

Nehemiah's Prayer (5)

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[0 : 00] Nehemiah 1, verses 8 and 9.

As we continue our studies into the prayer of Nehemiah, it's my intention over the next few months really to go through many of the prayers of the great saints of the Bible.

And we're starting with Nehemiah because perhaps this is the most famous of them all. We're in verses 8 and 9 this evening. Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses saying, if you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples.

We studied what it meant to pray our way through the Psalms or to put it more formally, perhaps, how to express ourselves in prayer using the words of the Psalms.

And so in that series, we learned how to express our sadness and our happiness, our doubt and our trust, our pain and our pleasure using the Psalms.

[1 : 43] In many ways, as we're working our way through the prayer of Nehemiah, both this week and for the past few weeks, we've been studying together what it means to pray the promises.

Or to put it more formally, how to use God's promises as the foundation for every aspect of our prayer lives, for our prayers of adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication.

In fact, as you work your way through the prayers of the Bible, whether in the New Testament or in the Old, they're all founded upon and inextricably connected with the promises of God.

Whether it's Moses in the Old Testament or Paul in the New, they're all praying the promises. There's nothing in their prayers that can't be traced back in one way or another, in one form or another, to the covenant promises of God toward his people.

Well, here in Nehemiah 1, verses 8 through 9, we're hearing the voice of a man of God who is, par excellence, praying the promises of God.

[2 : 56] There's much we can learn from Nehemiah in every way, but it's here, in the heart of his prayer, we learn the most. As he prays the promises of God, he begins to see things from God's perspective.

And he begins to understand two things. First of all, understanding why things are the way they are, in verse 8. And secondly, understanding what God can do, in verse 9.

Great things can happen, you know, when we pray the promises of God. Not the least of which is that God changes our perspectives on the circumstances we're facing and on his mighty grace.

First of all, then, from verse 8. Praying the promises helps us to understand why things are the way they are.

Why things are the way they are. Nehemiah prays in this verse. Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples.

[4 : 12] Now, what precipitated Nehemiah's prayer in the first place was the report he received from his brothers concerning Jerusalem. Its ruin and its destruction.

The people of God are scattered all across the Babylonian world and beyond. And Nehemiah is trying to understand why these things have happened.

Were they random events? Or was God taken by surprise when the Babylonian army attacked Jerusalem? Nehemiah is himself in Susa at this time, one of Babylon's major cities, serving as a prominent slave to the king.

But he's trying to understand why all these things have happened. And he's using the promises of God as a matrix for his understanding.

When he's talking about Moses foretelling these things, he's probably referring to verses in Deuteronomy chapter 4 and verses 25 through 27.

[5 : 19] Let me read these verses to you. Deuteronomy chapter 4, 25 through 27. When you father children and children's children and have grown old in the land, if you act corruptly by making a carved image in the form of anything and by doing what is evil in the sight of the Lord your God so as to provoke his anger, I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that you will soon utterly perish from the land you are going over the Jordan to possess.

You will not live long in it, but will be utterly destroyed. And the Lord will scatter you among the peoples and you will be left few in number among the nations where the Lord will drive you.

Well, Nehemiah looks around him and realizes that the people of Israel have been scattered among the nations. What God said would happen back then in Deuteronomy has happened.

The people of Israel himself included are in captivity all over the Babylonian world. And you can almost hear the cogs turning in Nehemiah's mind.

If what God had promised had happened, then it must be because of what God had warned them about, namely idolatry and evil doing provoking his anger.

[6 : 49] Do you see the point? Nehemiah is backtracing the promises of God in order to understand how the people of Israel ended up in captivity in the first place.

Let me illustrate this. Suppose you see a man swaying and stumbling on Sockhill Street one Saturday evening. He is talking nonsense and from time to time he vomits in a doorway.

You can be fairly certain that he's drunk. You trace back from the effect, the man acting like he's drunk, to the cause, he's had too much to drink.

In the same way, using the promises of God, Nehemiah is tracing back from the effect, the people of Israel have been scattered among the nations, to the cause, they have committed idolatry and done what is evil in the sight of the Lord.

In other words, Nehemiah is using the promises of God to understand why things are the way they are. Why when he wakes up in the morning and looks out of his window, he sees the foreign landscapes of Babylon and not the familiar scenes of Jerusalem.

[8 : 11] He's using the promises of God to understand why his people have been scattered among the nations and why Jerusalem is in ruins.

So let's take an application. Let's think of a Christian who is suffering. There are times in our lives, are there not, when everything seems to be going wrong for us.

There are no outstanding sins in our lives to account for this. And so we're left confused and wondering if, in fact, God loves us at all.

Well, in Hebrews 12, 11, we read these verses together, we read, For the moment, all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

So here we have a Christian who is enduring pain. How can we backtrace the promises of God to understand why things are the way they are for them?

[9 : 21] Well, in Hebrews 12, earlier in this chapter, in verse 6, we read, The Lord disciplines or trains those he loves.

And then in verse 7, God is treating you as sons. Rather than the Christian being confused and beginning to question God's love, when she's suffering, she backtraces the promises of Hebrews 12 and realizing that God is training her, that God is disciplining her, that God is treating her like his daughter.

No, discipline is, it's not, it's painful at the time. It never, it's always painful. But it doesn't mean that God doesn't love her.

Rather the reverse. It's because God loves her that she's suffering like she is. They affect the suffering, but backtrace God's promises and you find the cause of the suffering.

God is your father and he is training you up as his child. You see, backtracing the promises of God like Nehemiah does in verse 8 here, and like we can from Hebrews 12, we begin to understand why things are the way they are.

[10 : 47] And rather than kicking against God and doubting his love for us, we begin to see things from his perspective. Our hearts change and begin to line up with his heart in our prayers.

When I said earlier that in Nehemiah chapter 1, verses 8 and 9, we're hearing the voice of a man who parox excellence is praying the promises of God, I meant it.

But such promises, such prayers rather, are not beyond us. If we will but use our eyes to understand where we are, and then the promises of God to understand how we got here.

Understanding why things are the way they are. The second thing Nehemiah uses the promises of God for is to understand what God can do.

To understand what God can do in verse 9. God's promise of scattering, of what would happen if his people were unfaithful to him, take up 10 words in our text in verse 8.

[12 : 03] God's promises of gathering, of what would happen if they returned to him, take up 72 words in our text.

In other words, the promise of God's merciful gathering of his people is so much greater than his promise of angry scattering. His grace is always so much bigger than his wrath.

Again, Nehemiah probably goes back to Deuteronomy, this time in chapter 30 in verses 1 through 3, as the basis for his prayer in verse 9.

Let me read these verses to you. And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I've set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart, with all your soul, then the Lord will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you.

He will gather you again from all the peoples for the Lord your God has scattered you. Well, it might seem as if it was impossible that the city of Jerusalem and the nation of Judah should ever rise again, that the walls of the city should be rebuilt and the gates should be rehung, that the people of God should ever return once again to their homeland, but not according to the promise of God.

[13 : 47] Because he lived in the palace of the king, Nehemiah was uniquely aware of the great power of the Babylonian empire. And yet, as he prays through the promises of God, he begins to understand what God can do, namely, gather his people from wherever he has scattered them and restore their fortunes in their own land.

Nehemiah understands that no matter how great the power of Babylon, the Lord's power is greater by far, and that just as he used Babylon to judge the people of God, to cleanse them from their idolatry and their evil doing, so he will save his people from Babylon if they will but return to him in faith and obedience.

You see, as he prays the promises of God, his heart is changed from despair and gloom to hope and glory.

He begins to see things from God's perspective. It's only then that Nehemiah really begins to pray. Let's go back to our earlier example from Hebrews 12 of how God disciplines his children and how, therefore, suffering in our lives as Christians is a sign that God loves us.

When we're suffering, although at a stretch, we might still say that God loves us. We ask ourselves the questions, what possible good could come from the things I'm going through?

[15 : 21] What possible good could come from the sufferings I'm enduring at this present time? Is God willing or able to redeem my pain and make it mean something?

Well, as we pray the promises of God in Hebrews 12, we come across the following two marvellous truths about how God uses our suffering, that suffering that he gives us as a function of us being his children.

First of all, in verse 10, we read of our loving and heavenly father that he disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness, that we may share in his holiness.

What possible good can come from the suffering that you're being forced to endure? Well, in the first instance, you are learning how to share in the holiness of God.

You're being refined by fire so that the dross of your worldliness is burned away like the chaff. God's discipline might not make you happier, but it will make you holier.

[16 : 34] Second, in verse 11, we read in verse 11 of Hebrews chapter 12 of the result of God's painful and yet loving fatherly training.

Later, we read, it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. The Lord's training produces a harvest.

It yields fruit. The harvest of our endurance and the fruit of our faith is peace and righteousness. Isn't this so often true to our experience as Christians that by and large, those Christians who have suffered most throughout their lives also tend to be the most peaceful and the most righteous.

There's something different about them. They've been trained by God. And so you see, in the context of Hebrews 12, to pray the promises of scripture is to pray for God's help to be trained by his discipline and the grace to endure.

So you see, how praying the promises of God helps us to see things from God's perspective and how it changes us for the better. Well, we learned over the course of many months how to pray the Psalms.

[18 : 04] We definitely need to work more on this. Praying the promises. How to use the promises of God and scripture as the foundation for all our prayers of adoration and confession and thanksgiving and supplication.

To use James' language, this kind of prayer availeth much with God. And if nothing else, changes our hearts to see things from his perspective.

And so scripture says, be a Nehemiah and pray the promises. ■■■ the promises. am a a home And so the she is and to the her a a