

THE PRAYERS OF NEHEMIAH

The Old Testament book of Nehemiah tells a great story about a man called by God to accomplish an amazing mission. Nehemiah was a Jewish man living in a land that was foreign to his faith heritage, serving the King of Persia in the city of Susa as his cupbearer. He was in Persia as a result of a horrendous period in the Hebrew people's history. 140 years earlier the Babylonian armies marched into Jerusalem, and in three waves over about twenty years the Babylonians completely destroyed the great city and deported almost all Jews. While serving in Susa, Nehemiah was visited by his brother with news about the state of the homeland of his ancestors, and the news was bad. The city was run down, the walls were in ruins, the Jews had many enemies, and people were not safe to live, raise families, and worship. The result was that God moved greatly in the life of this man to join Him in the mission of rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem. Ultimately, God grants Nehemiah grace when he speaks to the King of Persia who sends him to Jerusalem with permission and funding to rebuild the walls. While in Jerusalem, Nehemiah formulates a plan to rebuild the walls, and then enlists all of the Jews. God again grants grace as the people enthusiastically join the project, and even in the midst of incredible opposition and persecution, they complete this project in a mere 52 days. This is a task that couldn't be accomplished even though there were various attempts over the previous 140 years.

The outcome of the wall building is that God built his people. They experience an incredible revival as they see the work of God among them. They begin to study the Scriptures, gather in community with each other, and live for the glory of God. The walls give them a safe place, and many people leave their homes in the country to populate the city for the glory of God. They also hold a significant covenant renewal where the people as a nation turn from their sin and recommit themselves to live under God's purpose and mission. The book of Nehemiah is one of the great stories in the Bible, but interwoven throughout the story are references to a couple things that demonstrate the key to understanding the book of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah is not about Nehemiah. Yeah, it has his name, and much of the book was penned by this person. But within the pages of Nehemiah we find the true hero, the one whom is at work accomplishing His mission. Like every other book of the Bible, the book of Nehemiah is ultimately about God, the one true God of the Bible existing in three persons. The first way you can see this is to track the times in the book where the hand of God is working, either moving people toward His call or working to accomplish things which the people in the story could not do on their own. We see the hand of God at work in Nehemiah 2:8 as he moves the heart of the King of Persia to send Nehemiah to Jerusalem with letters of permission and the funding for the project. In the book of Ezra the same king issued an edict forbidding the rebuilding of the wall, but God answers the prayer of Nehemiah in chapter 1. In Nehemiah 2:18 and 20 we see the hand of God working to rally the people to the project, even though they have felt dejected and frustrated with this job in the past. The result is that every person finds a spot on the wall. In chapter 4 the enemies of Nehemiah and the Jews are organized and threatening the people. Nehemiah challenges the people to remember that the Lord is with them and be ready to fight. The result is that the enemies realized that God had frustrated their plan and they never actually try to invade. Chapter five tells the story of tension and dissension among the Jews between the wealthy and the poor. The appeal to all the people is to care for the poor and hurting because of the fear of the Lord (see 5:9, 5:15). When the wall is completed in 52 days even the enemies of

the Jews realize that the task of rebuilding was accomplished with the help of their God (6:16). The rest of the book is the story of God speaking deeply into the lives and hearts of the people and their response to His work.

The second clear demonstration that the book is about God comes from the deep prayer life of Nehemiah. The dude is always praying, and some of the greatest prayers in the Bible are found in the text of this book. Some prayers are long (the longest prayer in the entire Bible is contained in chapter 9), while others are short, almost in a single exhaled breath. This demonstrates that Nehemiah had come to understand the words that would be spoken by Paul several centuries later when he told the Thessalonian church, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you (I Thessalonians 5:16-18).” The core of the entire book is the incredible relationship and dependence Nehemiah had on God, and the work of God in his life as a result.

Nehemiah is a building project. Walls are built, but greater than this, the people are built. Much like the stones in the wall, there are many stones used to build the people. But a wall built only of stones will not stand, something must hold those stones in place. In a real way, the mortar that supports the bricks is dependence on God through prayer leading to a deep relationship with Him. In Nehemiah the bricks include things like the call of God, everybody working together, giving, studying the Scriptures, preaching, the leaders God calls... But the mortar that causes the wall to stand is the deep prayer life reflecting dependence and faith in their God. Pull out the mortar and the wall would fall.

As we close this great book, I thought I would provide a list of these prayers for you. They are amazing prayers and give us a wonderful model. If you are new to the faith, these prayers can be used to teach you how to pray. Read the prayers in Nehemiah and then pray them, personalize them, use them to cry out to God. For those who have been following Jesus for a while, let the prayers in this great book speak deeply into your prayers, so you are sure that your prayer life is wholistic. God bless you as the mortar of prayer pours in to the bricks of God’s work in your life and in that of our church.

The prayers of Nehemiah

Nehemiah 1:4-11

Upon hearing about the situation in Jerusalem from his brother, Nehemiah is deeply moved to the point of action. But the first action is to pray and seek the heart of God. The first thing about the prayer contained in Nehemiah 1 is that the text indicates this prayer is a synopsis of many days of prayer and fasting. The prayer includes praise to God for being a great God who keeps his covenants, and a plea for God to hear the cries of his people. Nehemiah confesses and repents of sin and appeals to God to act in behalf of his people. Nehemiah closes by asking God to grant him success as he pursues God’s call and joins God in his mission. Specifically, he knows that the next step is to approach the king and ask for permission and funding for the project. The prayer asks God to give Nehemiah mercy or favor in the sight of the king.

Nehemiah 2:4

Nehemiah’s second prayer is a short prayer in the midst of a difficult situation. Nehemiah is given the opportunity to speak to the king and he must decide how to act. The passage does not tell us what Nehemiah prays, only that he quickly breathes a prayer and then acts. Sometimes a

short sentence prayer under your breath is all you will have time for, but these prayers can be powerful if they flow from a deeper prayer life and a heart that is deeply seeking God.

Nehemiah 4:4-5

The prayer moves from “me” to “we” as the entire community of faith in Jerusalem has joined Nehemiah in the building project. But they are enduring persecution, threats, taunts, and hardships, mostly coming from the hands of Sanballat and Tobiah. I love Old Testament prayers. In our cultured state we want to pray that somehow God would bless them and change them. Their prayers are that God would get them. But for Nehemiah and the people, they realize that as long as Sanballat and Tobiah prosper the task of rebuilding the wall will not be completed and God will not be glorified. The people are asking God to act on their behalf but also for the sake of His glory. This prayer is continued in verse 9.

Nehemiah 5:19

This prayer in chapter 5 follows a crisis within the people of God. Nehemiah calls on the wealthy to share with and care for the poor in the culture. Nehemiah takes the lead by giving up his own wealth and makes personal sacrifices in order to model leadership. His prayer here is one that he uses throughout the book, a prayer for God to remember the work that he is doing. These prayers seem a little self-centered, but the prayer for remembrance comes from covenant. As a person who has a relationship with God, the prayer for remembrance is a plea for God to be at work as Nehemiah strives to honor God with his life and actions.

Nehemiah 6:9

Nehemiah is dealing with threats, character assassination, and torment from his enemies. Life is hard. This simple prayer is one asking God for strength.

Nehemiah 6:14

The ploys of Nehemiah’s enemies have reached so far as to infiltrate and corrupt even some of the religious leaders, to the point that a prophet claiming to be sent by God tells Nehemiah to run into the Temple for his own safety. Nehemiah recognizes this guy as a false prophet, but the wear on him is great. This is another prayer to foil the plans of those who strive to ruin the work of God.

Nehemiah 9:5-38

This prayer, the longest single prayer recorded in the text of Scripture, is a corporate prayer of repentance. Upon completion of the wall the people gather together to worship and hear the reading of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. In chapter 8 we learn that Ezra and other leaders preached and taught the Scriptures for an entire day, and after that they came back to learn more. As the Word of God was read and proclaimed the people’s hearts were convicted as they realized that God had been faithful to them, but they had been absolutely unfaithful to Him. This prayer is an expression of their desire to repent and return to their God.

As you read this prayer notice a few things. First, take note of the ways they address God and give him praise. Second, find the different ways they honor God for being faithful to them even when they rejected Him and lived far from Him. Third, notice the different ways they acknowledge their sin and evil in the sight of God. Finally, recognize the ways they as a people

demonstrate repentance with commitments to obedience.

Nehemiah 13:14, 22, 29, 30

The book ends in a difficult way. Rather than “happily ever after”, the last chapter of Nehemiah reflects the condition of the people at least thirteen years after the wall had been built. Nehemiah returned to Susa, and the people quickly drifted from the covenant they renewed in chapter 9. As an older man Nehemiah returns to set things right, and his actions are pretty drastic. He shows us that in the life of faith there are things worth fighting for in the community of faith. Three times in this chapter Nehemiah prays asking God to remember the things he is doing. When Old Testament characters ask God to remember things they aren’t thinking that God has forgotten. Rather, they are acknowledging a desire to do what is right and to honor God with their actions. They are striving to live for God even when that means making difficult decisions and if needed, offending people. But Nehemiah knows he is a sinful, frail human who could be dishonoring God if he is not careful. So these prayers are asking God to show grace and support the work of Nehemiah if he is doing right, and to show Nehemiah if his actions are not godly. Any Christ-follower will have times when they have prayed through things, but the time for a difficult decision is upon them. Following Nehemiah’s model, a prayer asking God to remember is a great way to demonstrate trust and the desire to do what God wills.