

**A New Enterprise: Powerful Prayer**  
**Nehemiah 1:4-11**  
**October 20, 2013**

**Introduction – The Need for Prayer**

We need to pray. You can't be a believer and not know that. Even people who don't profess belief in God seem to innately understand the power of prayer. From time to time, I'll visit someone in the hospital who doesn't have a personal relationship with Christ. But they never refuse prayer.

Virtually everyone acknowledges some benefit in prayer. For the believer, there is no doubt of the necessity for prayer. I've got lots of books on my shelf about prayer. Some of the titles are: *Too Busy Not to Pray*, *The Only Necessary Thing*, *Hearing God* and *The Lord and His Prayer*. Earlier this year, we went through a series on The Lord's Prayer.

For most of us, learning to pray and to be diligent in that prayer is a lifelong journey. We know we should, but it is hard talking and listening to someone we can't see. It's so much more natural to offer up a little prayer here and there, just to keep our conscience clear, and go on our merry way negotiating the duties and challenges of life on our own. In the last few years, my daily prayer life has become much more consistent. Still, I resonate with the temptation to just go it on my own. But when I've run into problems that consume me, my prayer life always kicked into another gear. There have been serious illnesses, financial struggles, and vocational challenges that have brought Diane and me to our knees. I suspect most of you know what I'm talking about because you have had a similar experience. When life gets hard, you pray hard.

But how do you pray in those moments of desperation? What does a prayer of real faith sound like? How do you express desperation within the sphere of faith and confidence in God? How do you know God hears you?

**The Word**

Nehemiah found himself in that position when he heard the devastating news about Jerusalem. His cry to the Lord, recorded in Nehemiah 1:5-11 is a model of faith-empowered prayer that is instructive for you and me personally, and for us as a church.

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 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 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 outcasts 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.

Now I was cupbearer to the king.”

## **Prayer**

### **Coming to a Place of Vulnerability**

It is not insignificant that the book of Nehemiah, which is a book of action, opens with an extended prayer. Next week we will observe that the time between Hanani’s report and Nehemiah’s action was a period of over three months. What happened during that time? Nehemiah was a decisive man of action – no question about that. But remember, this story isn’t primarily about Nehemiah. It is about what God does through his people. Though Nehemiah serves the Persian king, he turns to the King of kings.

Ten years ago, if we were in the place we are now, I would gather us all together, have a great big brainstorming session, make a strategic plan and get to work. Ten years ago, I would have already had us writing a new vision statement. I love that kind of stuff and dynamic leadership. God willing, we will get to that in the near future. But right now, that would be a mistake. Like Nehemiah, we need to pray. We need to hear God. We need to follow his agenda rather than asking him to bless ours.

Nehemiah was tough, but he was vulnerable. I believe vulnerability is an essential ingredient for godly leadership. The plight of the Jews in his homeland moved him to deep sadness and grief. Have you ever experienced that? Our tendency is to repress it and pull ourselves up by our bootstraps so that no one sees our weakness. In 1992, Sheila Walsh, contemporary Christian artist and co-host of the 700 Club checked herself into a mental health clinic. Exhausted from the charade of an expectation of perfection, she finally embraced her devastation. Two weeks later, in a small little Episcopal church, in her words,

I ran to the front... and I lay flat on my face in front of the altar, and it was like, 'God, I'm done. I'm absolutely done. I have nothing left. And you either help me here, or I'm done.' God said, 'Yes. You've been done for a while. You just didn't know it.'<sup>1</sup>

That's a good place to be. No one wants to be around a perpetual "Eyore," but sadness and grief should be embraced because they cultivate vulnerability. And vulnerability cultivates dependence on God. Was not Jesus himself called "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief?" Are you sad or grieving? You're in a good place if it brings you to the altar.

### **Unpacking the Prayer**

So after days of weeping, mourning, and fasting, Nehemiah opened his wounded heart to God in prayer:

*"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..."*

Nehemiah recognized that only God can supply an answer to the burden that he feels. He addresses God as the "God of heaven," which would be typical for those living in the Persian culture. Ezra and even Cyrus, the earlier Persian king used the same phrase. But Nehemiah is more descriptive of the God that he is praying to. He addresses him as the "great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments." He begins with praise and an acknowledgement that God is great enough to accomplish what he is about to ask. Moreover, his address speaks of a relational God, much like Jesus did when he taught his disciples to pray to their "Father in heaven." Nehemiah realized that it was only the steadfast love of God that offered him any hope of an answer to his burden. Boldly, he began his prayer by staking out the grounds upon which he will make his request. This is covenantal language; Nehemiah will leverage promises that God has made in the Covenant to ask for help.

Prayer is more than wishful thinking. The prayer of a believer is made to the God with whom we have an intimate relationship. When you come to prayer, begin with praise to acknowledge that God is able to accomplish the requests that you are bringing to him. Nehemiah uses covenant language because he will ask God to fulfill his ancient Covenant with his people. In the same way, when we come to prayer, we should acknowledge God's past actions and attributes that speak to the burden we carry. If it is an issue of healing, recall that Jesus came and healed many people. If it is finances, acknowledge that he is the God who owns everything and cares for his own. If your burden is for wisdom or guidance, praise God that he knows all things including the future. Be like Nehemiah. Address God in faith, remembering his ability to meet your needs. In so doing, your prayers will be offered in faith.

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.cbn.com/cbnmusic/Interviews/700club\\_SheilaWalsh\\_070903.aspx](http://www.cbn.com/cbnmusic/Interviews/700club_SheilaWalsh_070903.aspx) October 16, 2013

Nehemiah continues:

*“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...”*

Nehemiah was asking God to engage fully with him and the issue that he is bringing. It's like he's jumping up and down and yelling, “God, here I am! Listen to my request!” Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open... Nehemiah confesses his passion. The issue that he is bringing is no small thing. His burden for the people of Israel consumes him all of the time. Nehemiah is not asking for himself. He is a true intercessor. He is “standing in the gap” for God's people. God's glory is the issue here because these people are God's servants. This is God's concern – not just Nehemiah's.

Nehemiah's approach is not unlike the petition that Jesus taught us to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done.” This is a powerful way to pray. Pray for God's glory to be seen and manifested. When we pray this way, our requests are no longer selfish. We can pray them with great confidence and with a clear conscience.

Now that Nehemiah has expressed his faith that God can meet his request through his power and he has addressed God for the sake of his glory, he confesses that he has fallen short and broken the covenant of which he spoke earlier.

*“...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 have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.”*

While Nehemiah is praying for the shamed people in Jerusalem, he does not consider himself better than them. He stands with them and shares their guilt and shame. Nehemiah's humility here is remarkable and important for every spiritual leader. He is not condescending. He didn't engage in idolatry like his predecessors. For all of his life, he had lived in Persia and demonstrated strong moral character – he couldn't be a trusted member of the court if it were otherwise. Even so, he included himself in the confession. Jesus, too, shows the way here. He entered into our suffering and shame as a human being and took it upon himself. His name was “Emmanuel – God with us.” This is the way of a servant-leader. If you are praying for someone, enter into their suffering. If you are a leader, it should never be “you” or “yours,” but rather “we” and “ours.”

In the heart of his prayer, Nehemiah places his request within the framework of God's word to his people through 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 outcasts 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.’”*

O that we would learn to pray God’s Word! Nehemiah is summarizing and quoting God’s word through Moses in Deuteronomy 3:1-4:

“And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will take you to make my name dwell there.”

It is here that Nehemiah leverages God’s promises to his people. And he recognizes that it is only by his mercy that the people will be blessed. We can learn from Nehemiah’s bold prayer. It is as though he is saying, “God, you promised. Now I’m asking for you to fulfill your promise!” Such a prayer is not impertinent because it is not a selfish prayer. It is a prayer for God’s glory – that his name may dwell in Jerusalem whereas now the people are dwelling in shame. I believe that God is pleased with such a prayer. It is a prayer of bold faith. And it is on solid ground, because it is based on God’s word and his promises.

Are you worried about tomorrow? Pray Jesus’s words in Matthew 6:25-34 that he would provide for your needs. He knows them even before you ask. Do you need wisdom? Pray James 1:5 where it is promised in generous supply. Are you praying for someone who is wallowing in sin? Recall the promise of I John 5:16. Let us learn to pray God’s Word. It is sure ground!

Nehemiah then recalled what God had done in the past.

*“They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.”*

Has God done great things for you? Do you have any monuments or Ebenezers? Remember them in prayer. “God, you did it before. Do it again!” Nehemiah was referring to both Israel’s exodus from Egypt out of slavery and the first return of the exiles from Babylon, nearly one

hundred years before. In effect, Nehemiah was appealing to God's glory, asking him to finish the work had already begun. Notice his language. "You have redeemed by your great power and by your strong arm." Nehemiah's prayer is infused with faith. He has no doubt that God can accomplish his request.

Having acknowledged God's greatness, confessed his shortcomings, and recalled the promises of the Covenant, Nehemiah asked for help in the specific matter at 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."*

Nehemiah acknowledged that he was not alone in his passion for the glory of God through his people. There were many more who desired God's will. He has aligned his request with the glory of God and on that basis, he made his personal request. Are your prayers oriented towards God's will and glory? Will God's glory be seen in the answer you are requesting? Are you seeking God's will rather than your own? The Apostle John makes this audacious claim:

And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.

I John 5:14-15

Nehemiah simply asks that God grant him mercy in the sight of the Persian king. It is a good prayer to pray and I have used it many times when I needed favor from an employer, a person from whom I needed a something, or even a congregation. Yes, I've often prayed that God would grant me favor with you. I do not take it for granted. It is a good prayer. Use it when you need God to work through other people.

### **Reflections for Personal and Corporate Prayer**

As Christians, we all know that we need to have a regular prayer life. Let me encourage you, without laying performance guilt on you, to continue to develop a rich and disciplined prayer life. It is a life-long journey. The longer you are a Christian, the deeper your prayer life should become.

When you come to a significant obstacle in your life or God has given you a big burden for his works, as he did for Nehemiah, use his prayer as a model for boldly and confidently presenting your request to the Lord. Spend a good deal of time listening and mourning, if the circumstances call for it. Do not be in a hurry. Allow God to speak to you and to show you where and how he is working in the circumstances. For Nehemiah, it was three months of waiting. The Scriptures

tell us to wait on the Lord. That is where your strength and confidence will come. In your waiting, God will reveal to you if there is anything displeasing in your life for him. Confess your sin. Acknowledge your unfaithfulness. The Bible tells us that there forgiveness flows freely when we confess our sins. Then you will be bold to bring your requests to God. Learn to pray the Scriptures. What are the promises that God has given in his Word that are relevant to your situation? Pray those. How has God worked in the past to address similar challenges? Rehearse those, whether they are biblical, historical, or your own stories. Leveraging God's promises in Scripture and his acts on behalf of his children in the past is not disrespectful or demanding. It is a prayer of bold faith that God hears and answers. And then, as Nehemiah did, present your request simply to God, knowing that the prayer offered in faith will be heard and answered.

Nehemiah's example is a powerful model for personal prayer. But what would it be like if we as a church family embraced the same principles of powerful prayer together? I think we all know that we are entering a new season of our life here at First Baptist Church. I described the landscape of potential change last week. This is not my church. First Baptist is not Pastor Salem's church. It doesn't matter what the by-laws say, it is not the deacon's church and it is not your church.

It is Christ's church. We are God's enterprise and his workmanship. Let that sink in. I am not the CEO or the operations manager. I'm not interested in sustaining a religious business. I am an undershepherd and my role is to help us follow the Chief Shepherd. It is time to wait on the Lord. It is a time for us to seek the burden of the Lord that he would have for us in this place, in this city of Aberdeen. In January, we will begin to take concrete steps to move forward in ministry plans. But now, it is time to wait on the Lord.

We need to pray together to understand his heart for our city.

- Where are the areas of real need in this city where God would have us bring his grace?
- Why is it that in this city of two colleges so few young adults are pursuing Christ?
- Why is it that the culture of our Midwest city seems so friendly to our faith, but yet we exhibit the same problems of alcohol and drug abuse, sexual sin, domestic abuse, and broken families as the rest of the country?

We need to pray together and discern where we have failed God and where we have been unfaithful. I don't know where to begin. But as God breaks our heart for our city, perhaps we'll know where we have been unfaithful to him.

We need to search the Scriptures to claim the promises he has for us.

- We are Christ's church and he has promised that we will prevail against the forces of evil and of this world.
- We are his work...has God not promised that he would complete what he has begun?

We need to reflect on what God has done for us in the past to inspire us to follow him into the promise of the future.

- What great things has God done through First Baptist in the past?
- When have we seen God's remarkable faithfulness and blessing?
- How has this ministry impacted and changed lives?

If God has done it before, he can do it again.

Can we do this together? Will you commit to pray and ask these questions of the Lord over the next three months? We are God's work. He is waiting for open hearts and willing hands in order to further his Kingdom through us. Jesus said, "You don't have because you don't ask." Ask, and keep on asking. Seek, and keep on seeking. Knock, and keep on knocking. Anyone who keeps on asking keeps on receiving. Those who keep on seeking keep on finding. And the church that keeps on knocking will have the door opened unto them. This is God's word to us.

### **Prayer**

### **Song of Response – "Knock"**