

## **I. Introduction**

- A. Someone has said, “If I wished to humble anyone, I would ask him about his prayer life.” Indeed, it is humbling to be asked, “How is your prayer life?” When you woke up this morning, before you came here, did you pray for God’s blessing upon this workshop? Did you pray for all the speakers in this camp? Did you pray for yourself that God would use this camp for your soul’s benefit? Do we pray regularly—day and night? Can we honestly sing: “Sweet hour of prayer! sweet hour of prayer!”? Do we really enjoy praying to God? Do we find it sweet and delightful when we commune with Him? Or, maybe we find it sour and boring.
- B. My objective in this workshop is to help us become more prayerful by studying the life of Nehemiah—a man of prayer. We will particularly study his prayer found in our passage (vv. 5-11). And as we examine his prayer, I want to highlight the following elements of his prayer:
1. Adoration of God (v. 5)
  2. Admission of sin (vv. 6-10)
  3. Appeal to God (v. 11)
- C. Before we look at these three elements, let me first set the historical stage for our passage. Doing so will help us better understand Nehemiah’s prayer.
1. In **586 B.C.** the Babylonians took the Jews into exile in Babylon. And according to 2 Kings 25:10, the Babylonians “brake down the walls of Jerusalem round about.” God used the Babylonians to chastise the Jews because of their unfaithfulness to Him.
  2. In **539 B.C.**, however, the Persians under King Cyrus the Great defeated the Babylonians.
  3. Then in **538 B.C.**, a year after the defeat of the Babylonians, King Cyrus made a decree that allowed the Jews to return to Judah.
  4. Now in **445 B.C.** (at this time Artaxerxes was the king of Persia) Nehemiah received a sad report about the condition of the Jews in Judah—those Jews who returned from Babylon. We see this report in verse 3. Let’s read verses 1-3:

<sup>1</sup>The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. And it came to pass in the month Chisleu, in the twentieth year [445 B.C.], as I was in Shushan the palace, <sup>2</sup> that Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and *certain* men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> And they said unto me, The remnant that are left of the

captivity there in the province *are* in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also *is* broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire.

Let's look at Nehemiah's response to this account in verse 4:

And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned *certain* days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven.

**Observe two things in Nehemiah's response:**

- a. His *concern* for God's people. Nehemiah is deeply concerned with God's people. Imagine his grief when he heard of the disheartening condition of the Jews in Jerusalem. He cried and mourned for days because he cared for God's people.

**Challenge:** When you hear of the sad condition of many churches today, does it grieve you? For example, when you read these headlines, do you show concern for Christ's church?

- 1) The New York Times headline (July 25, 2010): "Lutherans Offer Warm Welcome to Gay Pastors." "The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America...with 4.6 million members, is now the largest Protestant church in the United States to permit noncelibate gay ministers to serve in the ranks of its clergy."
- 2) CNN headline (May 10, 2011): "Presbyterian Church U.S.A. to allow gay and lesbian clergy." "The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A. [or PCUSA])...voted to allow the ordination of openly gay and lesbian ministers."
- 3) Voice of the Martyrs headline (July 5, 2013): "Honduras—Widespread Violence Affects Pastors." "Eight pastors have been murdered in Honduras in 2013 alone. In the most recent attack, on Wednesday, June 19, Pastor Eduardo Mejia was stabbed to death. Pastor Mejia led a church called 'God Is Love.' The other seven pastors killed over the first half of this year have all died from gunshot wounds."

What do you feel and what do you do when you hear news like these?

- b. His *comfort* in God. Do you know the meaning of Nehemiah's name? It means "God comforts." In his great sorrow, he finds comfort in God. Joseph M. Scriven, writer of "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," says,

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?  
We should never be discouraged; take it to the Lord in prayer.

Indeed, Nehemiah takes his concern to the Lord in prayer. Let's now consider the three important elements of his prayer.

## II. Three Important Elements of Nehemiah's Prayer

### A. Adoration of God (v. 5)

<sup>5</sup> and said, I beseech thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible [awesome] God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments:

Nehemiah begins his prayer with the adoration of God. As Nehemiah exalts God, he underscores two character traits of God:

1. Promise-keeping God. Notice the word "LORD" is all in capital letters. In Hebrew it is *Jehovah/Yahweh*, a name that marks God's faithfulness to His promises. God keeps His covenant.
2. Powerful God. Take note also of the word "God" or *Elohim* in Hebrew. If the name *Jehovah* emphasizes God's faithfulness to His promises (or willingness to fulfill His promises), the name *Elohim* emphasizes God's power to fulfill His promises.

Thus, our God is not only willing but also able to do all that He has promised.

**Note:** There is something that we need to understand in verse 5. According to Ezra 4, the Persian king allowed the returning Jewish exiles to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, but the Samaritans, who were jealous of the Jews, wanted to stop them from rebuilding the walls. In Ezra 4:8 the Samaritans write a letter against the Jews to king Artaxerxes. Here's an excerpt from that letter:

<sup>12</sup> Be it known unto the king, that the Jews which came up from thee to us are come unto Jerusalem, building the rebellious and the bad city, and have set up the walls *thereof*, and joined the foundations. <sup>13</sup> Be it known now unto the king, that, if this city be builded, and the walls set up *again*, *then* will they not pay toll, tribute, and custom, and *so* thou shalt endamage the revenue of the kings.

Here's an excerpt from king Artaxerxes' reply:

<sup>21</sup> Give ye now commandment to cause these men to cease, and that this city be not builded, until *another* commandment shall be given from me.

**Application:**

- a. Nehemiah faces a problem, but he does not focus on his problem but on God’s promise (v. 5).
- b. Nehemiah has a big problem (the king made an order to stop the Jews from rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem), but he knows that his God is bigger than his problem. He has a powerful God—the maker of heaven and earth. Let us remember that our God is in control of everything. He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He has the power to change the king’s heart.

Do you have a problem? Do not focus too much on your problem. Rather, focus on God’s promises. There is a hymn that says:

Standing on the promises that cannot fail,  
When the howling storms of doubt and fear assail,  
By the living Word of God I shall prevail,  
Standing on the promises of God.

Is your problem big? Remember that your God is bigger than your problem. What you must do is cast all your burdens upon the LORD your God, for He cares for you (1 Peter 5:7).

He hears your cry (v. 6). He sees your suffering. He understands your pain. He is a loving, merciful, and gracious God who is willing and able to help you.

**Illustration:** A man once asked a lifeguard, “How can you hear a person drowning when all these people are making this noise on the beach—talking, yelling, whistling, etc.?” The lifeguard said, “I’ve been at this job for twenty years and I haven’t let one person go on in distress. My ears are turned toward those in distress” (taken from Roy B. Zuck’s *The Speaker’s Quote Book*, p. 296)

**B. Admission of sin (vv. 6-7)**

In this section, please note the following:

1. His humility: “thy servant” (v. 6). In his prayer, Nehemiah calls himself “servant.” Remember he is the cupbearer to the king of Persia. He is an important person in the palace, yet he humbly prays to God, “let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant” (v. 6). What Nehemiah is saying here is this: “Lord, I am your servant. My loyalty belongs to you and not to the king of Persia. I humbly submit myself to your authority. Your will be done and not mine.”

**Challenge:** When you pray, do you submit to God’s will?

2. His persistence: “day and night” (v. 6). Nehemiah prays regularly. In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Paul exhorts his readers to “[p]ray without ceasing.”

**Challenge:** Do you pray regularly?

3. His intercession: “for the children of Israel thy servants” (v. 6). He unselfishly prays for others. Do you pray for others? It is sad that sometimes our prayer revolves around “I” and “me.” We say, “Lord, I want this. Give me that.”

Then here comes his admission of sin:

<sup>6</sup>...and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father’s house have sinned. <sup>7</sup> We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses.

**Note:** This confession implies that the affliction that they have is a result of their disobedience to God. Why is confession of sin essential? Well, the psalmist says, “If I regard iniquity [if I hide sin; if I cherish it] in my heart, the Lord will not hear *me*.”

Now there is something that I want to stress here. Look at verses 8 & 9:

<sup>8</sup> Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandedst thy servant Moses, saying, *If* ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations: <sup>9</sup> but *if* ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, *yet* will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there.

In these verses Nehemiah is quoting from Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 4, 12, 28, & 30. What can we learn from Nehemiah here?

- a. In your prayer remind God of the word that He has given to you (v. 8). In other words, pray through His word. Bring His word back to Him. Say, for instance, “Lord, have you not said that if I believe in your Son Jesus Christ, I will be saved” (John 3:16)? (Emphasize the gospel promise here.)
- b. In your prayer remind God of what you are before Him (v. 10). In verse 10 Nehemiah is quoting from Deuteronomy 9:29, “Yet they *are* thy people and thine inheritance, which thou broughtest out by thy mighty power and by thy stretched out arm.” Yes, we are servants and therefore undeserving of any blessings from the Lord. Yet, we are also His covenant people. **Point:** In our prayer we can say to God, “Lord, are we not your people whom you have redeemed from slavery in sin? Are we not your children? Are you not our heavenly Father?”

### C. Appeal to God (v. 11)

1. Nehemiah's appeal is that God will grant him mercy in the sight of king Artaxerxes. As we see in chapter two, God graciously answers Nehemiah's request.
2. It is noteworthy also that Nehemiah did not immediately come to the Persian king for help. He came to God first in prayer. In fact, it took four months before Nehemiah approached the king about his burden. Pat Johnson states, "When man works, man works. When man prays, God works."
3. Remember also that Nehemiah did not just pray. He also worked. He did his part. Someone has said, "When you pray, pray as though everything depended on God. When you work, work as though everything depended on you." With God's help the walls were rebuilt, as Nehemiah 6:15 tells us: "So the wall was finished in the twenty and fifth *day of the month* Elul, in fifty and two days."

Then listen to verse 16. This is beautiful: "And it came to pass, that when all our enemies heard *thereof*, and all the heathen that *were* about us saw *these things*, they were much cast down in their own eyes: for they perceived that this work was wrought of our God."

Their enemies recognized that the rebuilding of the walls had been done with God's help. God, therefore, received the glory both in Nehemiah's prayer and work.

### III. Concluding Challenge

- A. As I end this message, let me ask you with love: How is your prayer life? Are you too busy to pray? Learn from Martin Luther's philosophy in life, "I have so much to do today that I must set apart more time than usual to pray."
- B. Oh, let's pray with Peter Marshall, "Forgive us for thinking that prayer is a waste of time and help us to see that without prayer our work is a waste of time." Amen!