choose. He is the God whose love for you is great and awesome.

But then secondly, he's great and awesome in his power, in his power. Nehemiah describes him as the God of heaven and earth.

Now, Nehemiah lived in Babylon. A Babylon that was home to a thousand different gods, many of whom claimed to be gods of heaven and earth.

[8 : 29] Nehemiah served the emperor of Babylon, the most powerful man in the world of his day. He clicked his fingers and nations were conquered at his behest. Nehemiah knew all about power.

The power of Babylonian gods and the power of Babylonian kings. But far above all powers and principalities. Nehemiah stands the one true and living God.

The God of Israel. The God of heaven and earth. Let that be the second pillar of your prayer. That the Lord is great and awesome in his power because he is the God of heaven and earth.

Never doubt that because, once again, doubting is a slippery slope that leads to spiritual death.

Nehemiah was approaching God, facing a seemingly hopeless situation.

But he never doubted that God had the power to do something about the broken walls of Jerusalem. If ever you're tempted to doubt the greatness and awesomeness of God's power available to you in prayer.

[9 : 36] Look to the empty tomb. From which on the third day God raised his son from the dead. This is the God with whom we have to do.

As Clement Graham used to say. The God who can do exceeding abundant above all we can ever ask and imagine. So this is where our prayers begin. Not with ourselves.

Not with our own problems. But with the greatness and the awesomeness of the love and power of God. It's God. It's the God who is.

Who puts our ruined lives and our anxious problems into perspective. He is the God who is. Secondly.

He is the God who does. The God who does. God is and God does. Thou art the God with whom we have to do.

[10:36] A God whose attributes and whose attitudes are revealed to us through his actions for us. Now Nehemiah knows this.

And so he continues his introduction in prayer. His address to God. By saying. Who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments.

Notice how Nehemiah describes God. He keeps covenant. He doesn't say he makes covenant. He says he keeps covenant. And he's thinking that back to that foundational covenant of God in the Bible. The covenant God made with Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation.

And then to all the covenants afterwards. The covenant he made with Moses. The covenant he made with David. God entered into these covenants where he obligated himself in love to his people.

[11:34] But Nehemiah isn't referring to God's love in making these covenants. Rather to God's acts of loving power in keeping these covenants.

In other words, he's thinking of how God has saved and rescued his people in the past. How God has demonstrated his steadfast love and faithfulness toward them.

God did mighty works of power to release Nehemiah's ancestors from their slavery in Egypt. And he's thinking back to these great demonstrations of the power of God.

And that's his prayer for a ruined Jerusalem. Not just who God is. But in the God who does. The God who kept his promises to Moses.

The God who will keep his promises to him. Is lovingly faithful to his mourning people. This ground allows Nehemiah to look forward with the hope.

[12:37] That what God has done before in rescuing his people. He will do again. Just like he released his people from their captivity in Egypt. So he can restore them from their captivity in Babylon.

This is the God with whom we have to do. A God who can do. And again, if we should doubt this. Look back to the cross.

Where our Savior triumphed over our sin. By his atoning sacrifice. And the empty tomb. Where he triumphed over our death. By his victorious resurrection.

As the Apostle Paul will say a thousand years later. If God be for us. Who can be against us? Nehemiah is mourning over the ruined walls.

And the burned gates of Jerusalem. Looking at the destruction and the fire damage. Whoever would have thought that even God could restore their former strength.

[13:44] Well, as Nehemiah looked back to what God had done before. He became convinced that what God had done before. He would do again. You know, this evening.

We might be mourning over the ruins. Of our own lives. Or the ruins of the lives of those we love. The ruins of the church in Scotland. The ruins of our nation of Scotland. But as we look back on the cross and resurrection.

We too can be convinced. That God can heal us. He can restore us. He can make us strong again. After all, we're praying to the God who does.

And who are we to pray these things anyway to him? We are, as Nehemiah describes us, those who love him and keep his commandments.

[14:47] That's who we are. Those who love him and keep his commandments. Really? I don't see that person in the mirror looking back at me. Nor do I see anyone here tonight that looks like that.

Why should God answer our prayers for, after all, if we're being honest with ourselves? Because we don't love him as we should. And we most certainly do not keep his commandments.

And here's good news for all of us who are vexed over the ruination of our lives. He hears us because we have faith in the Jesus who loved him perfectly.

And who perfectly kept all his commandments. Who are we to pray these things anyway? And why should the God of heaven and earth listen to us?

Answer? Because of the Jesus in whom we have faith. On account of Jesus, the great God of awesome love and power cannot but stoop down to hear our prayers and have mercy upon us.

[16:00] And so we begin our prayers not with the good things we've done. Or the good and righteous people that we've been. We begin our prayers with the God who does for us in grace and salvation.

The God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who cling even by their fingertips to faith in Christ. I'll never forget Clement Graham's prayer for as long as I live.

Thou art the God with whom we have to do. This is where Nehemiah began in prayer. With the God who is. With the God who does.
And this too is where we must begin. If we too would experience the restoration of our ruined lives.
With God and his grace.
With the God who does.