

Nehemiah's Need To Pray

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Date: 07 January 2018

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[0 : 00] Let's turn for a little to the chapter we read in the book of Nehemiah, chapter 1. We read there at the beginning of the words of Nehemiah, the son of Hakaliah.

Now it happened in the month of Chisleu, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa, the capital, that Hananiah, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And 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 for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

Ezra and Nehemiah are two fascinating books of the Old Testament. The first six chapters in Ezra have to do with the rebuilding of the temple, and the last four have to do with the restoration of the worship.

[1 : 18] And Nehemiah, the first six chapters have to do with the reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem, and the last chapters have to do with the instruction given to God's people.

Now, as we know, this man, Nehemiah, was a great man, and God used this man, Nehemiah, to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

And it is a book, I know, that a lot of people have gone through this book, studying this book, because there are so many practical lessons to be learned from it.

But I think the first thing that we see here is that this huge undertaking that Nehemiah found himself involved in came about through a casual conversation.

Nehemiah didn't get up one day and said, you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to go back to Jerusalem, and I'm going to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. That wasn't the way.

[2 : 24] This, what happened with Nehemiah, the whole thing began, as we say, with a casual conversation. And that is often the way in life, that huge things, momentous events, often begin with something very simple, something very, very almost straightforward.

And that's how it was with Nehemiah. He simply asked a question of some who had come back. His brother Hananiah was one of them who had come back with certain men from Judah.

And he asks a question. And I'm sure as we look back over our lives, we often see huge things happened, just almost in a, on just a chance meeting, or on just a turn of events.

You think of, I'm sure Moses, there were times in his life when he would stop and he would say, I can hardly believe all that has happened. As Moses would think back into leading the people out of Egypt with that huge, great display of God's power with the plagues, and then this miraculous event of crossing the Red Sea where the waters parted, and then all that happened in the wilderness, the construction of the tabernacle, and meeting with the Lord up in Sinai, I'm sure there were times when Moses would say, you know, it all began one day when I went out to look after the sheep. That's what Moses was doing. He was off, it was a day when he was out looking after the sheep when he saw this bush that continued to burn. And he just turned aside to see.

[4 : 11] It caught his eye. He was wondering what it was. And of course, as we know, it was the presence of the Lord in that bush. And that's where Moses was called into that work.

So it was just a very ordinary day. The same with David. David had no idea one morning when they went off, as usual, a way out into the back of the hills to look after the sheep.

Again, looking after the sheep. And Samuel had arrived to anoint him to be king over Israel. It wasn't something that was on David's thoughts in any way.

And I'm sure there was many a day over the many years that he would think back. There were times, I'm sure he wished it hadn't happened, when he was hiding from Saul, barely escaping with

his life.

There were other times when he would be sitting on the throne in the palace saying, really, God's providence is incredible. There was nothing unusual about the day when Peter and James and Andrew and John were sitting, whether they were standing or sitting, mending their nets.

[5 : 19] And Jesus approached them. And when he called them to become fishers of men, their lives changed forever. And so it's often like that. You look back over your life, and I'm sure there have been things that have happened in your life.

Maybe you look back, and maybe it was how you found your husband and wife was just in what you would almost call a chance meeting. But as we know, we use the word chance, we know there's no such thing as chance.

It's all under God's care and God's providence. But we use that word just in the way of expression. It was just a chance meeting. And from our point of view, it was just a chance meeting, but not in God's point of view.

Everything was ordained and set out. But often, as you look back in life, things that have happened and wheels that have turned round came about from the most unlikely and the most ordinary days. Well, that's how it was for this man, Nehemiah. And as we say, he asked two questions. He asked, the questions were very simple.

[6 : 25] How are the Jews that survived the exile, those that did escape? How are they? And what is Jerusalem like? Because remember, Nehemiah was somebody who was in captivity and had no idea what Jerusalem was like or what had happened to those who had survived the exile.

So he was keen to know. Now we're told at the end of the chapter that Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the king. And that was an incredible position.

A cupbearer wasn't simply what we might think of as a butler, somebody who just came in with a tray and a glass and said, well, here's your drink or whatever. The butler or the cupbearer to the king, it was an honor.

It was a job or a title of great privilege, great honor. And a cupbearer had to be somebody who was very, very clever, had to be somebody who had a great knowledge of court administration, somebody who would be able to discuss things with the king.

He would also be an advisor to the king. So it wasn't just somebody who brought in, and more than likely, he would be the food taster of the king in case there was poison in it.

[7 : 49] It was a very, very privileged position. And so that's a job that Nehemiah had. And he was a man who had constant access to the king, and as such, he had huge influence.

And again, it's interesting how God places his people in places of prominence. It's one of the features as you go through the Bible. And you see that happening over and over again. In the previous, if you go back to follow through in the following book, in the following book in the book of Esther, we find the very same thing again.

Where that man Haman was, his whole life was to destroy the Jewish, to destroy, he was like a Hitler. He wanted to annihilate the Jew. But the Lord raised a Jew, Esther, to become the queen. To become queen of King Ahasuerus. And she was able, through her influence, to save the Jewish race. It was the same with Daniel.

In the time of Nebuchadnezzar, the most mighty man in the world at that time, ruling the whole Babylonian empire. And Daniel had a place and a privilege, and he had an influence and the ear of the king like nobody else in the whole land.

[9 : 12] It is the same with Joseph in Egypt. Remember how God raised Joseph up to become second in command in Egypt only after Pharaoh.

God does that. And he still does it. And we ought to be praying that the Lord will put his people in places of influence and places of prominence throughout the land.

It's a great privilege. It's a great thing when God's people are in any position, whether it is locally in council, whether it is down in Holyrood, or whether it's in Westminster, or whether it is in places of education, or in technology, or in administrative work, or whatever.

It doesn't matter. In all places of influence throughout the land, it's really vital and important that there are people who love the Lord and will stand for the truth and the things of God.

Well, that's the kind of person that Nehemiah was. And again, one of the things that we see with Nehemiah here is that he's somebody who had a real interest in God's people and in God's cause.

[10:26] You know, it would be very easy for when those who had come back from Jerusalem, for Nehemiah to say, I'm really involved here.

I can't get over. Here I am as an exile. Here I am as somebody, a Jew. And I've been raised to this place of prominence and influence in the land.

I mean, what happened way back is of no interest to me anymore. I know by birth, by race, I'm a Jew, but I'm not interested in the old life.

I'm not interested in Jerusalem. I'm not interested in the other Jewish people. I'm a Jew. No, he wasn't like that. He was a man of God. God's people, God's cause.

These things were vital to him. He loved Jerusalem. And so the first thing you can almost say, he's asking, what's Jerusalem like?

[11:22] What about the other Jews that escaped? How are they? And so, you see, sometimes when we ask important questions, the implications on us can be great.

We often have a choice because sometimes the answer can be uncomfortable. You know, sometimes you say to yourself, have you ever asked a question and then say, I wish I'd never asked?

Because the answer begins all of a sudden to unravel and involve you in lots of things and you're saying, I wish I'd never asked this question. Look at what's happened.

I've got so involved in all this. And we use the old adage that ignorance is bliss and quite often it is when we don't know something. Well, we just get on and we're not aware.

But as soon as we become aware of things, then challenges start within our own lives. Do we ignore it or do we face up to these things?

[12:23] Well, we see very clearly the kind of person that Nehemiah was. Because when Nehemiah got the news, as we say, he had two choices of either to ignore it or else to do something about it.

And we see straight away the kind of man that Nehemiah was. Because the news that he received overwhelmed him. In fact, it was so awful that he barely stood up to it.

See what it says in verse 4, as soon as I heard these words that the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and his gates are destroyed by fire and the remnant in the province who had survived the exile that they're in great trouble and shame.

As soon as I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days. It wasn't just that he sat down with a shock and he said, oh, that's awful and then got up again.

He was he was in a state for days and days. It was it overwhelmed him. In fact, he couldn't even hide the state he was in because when you go to chapter 2 and it tells us when he took up the wine and gave it to the king.

[13:39] Now I had not been sad in his presence and the king said to me, why is your face sad seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart.

So he couldn't he was he was in so much misery, so much pain, his heart was so broken that he couldn't disguise it and the king knew that he was well.

It wasn't an illness so the king is asking, what's up? What's wrong? You look like you've got a broken heart and Nehemiah had. That's exactly what he had and he was so so pressed down with what was what was happening and so we find that Nehemiah is somebody here that he has this huge burden upon his heart and I believe that when God is calling somebody in into some particular work or into doing something he places upon them a burden and he gives them the eyes of reality to see how things really are.

That's vital, it's important. I don't think that a person can preach properly to the unconverted without them having a sense of the awfulness of what it is to be lost because if a preacher is in a if the Lord opens a person's mind or keeps bringing before them how they felt themselves before they were converted of how it is to be without Christ to be in a state where if you die you are lost it's a fearful thing and if you don't have that, if you don't have that heart then you can't preach that properly because it's not, it's just words without heart and so the Lord creates burdens within people and the Lord opens people's eyes to see so that they be able to have an awareness and understanding in fact we can say everybody is called to serve the moment a person becomes a Christian they're called into service the expression is often used saved to serve now of course not everybody is going to be serving in a full time capacity

I believe the Lord gives us special put special burdens upon a person's heart for that whether they're to be missionaries or to be ministers or whatever into full time service but we're all saved to serve us and God's glorious tide into our service and we're going to remember that even the most menial the most simple thing even giving a cup of water in his name is serving him and the Lord takes note of all these things it's all adding up as we've often said it that's going to be one of the great surprises on the great day when the books are opened and when the Lord meets his people and he says to them you did this and you did that in my name and we're going to say when did we do that and he says as much as you did it to one of the least of my brethren you did it unto me so you see service is vital in the Christian life let your light shine before men that they may see your good works and so glorify your father who is in heaven and so here it was with

[17:08] Nehemiah but as we said with Nehemiah it is in a specific case God is calling him into this work and when God puts a burden on your heart for anything don't try and run away from it you know sometimes we can do that you often find that just say for instance calling into the ministry a person doesn't just one day all of a sudden say you know what I think I'm going to work for the Lord what will I do I'm going to be a minister that's what I'm going to do and decide like that it doesn't work that way the Lord places a burden places through the word and through an inner conviction within the heart and eventually through providence all these things the Lord's working away and there's often to begin with a resisting of that and it's true in a lot of the service of the Lord there's a resistance because it always costs it doesn't matter what you do for the Lord there's a cost in it service is costly but here it is you know that sometimes there is this initial reaction of running away but you know when we run away we miss the blessing this is what a person wrote our tears water the seeds of providence that God has planted on our path and without our tears those seeds could never have grown to produce fruit and you know that is so true so we find that Nehemiah we find that he begins to pray and I want us to think one or two things about this prayer and the first thing we see about

Nehemiah's prayer is that it's a prayer of earnestness Nehemiah is doing serious business with God this is not a matter of just coming in and saying oh Lord things are bad in Jerusalem please sort it out or saying Lord the news that I've got about my brothers and sisters who escaped the exile is not good apparently that they're in real trouble and she Lord help them and that was it that's not how it was Nehemiah was praying and he was praying and he couldn't stop praying and he was weeping over it and he was fasting over it this was business with God this was a reality and you find that here he is that he's just pouring himself out before the Lord because the walls are broken down and he cannot bear to think that here's Jerusalem the place that God had set apart above all places in the whole wide world and the temple which had been the very center of where God's presence had been and to think that the walls are broken down that the gates are burnt that everything it's more than he could take and you know sometimes we have to stop and even ask ourselves about our own life about the walls of our own life are they in ruins today how are we walking before the Lord as God looks in upon our life is he looking at a smoldering wreck of broken walls of broken promises of constant failure of little growth just barely getting along or is he seeing there that the walls are solid is he seeing growth you see we've got to look at these things it's all very welcoming to look at

Nehemiah and looking at the walls of Jerusalem and he's got to bring it to ourselves got to apply these things to ourselves and say where am I where am I in relation to these things and if it's true of us as well that our life right now that it's broken walls rather than strong structures that it's rather than growing in grace and the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ we're in standstill then the result should be that we should be like Nehemiah and that we deal with it we find a burden coming upon us and we weep about it and we don't just say oh well that's the way it is we're living in dark days we're living in tough times yes we are we're living in tough times for the Christian it's hard being a Christian today because there is so much opposition in our land to the Christian faith and you can feel it we see it it's happening all the time and that makes it hard for the Christian because you can think of other times where we're so aware of

God's spirit where the Christian influence is quite powerful but it's hard when it's a reverse well we need often to examine ourselves and it's very important because we find that it was after Nehemiah's weeping that he began working and that is often the way it is before we begin working and rebuilding there has to be the weeping first of all and the Lord doesn't bring us to places and points of self-discovery and where we find that things are not right and then just say well look at that

I'm finished with you the Lord brings us to these places and these points in order for us to do something about it and that's what he was going to do with Nehemiah he was going to use Nehemiah he placed this burden upon Nehemiah he broke Nehemiah in order to build Jerusalem so there's so much pain in his heart but you notice the great view that Nehemiah has of God because as he begins praying he said oh Lord God of heaven the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him Nehemiah is a man who has a great view of God he sees the greatness of God his goodness his abundant mercy he sees his love his grace he sees his power his majesty his glory and he comes to him and he says Lord will you work your great goodness will you work your great love will you work through your great majesty will you display your power again that's what he's saying but not only is there great earnestness in his prayer there's great humility and true confession of sin always brings humility you cannot be broken in heart and be proud before God at the same time the two are not compatible now you and I know that pride is the mother of sins and pride is always within us no matter what we do it is part of the whole self-righteous streak that belongs to us by nature and so pride is always part of what is there but when we are broken before God and when we see the ruin of who we are and we're weeping before him and crying out before him there is humility of spirit and there is not at that moment the pride it is that woe is me attitude

[24 : 56] I am undone I am a man of unclean lips it's the cry of the public and Lord be merciful to me a sinner the pride belonged to the proud the Pharisee was a proud man not the public he was the one with a broken heart and so we find this is the kind of man that Nehemiah is and he is sorry for his sin he is pleading to the Lord and again when you look at this you find that he's like Daniel because when he he's confessing the sin of the people this is what he says let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant for the 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 and you might be saying well here's Nehemiah and he's confessing the sins of the people and we've always got to guard against having a them and us attitude because as we confess the sins of the nation and remember we have to because if we don't who is going to

Nehemiah hasn't separated himself from the people because he says confessing the sins of the people of Israel which we have sinned against you even I and my father's house have sinned so it's not a them and us Nehemiah isn't saying well Lord I'm a good man and I'm really sorry about the state of Jerusalem and I'm really sorry about the exiles about those who survived and the shame they're in I'm sorry about these things these things have come about because of the sin of the people it's terrible what they have done Nehemiah is not saying that it's what we have done I and my father and Daniel was the very same in his great confession he linked himself with the people and that's what you and I are to do because it's not a them and us and as I said if we don't pray for our country who will there are millions of people I believe who never think of praying

I would love to think there's a lot more that do than maybe we assume going by percentages who will attend God's house but we know that there are many who won't but it's God's people this is part of our duty our obligation we have an obligation yes to ourselves yes to our homes and our families yes to our church and our community but also to our land God has placed us in a particular land we're part of it and we have a responsibility let us pray to the Lord to have mercy upon us to rebuild us and that's what Nehemiah is doing and so he's there is this great confession of sin and again Nehemiah's prayer you see is rooted in God's word that's what he says in verse eight remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses you see what Nehemiah is saying you said that if we forsook you if we went after other gods it's all there in the law that you gave to Moses that you would scatter us amongst the nations of the world it's happened we forsook you and you did what you said but Lord you also said that if we return to you if we confessed our sin if we began to seek you again that you would hear us and that you would forgive us and that you would take us back you said Lord that you would take us back and that's true that's exactly what happened the Lord did bring the exiles home Jerusalem was rebuilt and so this is what's so important in our prayer is that we base our prayer upon God's word and if we're praying according to God's word we're praying according to his will and we're told in the Bible that if we pray according to his will he will hear us and he will grant us that which we have asked so there's this wonderful link between the praying of through

God's word and the receiving of the answer to that prayer so that's how Nehemiah he prayed and he prayed and he prayed basing it upon God's word and finally we see that Nehemiah is prepared to be used by the Lord it's one thing to pray and say Lord please will you do this you can't very well say but don't use me we find Isaiah praying remember how he prayed he was saying Lord send me it's not that he particularly wanted to but he's prepared to be sent and that's what we find with Nehemiah oh Lord verse 11 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 in other words

[30 : 35] Nehemiah was planning to ask the king if he could go back to build the walls now the king had all power the king could chop Nehemiah head off king had we can't understand here in the west in our democracy the way things worked way back then but the king had the words of life and death and he could just at that moment he would just say how dare you ask such a thing guards take him out and kill him and that was normal so Nehemiah he's praying he's praying he's praying but he's also saying Lord I'm going to do something about it I'm asking you to do and I'm prepared to be the one to do what a great man he is and as we know if we were to follow through we see that the king actually granted him the request the Lord was in it and you know when the Lord gives a burden to you he intends to answer and if you if the

Lord puts a burden about a thing or about a person or about a cause upon you and it becomes a real burden so that you cannot stop praying about it it's not to mess you up I believe it is in order to answer it the Lord gives burdens to his people about and for others when the Lord puts a burden on you respond to it let us pray oh Lord our God we we give thanks as we are able to reflect upon so many of your great people that it has pleased you to set out for us as examples because there's so much to learn we're told in the New Testament that these historical characters and these very interesting incidents and episodes in the life of these people are there for our instruction and for our edification and so Lord we pray that as we even today very briefly thought upon this great man Nehemiah that we may take some of these lessons to heart ourselves so that there will be an earnestness in our prayer that there will be a true humility in our prayer as we confess our sin but help us Lord to base our prayers upon your word knowing that you are faithful to your word O Lord bless us and we pray and do us good take us to our home safely we ask and forgive us all our sin in Jesus name Amen