

Facing a Task Unfinished

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[0 : 00] This was not down to God as much as people not committing to God. So we're going to pick it up with Nehemiah's prayer in chapter 1, verse 4.

Nehemiah has just heard, at the end of chapter 3, that the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are destroyed by fire. He says, verse 4, 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 keeps 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 have sinned against you.

Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and 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.

[1 : 16] But if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though you are dispersed in under the Father's furthest skies, I will gather them from there 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. Now I was a cupbearer to the king. Two verses. Chapter 2, verse 8, which says, In a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple and for the wall of the city and for the house that I shall occupy.

And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me. Verse 18, And I told them of the hand of God, of the hand of my God, that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me.

And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for the good work. Well, that's the reading of God's word, and we'll come back to that in a moment after we sung this next song.

[2 : 58] If you have anything near to a normal Christian experience, then it will be similar for most people in this room. And that is that whenever a pastor, whoever that pastor may be, I certainly experienced it when I sat under other pastors, and they say the topic this morning is prayer, or they read a passage which clearly emphasizes on prayer, it's immediately possible to feel guilty even before he starts speaking.

I just don't pray enough. And one of the fears that you have is words along those lines. And what happens is that whenever we're afraid to hear something that we don't want to hear, we've got a wonderful mechanism called able to ignore.

We're really good at it. It's called selective hearing, apparently, I'm told. But selective hearing is not something that you necessarily want to do on purpose.

It's almost, I would suggest, a way of filtering. That prayer is one of those things where we know how much we can handle in life, okay, and when we've reached that limit, we switch off.

The trouble is, however, that when you switch off, and you switch off from God, you can't help but be changed by the circumstances around you.

[4 : 29] And so the reason God gives us commitments to make, and the reason we make those commitments, is so that we don't change when the circumstances do. There's a lot to say in Scripture about a person who is driven in time, by the circumstances of life, by the trials, the tribulations, even by the good things, that we can be thrown about by these in our Christian life.

But the only thing to establish that connection with security, with stability, is, of course, communication with God. It is prayer.

But prayer is one of those things that we think that if we, you know, it's almost, you know, if we convince ourselves that we need to pray more, at the end of the week, some of us actually believe that we've done it.

You know, it seems to have that sort of subtle effect over us. Frank Horton, who wrote this hymn, Facing a Task Unfinished, puts the next line, that drives us to our knees.

The temptation is to think that that is prayer alone. I, however, have read the hymn several times throughout this week, trying to understand what he meant by what he wrote. I'm not entirely convinced that he had prayer in mind completely.

[5 : 50] He definitely had prayer in mind. I'm not saying he didn't, but I think he was hinting at something a little bit deeper that actually drives us to our knees in prayer. It's not just the task that drives us to our knees, but there's something that happens before we get to prayer.

What is the thing that brings our knees down to the floor before God? Now, I know that that could be metaphorical for you, that you're not actually going to go home and get down onto your knees just in case you, you know, you can't get back up again.

And, you know, then you're praying, Lord, help me to get back up again. But the idea behind the hymn, as you can see from the video that we watched, was to get 200 missionaries into China. But Frank Horton knew, and so did all the other people, that these were people who were going to give up their lives, that their lives were going to be spent on that one thing, going into China and making the gospel known.

I told the story last week of how some missionaries decided never to pack a suitcase when they went on mission because they wouldn't need a suitcase again. They wouldn't be leaving the place from where they were going.

[6 : 58] So instead, they decided to pack a coffin because the coffin would be the last thing that they needed. And that type of mindset is something that many of us just are not quite ready for, to be single-minded.

But that is what was being prayed for, a task that is unfinished and which they said need at least 200 gospel workers to go into China and to make Christ known.

And so he writes this hymn, facing a task unfinished. But what is the task? What's the task? We've sung it. What's the task? Well, the task is making Christ known.

It just so happened to be, in his context, in China. But for us, it could be anywhere. And this task drives us to our knees.

But what does he mean by this? And I thought, well, he definitely means prayer, but I think he means something else. And I think it's summed up in the quote. And that is, we're helpless without God.

[8 : 05] The reason we're driven to our knees when we undertake the work of God is because we cannot undertake the work of God without him. It's not just an attitude of praying more.

It's actually an attitude of, I go to prayer because I can't do it. So I'm facing a task that's unfinished. And the task is clearly my own, that God has given me to do.

But God has not given it to us to do without him. And so the reason we're driven to our knees in prayer is simply a humble declaration that I accept the task that I have been given, but I also accept the fact that I can't do it without you, God.

In other words, God has given me a task to do as he has given you a task to do, whatever that task may be. We know on the broad scheme what it is, but generally speaking, we cannot do any of them without God.

Nehemiah finds himself in exactly the same position. He comes before God in prayer after hearing news that Jerusalem is not well.

[9 : 12] It's in utter destruction, and the people, when he gets there, are as bad as the city. They've lost all hope. Any idea of a vision project is gone.

What do you do when... There's good reason why we don't bank our hopes on one thing in particular, and we only bank our hopes on God, is because when all other things fail, God doesn't. And so you're kept stable by the thing that you put your trust in and not the thing that you hoped in. There's a subtle difference there, but it matters a lot if you're going to make it through this life alive. Nehemiah understands that God is steadfast and that God is faithful. And it is because God is steadfast and faithful, it is because God makes commitments and keeps to them that we can actually go to him in prayer.

We couldn't actually go to a God in prayer who didn't keep the commitments that he's made, because we couldn't be sure whether or not he would today keep the commitments that he made to us yesterday. So this idea behind steadfast love, it's a wonderful Hebrew word, which means love is hesed.

[10:26] It means a covenantal love. It means the type of love that cannot be broken. Not this soppy sort of, I love you or I care for you, let me show my affection to you for buying flowers or chocolates.

Not that. It's not even close to that, which I frequently try to remind my wife. Trying to love you like God does. Hesed love, covenantal love, is love that doesn't change when you change. Okay? Love that doesn't change when you change. God loves you. God's love is so certain towards you that it doesn't matter how often you change or how much you change, his love for you never changes.

That's what Nehemiah is sort of reminding himself about God and praying to the God who loves us steadfastly. And so I think there are four realities in Nehemiah's prayer, and we're going to go through these fairly swiftly.

The first is this, that prayer is not a response to news. It's actually a response to concern. Prayer is not a response to news, and I want to make this distinction carefully.

[11:38] It's actually a response to concern. News doesn't cause a person to pray. The second is that prayer is relying on the promises of God.

In other words, if God says, I will answer your prayer, the reason why I would pray is because I have confidence that God will answer my prayer, even if I have had a hundred prayers written down in my prayer journal that have gone unanswered.

Why would a person continue to pray who feels as though their prayers have never been answered? I mean, that's a real, you know, it's a real burden on a praying life that, you know, I think it's Tim Miller in his book, on prayer, he basically goes out camping with his daughter because one of his other child's is severely disabled, and she's lost her glasses, and she's crying, and he comes back to the campfire and what happens, he says, why are you crying?

And he says, you know, I've lost my glasses. I know it's silly, but I've lost my glasses. And so he says to her, well, let's pray, and she says, well, I don't want to pray, and he began to realize at that point that it was the first sign of his little daughter's heart hardening towards God.

I don't want to pray. It was the first indicator. What do you do when that happens? So he says, well, what do you mean you don't want to pray? And she says, because God never answers. He says, well, what do you mean God never answers?

[13:04] He says, she says to her dad, well, I've been praying for my brother who's severely disabled to get well, and God's not done it. So why should he answer my prayer about finding my glasses?

Okay? That's what we're like. So prayer has to ultimately rely on the promises of God, that yeah, I may have prayed a hundred times, and God, you're not answering me, is maybe a real feeling and something really difficult to deal with, but on the other side of that, God's going to have a real good reason for it.

And that is, listen, that's incredibly difficult to stomach but if God doesn't change and he is covenantally faithful towards us, then we have to hold on to the things that don't change in a world where we change and the world changes with it.

I could stress this point this whole morning of just how important that is. thirdly then, prayer is a humble position. It is literally to put your hand up before God and says, you know what, I've tried, I've really tried to do it on my own and you were right, God, you said I couldn't, you told me to come to you and now I've tried and tried and tried and I'm sorry.

And sometimes, I can remember David White saying to me, listen Daniel, you better humble yourself before God, before God does it to you in front of everybody else.

[14:38] Well, that was enough to frighten the living daylights out of me. The trouble was is I still didn't do it because most of us don't pray unless there is a real reason to change.

I once heard a minister who was carrying a little bit too much weight and I'm not speaking in the third person as I'm referring to myself now. This really was another minister. And he sort of said one day, almost flippantly, Lord, if you just give me a little stroke.

Now, hang on, let me finish. Don't, because it was, here's why he said it. He says, because then I'll change my diet, then I'll change my ways. He understood, whether you agree with him or not, that we don't naturally change when things are easy.

We need something to shock us into change. And sometimes the circumstances of life are the things that are the little strokes. They're completely unpleasant, but it took that to change.

And most of you know, sat here this morning, that it has been the difficult things in your life that's taken you to change. It has been the things that have been completely unpleasant, that up until that point, you thought, I'm managing, I'm managing, and God zaps you with something.

[16:00] I hated it, but it was the only thing that actually led to any change. So, prayer is a humble position. Fourthly, prayer is the removing of the barriers.

Nehemiah clearly says, doesn't he, on several occasions, that the reason he had his way in the world was because God's hand was upon him.

Prayer, effectively, is praying to God to change things in the world in this situation. So, here's the first one. Prayer is not a response to news, it is a response to, it is a response to concern or a concerning response.

Nehemiah hears this news about Jerusalem, but you'll notice that it's not the news that actually drives him to sit down and to sort of plead before God in prayer. What drives him to prayer in this, then, is his weeping.

Okay? As soon as, like verse 4, as soon as I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days and I continued fasting and praying. Okay? The news led to him weeping, but it was the weeping that led to him praying.

[17:16] The news created a concern in his life, or rather, the news revealed a concern that he always had in his life. This is why you can hear news in the church and if you carry no concern for it, it probably doesn't factor in your praying life.

Because it's not the news that causes people to pray, it's not, it's not, here's a list of bullet points of things to pray for. We have a wonderful list that's put out by the missionary committee every time we turn up to a missionary meeting of these are all the missionaries, these are the prayer points, this is what to pray for, but it's not the piece of paper with all that information on that ever causes you to pray for someone.

News doesn't do that. It's concern that does it. It's your attachment to the news that does it. And so, in saying we need to pray more, this is what we need to pray for, that's necessary, but it doesn't cause prayer.

What causes prayer is your commitment and your connection to what you're hearing. And so, our commitment and connection to facing a task unfinished is that we know that God, through Christ, gave that commission to every single one on earth, that we are to make Christ known.

Now, God doesn't make everyone overseas missionaries, he makes most of us hometown missionaries. Okay? If you ever wanted to go overseas, well, according to Africa, you are overseas.

[18:49] And the benefit is, you already speak the language. So, God has made it incredibly easy on you to proclaim the gospel where you are. You don't have to learn a new language, you don't, okay, you've got it.

And that's the way God tends to work most of the time it would seem. So, prayer is our reaction to news, not the news itself. It's our reaction, our concern to the circumstances, the expectations, the commission.

It's how we are connected with what we're hearing, not just with what we're hearing, our concern for what we're hearing. Several years ago, I decided to read a book on church architecture.

I'm not quite sure why, but it was one of those things that I got into and I thought, oh, I didn't know that. I did quite like that and one of the things that I found out is that these beautiful columns in cathedrals that are round had lines put in them so you ended up with a square and apparently it was to tell a truth about God that the circle was to say that God had no beginning and no end and the squares that were cut into the columns were to describe that God's authority covered the four

corners of the earth and so architecture, they were telling a story through architecture. When the church had a theology of silence, we don't have a theology of silence anymore but when the church had a theology of silence, you had monasteries being built where you could go and be silent but now we don't have a theology of silence anymore, we have a theology of sound and that is why we have platforms and drums and pianos.

[20 : 30] It's not a bad thing but it's a different theology, it's a change but one of the interesting things that I found being an ex-builder roofer myself is that some of these men woke up, started work at the age of 15 or 16 on a cathedral or on a very big church building and died without ever seeing it completed.

They woke up every single day and went to the same job in the same place and they come home and every day they woke up, they did more and they came back and they got to see incremental differences, they got to see the bit that they'd worked on but many of them who started at the very beginning of the project died long before the cathedral was finished.

Imagine that every single day getting up doing exactly the same thing. well that should be your praying life. That we're commissioned by God to get up every single day and to carry on where we left off the previous day in prayer though we may never ever see the outcome of that finished work, the unfinished task.

And so if that's an illustration of anything it is an illustration to keep continuing. I don't love poetry all that much but Myers I do love in particular and Myers put it like this, let no man think that sudden in a minute all is accomplished and the work is done but with thine earliest dawn thou should begin it scarce were ended in the setting of the sun.

And his point was this, Rome was not built in a day and neither is the gospel to all nations achieved in a day.

[22 : 18] It takes lots and lots and lots of time hence why Christ is not returned yet. It takes lots of time and so many of us when it comes to prayer simply have to have the attitude that I will wake up this morning and pick up my praying life from where I left it off the night before and I will pray and I will close in prayer that evening before I go to bed and the next day I will do exactly the same and I'll do it again and again and again and again.

That's the praying life. Secondly then, prayer is relying on the promises of God and as I said, why would a person continue to pray when they believe that they haven't received any answered prayers?

This is, you probably realize that I may have a title of pastor but I'm really just an ordinary Christian. I don't have any superpowers. I pray for them. No, I don't pray for them. And the thing is sometimes it's possible to think well that pastors have some kind of super spirituality.

Do you know what we really don't? We really don't. It's possible that the pastors though we could never show this because apparently the pastor is then not the person that you could go to with anything but pastors can often have probably more troubles than you have and more weaknesses and the thing is is God doesn't appoint people who don't have any of those things and that's what makes them qualified.

[23 : 59] What makes a person qualified to do anything is who do we go to to deal with those problems? Pastors are the only thing a pastor is good for is to point other people to Jesus because Jesus is the only one who can do anything.

You know God really is the only one who can do anything. I mean Isaiah says that my job my praying life as a pastor is to wake up in the morning to have counsel with God so that I will know how to speak with other people.

You go read it Isaiah 50 verse 4. Okay and that's the job of elders. The trouble is however is that sometimes you have to speak to yourself so how do you get yourself through this barrier of you've not answered me in a long time God and I've prayed the same thing and you're not coming through for me God and you feel that God is somehow holding you back and you feel that perhaps that God is even messing up your life and you could say I could do a much better job with my life than you're doing with my life right now God you ever prayed that no well now you begin to realize just how sinful your pastor is this is the type of prayers that I pray it just you know I read the Bible and think I know better than God it's a perpetual danger but I think we all do that I think we all deep down in our heart thinks that we can handle life better than God can handle our life but what gets you through it we have to go straight back you have to get there there is no shortcut here and and sometimes it is it's quite difficult to get there but nothing seems to really be blessed or benefited

God knows where he wants us and everything is to get us back into communion with him all the time and so it is a common feeling for us all to pray and pray and for our prayers not to be answered and then we read a book like Nehemiah and we find that he simply prays and he gets the answers that he wants straight Nehemiah doesn't understand what I'm going through Nehemiah doesn't have the same kind of burdens I have how can I learn anything from Nehemiah well the thing to learn from Nehemiah is that one you don't know anything about him either but notice what he does he holds on to the promises of God and he doesn't let go he holds on to the fact that God is a covenant God that God is one who loves him steadfastly that loves his people steadfastly that loves his will towards his people steadfastly that

God is forever working out his will on earth as it is in heaven and we struggle with that because our temptation is to think it can be done another way and this evening when we take a look at the cross and for those of you who take notes I want you to take them really carefully tonight is what if it is the case God can't do it another way not because there's a limitation on God but we'll get to that later so God expects his people to make commitments not just because he's laying upon them another burden God expects his people to make commitments because the world changes and God doesn't want his people to change along with a changing world God doesn't want his people to become sort of unhinged or unstable or driven and tossed in a world that will clearly do it to them if they do not hold on to God in prayer if they do not fasten themselves to the rock which cannot move prayer is ultimately relying on the promises of

[28 : 06] God that if I'm close with God that these things that God has promised to me will actually come to me God does not backtrack on his word and for some of us this morning you're thinking yes he does no he doesn't no he really doesn't the trouble is is that our circumstances which have got the better of us tell us a different story it tells us a different story than a God who doesn't change it starts to tell us a different story than a God who is covenantally faithful and who loves us and so the reason we make commitments to a God who doesn't change and the reason we're to understand the commitments that God makes to us is so that we don't change in a world that wants to change us the world according to Romans is always wanting to make us look like them the world wants us to look like the world that's the battle the world wants us to think like the world and the world wants us to understand the explanations that the world give and not

God's explanations hence why we keep looking for a different answer but God is faithful so remember it and God really really loves you and that type of love may be a hard providence right your next door neighbour gets cancer and you know where the grace of God is needed you know where you want the love of God to dwell down on their life right but then your other next door neighbour you know is just getting you know new car new house never been in hospital never got a problem in their family and you think I know where the grace is needed and it's not in his life right so it's over here so

God's love may be a hard providence may be hard but it is the thing that will never let you go it is the thing that will always get you through what it is that you're going through and so prayer in light of God's love should lead us thirdly to a humble position see there's one thing we recognise about Nehemiah's prayer more than anything else is that he completely understands that God doesn't owe him anything God doesn't owe Nehemiah a single thing God because he is God can do whatever he likes with Nehemiah and with his people and with Jerusalem but God is a God who according to Nehemiah inclines his here to humble people to people who will indeed be thankful who will indeed confess their sins who will indeed bow down before

God and be deeply moved by the concerns of God there's a humility in prayer and that could be one of the reasons why many of us find it so difficult to pray is because we've not learnt what it is to humble ourselves before God we're still affront with God we're still we're still I'm right and I think you're wrong but I'm not going to tell you it you know and if you've got a burden within your heart that says I'm right and I think you're wrong it doesn't lead to a praying life humility is the case of knowing that because God is God he has to be right God it's not one of those things that's up for debate so Nehemiah prays before God recognizing that his sins and the sins of his people have sinned against

God it's not been the other way around that if anything has gone wrong in the relationship then it's not because God has somehow changed towards us but it is because we have changed towards God and many things can make us change before God but God's grace gets us back to the place where we need to be that's why it's so difficult so faithfulness on our part is something that we need

to handle the answered prayer having read proverbs a few times one thing that always comes out to me when it comes to prayer is the reason for why some prayers don't get answered and the reason for why some prayers do get answered and some of us can't handle I've said this before but it's so important answered prayer needs to be handled and faithfulness is not a condition for the prayer if

[33 : 19] God is saying you know playing a tit for tat game you be faithful and then I'll give you what I want to give you and God people go okay we'll be faithful but you make sure you give us what you want to give us so if we do this you will do that is that right God well the answer is no it doesn't work like that faithfulness is the precondition needed to handle the blessing okay faithfulness is not a condition that you need to fulfill to get the answer faithfulness is what you need to handle the answer and there are many other things in the Christian life that is needed and so you need to get rid of the barriers which we'll get on to in a minute and the only way to get rid of the barriers is through the confession of sin but you need certain things in your life before you can handle the answered prayer in your life some things in the Christian life can only be handled by praying life and so if your life is not a praying life then those things will have to of necessity remain absent because it takes a praying life to handle them and so many of us may sit here or stand here and think why aren't these things turning up in my life well there's a good reason for it and that is sometimes answered prayer needs a foundation to rest on and if that foundation is missing from our life the answer to prayer it will destroy in the same way as

I said a couple of weeks ago we've all met these people perhaps not met but heard of them who win the lottery thinking I can handle it I can handle this blessing I can handle this money and it destroys them because their character is not sufficient enough to handle what they have just received and that that's a biblical principle it's not a worldly principle it's a biblical one and so Nehemiah understands this hence why he comes before God and confesses his prayers so fourthly prayer as the removing of barriers Nehemiah confesses his sins but then you'll notice he confesses the sins of the people Israel and why does he do this well the psalmist says if I had cherished iniquity in my heart the Lord would not have listened okay in other words that if I hold on to sin and if I hold on to unconfessed sin then a praying life doesn't work and this is something that

God has clearly taught us and told us that you can pray and you can pray and you can pray and you can pray but if you've not repented of the sin then the Lord doesn't hear that's not a condition it's just the foundation again to the Lord hearing and answering prayer so it's absolutely crucial that we remove the necessary barriers that we need to remove to get prayer answered the next barriers that need to remove are the barriers that are in the world so the barriers that are in us are normally sin but the barriers in the world are normally people you can imagine that there are plenty barriers in China even today to get the gospel out there and there are plenty of other barriers in the world to get the gospel out there also and so how does prayer change anything out there well Nehemiah puts it in other words

Nehemiah is testifying to the people that he is now around that the only reason why this situation has changed is because God has done something about it and the confidence that the people are to have is that it doesn't matter what kind of dire situation you are in it's not irreversible when you have God all things can be reversed all things can be removed it can be redeemed and so Nehemiah is testifying to the people of God here that the reason why change has happened is because the hand of God has been upon me the reason why the king has granted the request that Nehemiah asked for was because the hand of the Lord was upon him the psalmist says unless the Lord builds the house those that build it build it in vain so

Nehemiah knows that the hand of God is upon him and so the people are to know it doesn't matter how difficult the situation is it doesn't matter how dire the situation may be it doesn't matter how much it looks as though it is irreversible and nothing could ever change it can change because you're dealing with God God is the agent of change God is the one who orchestrates the blessing and brings the blessing to his people and to a nation and to a country that is how God does it because we're dealing with God and God is dealing with us prayer is looking to God in heaven for a difference down here on earth is what Nehemiah is prayer is looking to God in heaven for a difference down here on earth prayer is looking to God to change the things that we can't change prayer is looking to God that we may serve him well and so let me close with this

[39 : 09] I opened the service this morning just after the hints by calling you to remember what Jesus is doing right now and so what happens after all this message and everything that you heard

though it be true okay there's still not the desire to pray which is quite possible what happens then you know some of us can be so beat up and we feel that the Lord has done it that we're certainly not going to sort of go to him in prayer you know I understand these type of feelings what then well you have to remember what Jesus is doing right now and it says that Jesus Christ is the one true mediator between God and man that Jesus Christ lives and works at this very moment to make intercession for you which means this that when you don't pray God is praying for

Jesus is praying to the Father for you that when you're finding it really difficult to pray the things that you ought to pray Jesus is praying those things for you that when you don't want to pray Jesus is praying for you and that even when you want to pray Jesus is praying for you so your life is never without someone praying if if no one else in the world prayed for you Christ is praying for you this very moment why because he is the steadfast God the covenant keeping God he knows the situation that you're in better than anyone else and he knows he knows he doesn't just analyze the situation better than anyone else he knows the remedy for it better than anyone else and so Jesus isn't just telling

God what it's like he's also describing to God in his prayer what needs to be done that's the type of God that we belong to so that people down here on earth who belong to God may not be overtaken by the circumstances that they are in even though the circumstances they are in have overtaken a large part of their Christian life God who is covenant leave faithful towards us who shows his steadfast love towards us does so by keeping us right where we are in a world that wants to change us and so remember this that prayer then is looking to God who doesn't change for things to change down here on earth as Jesus said as it is in heaven as it is in heaven your will be done on earth as it is in heaven amen

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