

Prayer in Time of Need

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[0:00] Now we're going to read, we're going to read in the book of Nehemiah.

We're going to read the whole of chapter 1, Nehemiah chapter 1. The words of Nehemiah, the son of Hakaliah.

Nehemiah was in Persia. He was a Jew in Persia, a follower of God. Now it happened in the month of Chislev in the 20th year, as I was in Susa, the citadel, that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah.

I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said to me, 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. As soon as I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

[1:17] 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. Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant, that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel, your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you.

Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you, and I have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples. But if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcast are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen to make my name dwell there.

They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to the prayer of your servants, who delight to fear your name and give success to your servant today and grant him mercy in the sight of this man, this king.

Now I was cut bearer to the king. May God bless that reading from his holy word.

[2:57] And as we continue in these days, these weeks, months of lockdown, it's so important that we get our perspective right in what's happening at the moment, how we're to view these times and how we're to conduct ourselves in the light of these challenging times.

Where do we get that perspective? We get it from God's word. We get it from the Lord, our God, as we get that perspective from him.

And so we continue to trust him through these times. We look to the God who is sovereign. We look to the God who's in control, the God of love, the God of steadfast love, the God of mercy.

We trust in him, the one who knows the end from the beginning. We trust in him who holds your times in his hands.

He holds the times of the nations in his hands. He holds the times of his church in his hands. He holds your times in my hands, in his secure hand, hands of love.

[4:07] And God's word teaches us to trust him through these times. And we can turn to the historic books of the Bible. Sometimes, or very often, we can ignore these books or certainly marginalize the books of the Old Testament.

But in these books, whether they're books, the historic books of the Old Testament or even the New Testament, we see in them the truth that the God that we worship, the one true God, is the God of history.

The world that God has created is no randomly moving world out with the knowledge and providence of God. God whom we worship, the one true God.

And we see in his work, we see stories of God's people within the bigger picture of God making himself known. In the lives of his servants, making himself known as the God who is faithful.

The God of faithfulness. The God who teaches his people to trust him at all times. Even times that are perplexing to us. Even times when we don't fully understand what God is doing.

[5 : 20] We still trust in his covenant love. We still trust in the one who moves the history of his people towards that point. Where the Lord Jesus will return.

In the Old Testament, we see the God of history moving his people towards the coming of the Lord Jesus. And in these last days that we're living, we trust in the God of history who's moving his church towards that time when Jesus returns.

And so to give us that perspective on the God who is there, the God of faithfulness, the God in whom we trust. Well, we can turn, of course, to many parts of scripture.

We're going to turn to the book of Nehemiah. Because, yes, on the one hand, it concerns in this book the work of God through the life of his servant Nehemiah.

When Nehemiah was sent to restore the walls of Jerusalem a long time after God's people, or many of God's people, had returned from exile back to Jerusalem.

[6 : 25] Ultimately, the book of Nehemiah is a book about God. It's a book about God's control in the lives of his people.

It's a book that tells us of God's faithfulness towards those who are his. It's a book that tells us the God of power, God's power to change events, God's gracious love to provide for all who are his.

This is the same God whom we worship, the same God in whose trust we place, even in these present days that we're living, in these critical days that we're living through.

Yes, the events in the book of Nehemiah happened a long time ago. But what we read here, what we see here, is utterly relevant for us today.

This is the same God whom we read off in Nehemiah, the same God whom we worship and trust, the same God who still works out his purposes in the lives of his people.

[7 : 27] And of course, there are many challenges that we face in living our lives for the glory of God. But we remember that we follow the God of faithfulness.

We obey him. We commune with him. We serve him. We obey him, even in these troubled times. So we're going to be challenged as we go through this bit.

We're going to be encouraged, I pray excited, and yes, humbled before God as we set up the scriptures, even as we find God's word here in Nehemiah.

So let's think a wee bit about this book and about the context of the book. Those of you who were here last week, last Sunday morning, remember we were with the prophet Ezekiel.

And Ezekiel was with the Lord's people in exile just at the start of the exile. Remember, Ezekiel had been sent by God to Babylon to warn the people, to tell them why they were in exile.

[8 : 33] And that happened at the start of the exile. But now we're moving on some 130 years or so since Ezekiel first had been given that vision of God's glory and that message to give to the people.

In that exile, it was very much the cream, the higher elements, if you like, in Jerusalem who'd been sent into exile. They'd been sent to Babylon hundreds of miles away from Jerusalem.

The people had settled in Babylon. They'd raised families there. But they still longed to return to Jerusalem. So while these Jews were far from home, well, God wasn't far from his people.

God was working through events there in Babylon to bring his people back to himself and to take his people back to Jerusalem. And we read in the book of Ezra, for example, we read there of King Cyrus.

The king of Persia who'd defeated the Babylonians and King Cyrus, allowing some 40,000 of the people of Jerusalem to return to the city, to go and rebuild the temple so they could worship God.

[9 : 52] And as we read in Ezra, there was a stop-start building of the temple. It was rebuilt, but Jerusalem was still vulnerable to attack us.

Walls weren't yet completed. The walls that had been broken down, they were still broken down.

And even when there was a second wave of exiles who'd returned to Jerusalem, the walls were still not repaired.

They were still broken. And this is where Nehemiah comes in. Nehemiah is told of the state of affairs there in Jerusalem.

This is ancestral homeland. And this is where, if you like, the story of Nehemiah begins. And Nehemiah, the author, has taken us to this great city of Susa.

It's a lavish city. There's a lavish palace there. The king is a king called Artaxerxes. He's the greatest king in the world. He's the greatest person in the world in terms of power.

[10:55] Nehemiah is a servant of the king. He's, as we've told there at the end of the chapter, he's the king's cupbearer. He's got the responsibility every day of tasting and testing the king's wine in case poison's been put in it.

Nehemiah opens his life, as it were, in service of the king, King Artaxerxes. As we'll find out, he opens his life fully in service of the one true king, the one true God.

But Nehemiah is there in that palace. He has a very, in one sense, comfortable lifestyle. He is given the best of the conditions to live in, even though, as we said, his life is in danger of every day with his testing the king's wine.

Every day he has this work to do. But there's a day that's different. There's a delegation that comes from Judah, arrives at the palace. It's got news that really shaped Nehemiah to the core.

The remnant, the people that had left Babylon to go back to Jerusalem, they're not doing well. They're in constant danger. The walls are still in total disrepair.

[12:10] And the situation in Jerusalem is desperate. The people are vulnerable. They're vulnerable to destruction. When Nehemiah hears this word, he's absolutely distraught.

We're told that he weeps. He's in mourning. He's in mourning for his fellow Jews. They're suffering great distress in the city of Jerusalem.

And Nehemiah has such compassion, true compassion for those whom he calls his brothers. I mean, he never even set foot in Jerusalem. But his heart was there because it was the place where God called his people to worship him, even through the temple.

And so Nehemiah realizes the desperate situation of his people. And his heart is a heart of love. Love for the one true God and love for the Lord's people.

And in that love, he's not prepared just to sit back and do nothing. But in that love for God and for others, he's going to seek God's will, to seek what God will have him to do in that critical situation.

[13:19] And, you know, that spirit of Nehemiah, that heart of Nehemiah was a heart of true compassion for others. And surely that marks out a believer who truly believes in the one true God who follows the Lord Jesus, who has that active walk with the Lord.

When his faith and her faith is demonstrated by action, even in the action of helping others in need. That faith of the true follower of the Lord Jesus, that faith that seemed to be a living, active faith. And a faith that's demonstrated by good works.

The works of kindness. The works of second mile living. The works of reaching out to the needy. The works of reaching out to those who are suffering, those who are lonely, those who are vulnerable.

That, as Jesus said, that giving of the cup of cold water in Jesus' name to all who are in need. Even as we're called to do at this particular moment in our nation's critical time.

[14:33] And yes, we're to weep with those who weep. To show the compassion of Christ. And yes, to alleviate suffering as God gives us the abilities and enabling so to do.

To do so to the glory of God. We're not to Christians who cross to the other side, as it were, the other side of the road when we're faced with the desperate needs of others.

Whether that need is spiritual or physical. But surely we seek to give the Lord's blessing with the oil of compassion. And Nehemiah had that spirit of compassion.

He's going to be used by God to help his fellow Jews to overcome their dangers and troubles. But what does he do first? He doesn't just launch straight onto his desire to go to Jerusalem.

He doesn't just a chariot and go hundreds of miles to Jerusalem. No, he puts first things first. He prays. And notice how Nehemiah prays.

[15:38] He begins with adoration of God. He doesn't just even rush into his request for the people of Jerusalem. He begins with God. Remember us who we've been looking at a few weeks ago in our midweek meetings and the Lord's prayer as Jesus taught us to pray.

Our Father who art in heaven. And so we begin with God as Nehemiah began with God in prayer. And you notice how as he prays, he's acknowledging the greatness of God.

He's speaking of the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, the covenant-keeping God.

Nehemiah is truly acknowledging that God is sovereign. He's saying the universe is in your hands.

And therefore he's saying, Lord, you are able, you are worthy because you're God. And the situation in Jerusalem there was, you know, that was Nehemiah's priority, yes. But first and foremost, he comes before God, maker of heaven and earth. He comes before God to seek his face, to call on God's name, to recognize that neither Nehemiah nor the remnant in Jerusalem could do anything without God's help.

[16:52] Their need was great. The situation was critical. God would first be approached in reverence and in humility.

And Nehemiah recognized that he nor the people could do anything without God. And, you know, in the current crisis that we're living through, we still affirm that truth in our hearts that God is Lord. And therefore we call on him repeatedly to have mercy upon us, to recognize that he is Lord. He is Lord of heaven and earth. He is the God who rules all. And so as we continue to pray before God, as we continue to trust in him, even through these days, even that trust itself will strengthen your resolve, strengthen your faith at this time, particularly as you dwell in the character of God.

The more you think of who God is, the more your faith in him will be strengthened, even through these difficult times. You'll continue to trust in him in all things.

As we see, as we go back to the prayer of Nehemiah, he acknowledged God, who God is. He acknowledged that God is faithful to his people.

[18:11] And so, again, you see immediately, you see him in the heart of Nehemiah, you see his utter unworthiness. So he knows his utter unworthiness to come before God.

And so he confesses sin. And notice, this is important, he notices. There's not, and it's what we have to notice, it's not just his, the sins of himself that he confesses, but he confesses the sins of Israel.

He confesses their disobedience. He confesses that we're all complicit in sin. And so he's admitting to a shared, if you like, shared wickedness and disobedience against God.

Nehemiah knows that he's not guiltless before God. And, you know, as we confess our sins before God as individuals, we have to confess them also. It's our sins as a nation.

Sins of a continent. Sins of the world. We have to come before God and confess that, yes, truly, we have sinned. That we have come short of his glory.

[19:21] We've all messed up in our lives. We've all given in to the sins of our heart, the sins of our mind, the sins of the flesh. We haven't sought first the kingdom of God.

None of us have come before God with confession of sin and true sincerity of heart.

We've all allowed those things that offend God to become inoffensive in our hearts. And, you know, at such a time as this, when we do and must confess the corporate sins of the church and corporate sins of the nation.

75 years ago, Europe, well, certainly Western Europe, was freed from totalitarian oppression. Those rejoicing, as we saw on our television just a few days ago, the rejoicing that spoke of that joy of being free.

In America, even though the war with Japan still wasn't over, when VE Day was celebrated, still President Truman called on Americans to offer to God prayer of thanksgiving.

[20:36] And he called on America to have a day of prayer, to give thanks for that victory in Europe. Even ministers in our own country called on the people to give rejoicing to God.

One of our ministers was the minister in Stormway Free Church, Reverend Kenneth McCray. And two days after VE Day, he preached a Thanksgiving sermon.

And he said this in 1945. He said these words. We have reason to rejoice with trembling. And that trembling was in relation to the sins, the innate sin of human nature.

That we return. It's a propensity to return to our folly. Peace was won in 1945. And truly, we gave thanks then and continue to give thanks now to God for that peace.

What have we done with that peace? So often we've replaced freedom with license to sin. We've allowed the license of sin to go unchecked.

[21:44] We've sinned as individuals. We've sinned as a church. We've sinned as a nation. We've removed God from our schools. God's been removed in so many of our churches.

Even in the last decade we've seen society change in a way that 10 years ago we would never have thought possible. We've wandered far from his word.

We've rejected his truth. And we pray. Yes, we pray that God would forgive us our sins. We're all culpable. And so we pray for the forgiveness for these times when our voices were silent, when

others moved the boundaries.

We've been complicit in so many changes that have sought to eradicate Christian truth from our land. And so with Nehemiah, we come before God and we plead his mercy because we have sinned before God.

Listen again to the words of Nehemiah when he comes before God in prayer. We have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned.

[22 : 54] We've acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. We have to echo these words in prayer.

We come before God with our corporate sins as a nation, as a church, as individuals. We haven't loved the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind.

We haven't loved our neighbor as ourselves. We haven't. Instead, we've sought other gods before the one true God. We've made idols for our own self-satisfaction.

We've taken God's name in vain when we dishonor that name. We've broken his day, the Lord's day, as was called in the Old Testament, the Sabbath.

We've murdered others by our words and heart. We've dishonored our parents. We've committed adultery in our hearts. We've stolen and taken what's not ours to take.

[23 : 54] We've told lies against our neighbors instead of loving them sincerely. We've coveted.

We're all culpable before God. And so with Nehemiah again, we confess our corporate sins before God, the God who hears and the God who forgives.

And so we turn to God in repentance for our sins and pray that truly he would have mercy upon us. That God would heal this land, not just heal this land of this virus, this virus that's caused so much devastation.

But we pray that God would heal the land of our spiritual sickness, that sickness that lies within each one of our hearts. We're a sick nation. We're spiritually sick.

And so, yes, we pray and we must pray for our leaders, our decision makers, the people of influence, and pray that they will bow before the Lord of Lords and King of Kings.

Pray for our church leaders that, likewise, our church leaders would do the same. Church leaders who've been given so much in privilege. Church leaders who've been given so much in the past.

[25 : 34] Church leaders bring to their Sunday. Church leaders who've been loved, they've been rendered. Church leaders who've been 24 years They have moved to the God and priority.

Church leaders who've been given out the overall believer in order genuine care of us. secure in the land. So Nehemiah is pleading before God that God would be faithful to his people.

It's the kind of sentiment that we sing in Psalm 85, that God would restore us to himself. And, you know, surely these words are appropriate in our current situation, that we plead for God's mercies even at this time, that we plead that God would restore us as a people, that God would turn, well, turn his rage away from us. And that his name be honoured once more in church and nation.

And we pray that God would be gracious to us. And in repentance, that we seek his favour and know that blessing of restoration and that we continue to serve him and to shine for him in a dark land.

And so if in prayer, if in prayer Nehemiah is calling on God to reveal his faithfulness to his people, if he's praying that God would restore them to the land in safety and security, we're seeing that Nehemiah is praying for a miracle of deliverance, that he and his people go to Jerusalem and work the work that God will give them to do. Now, humanly speaking, what Nehemiah was praying was impossible. Some years before this, reading the book of Ezra, the same king had actually forbidden people to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. He'd heard word from malicious individuals that the people of Jerusalem were somehow conspiring against the king. And he'd forbidden absolutely the walls to be rebuilt.

[27 : 53] So Nehemiah is now asking the same king for permission to go and do what earlier the king had forbidden. Not only that, I mean, he's the king's cupbearer. He's indispensable to the life of the king.

So from a human perspective, it was impossible, it seemed impossible that the king would grant Nehemiah's request to go to Jerusalem. But God is stronger, infinitely stronger than any human ruler, than any human being.

And Proverbs 21, 1 tells us, the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, like the rivers of water. He turns it wherever he wishes. When Nehemiah prays his prayer to God, he has that confidence that God will turn the heart of the king and grant Nehemiah his request. And so Nehemiah is praying for that work of deliverance from the king whom Nehemiah calls simply this man. Nehemiah knows that the king is but a man in relation to eternal God. And we pray to God at this present time. We're praying that God would turn the hearts of our rulers to know God. And to do what humanly speaking seems impossible, but to do what is not impossible with God. And that God would work a miracle of deliverance for the nation. And not only that God would deliver this land from the virus that is so blighting our society, but that God would change the hearts of our rulers, that God would change the hearts of people within this land, so that we can truly say that righteousness prevails in our land, this land that was once known as the land of the people of the book. Places that were known, the people were, the people of the great faith. And we pray that God will turn us again to himself. You know, in World War II, as we remember the ending of World War II in Europe on Friday, were many miracles of deliverance.

Humanly speaking, when the prospect of defeat seemed so real at so many stages in the war, that God intervened to save us from the evils of Nazism. And we pray to the same Lord to have mercy upon us at this time, that God would overrule and that God would deliver us from the scourge of sin, the scourge of evil. Yes, that the scourge of the pestilence that's raging in our land, and that God, in his mercy, that God would so send that miracle of deliverance to us as a people, as a nation, and that God would be glorified in his work, that we pray that he'll do for the sake of his name, for the glory of his name, and that he'll do that at such a time as this. Amen.

Let us pray. Our Lord, our God, you who are sovereign, we bow before you. And we pray, Lord, that you will do that which might seem impossible to human minds, but that which is not impossible with you.

[31 : 24] And so, Lord, may we know that you are the God of the possible. And we pray, Lord, that you will change the hearts of our rulers, that you will change the heart of this nation, that you will restore us to yourself, and that you will heal us of the sickness in this land. Go before us, Lord, now we pray. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Let's close with a benediction. Amen. And now may grace, mercy, and peace from God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, rest upon and remain with you, both now and forevermore. Amen.