

Nehemiah's Prayer (7)

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[0 : 00] Over the last number of weeks, we have been studying together Nehemiah's prayer in Nehemiah chapter 1.

Having been informed of the destruction of Jerusalem and the abject misery of what's left of Judah, Nehemiah grieves and Nehemiah prays.

We've learned so much about prayer from this Old Testament saint of God, as we will over the next few months as we explore and access other prayers of the Old Testament saints of God.

But you will notice that thus far has he prayed, and yet he has not asked for anything. His prayers have been deeply reflective, filled with the adoration of God, confession of sin and the working out of the promises of God.

But only now, at the very end of his prayer, do Nehemiah's plans become clear and he begins to ask for things. We might say that he's come to the point where he's taking his life into his own hands.

[1 : 33] If it wasn't that actually, in verse 11, he's placing his life into God's hands. There's no safer place to be in this world, even before the throne of the most powerful king in the world, than in the hands of the king of kings and the lord of lords, his loving heavenly father.

And so in verse 11, it's as if he is transferring ownership of his fate and his life from himself and placing these things entirely into the hands of God.

Perhaps we would do well to view our everyday prayers in this way as well. Well, in this last sentence of his prayer, his first petition, as it were, Nehemiah is praying for three things.

Perspective, fellowship and action. This really is the prayer of his supplication where all the plans God has given him will begin to be hatched.

First of all, then, it is a prayer of perspective. It's a prayer of perspective. Consider with me that the first two words of that verse and the last two words of that verse, the brackets.

[2 : 56] It's O Lord, small capital letters referring to the God of heaven and earth. And this man referring to the king of Babylon.

In a couple of days time from having prayed these words, Nehemiah is going to be meeting with the most powerful man in the world. It is hard to overestimate the supreme power of King Artaxerxes over all the kingdoms of the known world.

He was not governed by the laws of Persia. Whatever he did was the law of Persia. A mere frown from his brow meant the death of thousands.

King Jong-un is the leader of North Korea. A psychopathic megalomaniac, King Jong-un has ordered the murder of family members as well as thousands of dissidents within his own country.

But Kim Jong-un is a pussycat compared to Artaxerxes. Historians tell us his fleet was legendary.

[4 : 05] His army was undefeatable. And his mood was changeable. And Nehemiah has to stand in front of this man and plead for the good of this man's enemies.

If I was Nehemiah, I would be terrified. But it seems to me that Nehemiah is praying for a sense of perspective here. For God to remind him that the king is just a man.

He might be a great man, but he's just a man. He will drown if you hold his head under water. He will take to his bed if he is sick.

He will grow old and he will die. It's rather like that hack that was taught to people who were afraid of public speaking.

You tell them, imagine your audience dressed in their pyjamas. Your audience might be the great and lofty of society. There in the front row, there's the queen herself.

[5 : 06] And there sitting beside her is Boris Johnson. But they're wearing pyjamas. No need to be afraid of your audience when they're all wearing pyjamas. And in a sense, that's what Nehemiah is

praying for by using the words, this man.

God's grace to see King Artaxerxes in his pyjamas. By way of contrast, as well as praying for perspective to see the littleness of this man, he also prays for the perspective to see the bigness of God.

He begins his petition, O Lord. You'll know that the words O Lord in small capital letters in your Bible corresponds to the covenant name of God, the name Yahweh or Jehovah.

And it's reminiscent of three things. It's reminiscent, first of all, of the great love of God for his people. That infinite, eternal and unchangeable commitment God has never to leave, never to forsake his people, but always to do them good.

Secondly, the name Yahweh reminds us of the great salvation history of God. He revealed himself to Yahweh. He revealed himself as Yahweh to Moses in the context of the exodus from Egypt.

[6 : 30] And now Nehemiah, as we'll see in a moment, is invoking the name of Yahweh in their need of a new exodus. Not this time from Egypt, but from Babylon.

And then thirdly, the name Yahweh is reminiscent of God's great power. God is willing to demonstrate that power to save his people.

Think of the ten plagues, the division of the Red Sea. Without being irreverent, God doesn't wear pajamas because God never sleeps.

If Moses can stand before Pharaoh and command him to let God's people go, Nehemiah is praying for the perspective to see the littleness of the king compared to the bigness of God so that he may stand before Artaxerxes and ask the very same thing.

When you're in a situation where you're in a situation where you're having to place your life into the hands of God, whatever that situation might be, remember to pray for the perspective of Nehemiah, that the littleness of man compared to the bigness of God.

[7 : 51] A prayer of perspective. A prayer secondly of fellowship, a prayer of fellowship. Nehemiah had probably lived most of his life in Babylon.

To all intents, he could have said of himself that he was a Babylonian. Just as I have lived longer now in Glasgow than anywhere else in my life, I could say of myself that I'm an adopted Oujia.

So Nehemiah had made a life for himself in Babylon. He could have said of himself that he was an adopted Babylonian. But you will notice from verse 11 that Nehemiah finds his primary identity not as a Babylonian, not even as someone who was close to the king.

He identifies himself rather as a servant of God. He might have left the Israel of God behind, but he has not left the God of Israel behind.

And so before ever it is mentioned that Nehemiah is a senior member of the king's court, cupbearer to the king, he says of himself, I'm a servant of God. You don't know me, Nehemiah says to us, if you don't know that my primary loyalty is to the God of Israel.

[9 : 12] Would that could be said of us? Does everyone know this about you? That you're a disciple of Jesus, a servant of Christ? But not only does Nehemiah find his identity as a servant of God, he finds his identity as one servant among many servants.

His closest fellows aren't the other members of the court of the Babylonian king, those dressed in golden robes and living in a palace of luxury.

His closest fellows are fellow servants of the king of kings. They are dressed in gash rags and they live in a ruin called Jerusalem.

And what is that definition that Nehemiah gives? It's a wonderful definition of what it means to be a servant of God. He gives it in verse 11 here. Write this down in your mind, seed it into your heart.

What is the definition of being a servant of God? Nehemiah says, your servants who delight to fear your name. That's what it means to be a follower and a servant of the God of the Bible.

[10 : 23] This mysterious and majestic phrase, a seeming oximeteron, those who delight to fear your name. We don't have time to go into this evening, but in general to fear God is to know God.

Knowing and fearing for our purposes being synonyms, two words which mean the same thing. In other words, to be a follower of the God of the Bible is to find one's greatest joy in knowing him, in knowing everything we can about him.

But even more than that, for it's possible to know everything about someone, but not to know them.

The greatest joy of the follower and servant of the God of the Bible is in knowing God himself.

And that's where Nehemiah finds his primary identity. Not just in himself delighting in knowing God, but in being one among many who delight to know God.

That's what unites him and his people, more than their ethnic or cultural background even, that together they find their greatest joy in knowing God.

[11 : 44] And there's a sense in which, therefore, in this prayer, Nehemiah is praying for God to remind him of that loyalty and that fellowship and that unity, that when he's standing there before the most powerful man in the world, God would remind him of his primary identity as one servant of God among many other servants of God.

That also must be our prayer. Morning by morning, as we prepare to go to school or our classes in university, our work or whatever we're going, whatever we're doing, our primary identity is as one disciple of Christ among many disciples of Christ.

And what joins us together is our identity as Christians, knowing Christ. That's tighter and more essential to who we are than anything else.

It's almost like he's praying, remind me, Lord, that I am not alone as I go into work this morning, as I go into school this morning, as I go to uni this morning.

Remind me that I am but one of a vast number of other disciples of Jesus Christ. And then third and last, it's a prayer of action.

[13 : 18] It's a prayer of action. It's only now at the very end of his prayer, in the last line almost, that Nehemiah directly prays for something. Give success to your servant today, grant him mercy in the sight of this man.

Now, remember, Nehemiah has been praying for over three months by this point. And over the course of these months, it has become clear that God has placed a call in his heart to be a new Moses who will deliver his people from their captivity in Babylon, who will rebuild the broken walls and the burned gates of Jerusalem.

Now, having been filled with that certainty of God's call and prompted, therefore, to action, Nehemiah prays for God to give him success.

Don't you see? Prayer and action go together. Prayer without action is pietism. Action without prayer is presumption. But when godly prayer and dependent action go hand in hand, it is an awesome weapon in the hands of a powerful God.

Nehemiah has knelt in the presence of the King of Heaven for the last three months. It's time for him now to stand in front of the King of Babylon.

[14 : 43] Like Queen Esther, who will come after him. It's time for Nehemiah to put his life into the hands of God and take action.

And yet he, of all people, by virtue of him being the King's cupbader, knows that it could go either way. He could either be successful and get ahead, or he could fail and lose his head.

The foundation's been laid, you see, in three months of prayer, but now it's time for Nehemiah to get his hands dirty. Just like we might pray in Glasgow City Free Church for God to work among international students in our city, and I certainly hope God will bless our work among international students in our city.

That's good, because it builds a strong foundation, but there comes a time for us to get our hands dirty and pray for God to give us success, both in our planning for mission and our doing of mission. Or again, we pray for 60 new ministry workers for the Free Church of Scotland by 2030, but there comes a time when each of us must ask ourselves the question, Lord, am I one of them?

[15 : 56] Am I one of them? Or to bring it back down even to a more common experience for many of us, supposing you've fallen out with someone, it doesn't matter whose fault it was, it could have been yours, it could have been theirs, it could have been both your faults, you've been praying sometime for a reconciliation between you.

There comes a time when based upon your prayers for success, you have to act. You've got to pick up the phone, you've got to send a text, you've got to send a card. The reconciliation process began when you started to pray, but now's the time to act.

Again, I say, prayer and action must go together. Prayer without action is pietism. Action without prayer is presumption. Nehemiah had both in spades, and in that we want to imitate him.

You know, finally, with this we close, not just tonight's study, but also our study of this wonderful prayer. In many ways, Nehemiah's prayer doesn't belong in the Old Testament, but in the New Testament, it is filled with the mindset of our great saviour, Jesus Christ.

Filled with the savour of his love, demonstrated in that he went before the divine king of kings on our account to save us from our sins and to bestow upon us eternal life.

[17 : 35] Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls, only for them to be destroyed again by the Romans 500 years later in AD 70. But Jesus is building a city against which the gates of hell shall never prevail.

And so as we leave this passage, I'm asking you not to let this passage leave you. Commit it to your heart by prayer. And who knows what God might do for you, in you, and through you. And through you.