

Nehemiah prayed the Bible

- Nehemiah 1:1-11
- We began our study of this book last week by looking at the times and the man. The time was around 445 BC, in Persia, where the man, Nehemiah, a Jew, served the King as his cupbearer. He wrote down the story of how God sent him back to Jerusalem to lead the effort to rebuild the wall and to reform the people, and I am so glad he did. It occurred to me this week as I read the story again that Nehemiah seemed to always be doing one of three things in the book. He was either planning or organizing in his role as a leader...or he was praying in his role as a servant of the most high God...or he was encouraging the people he served and led, pointing them to God and urging them to remember Him, to trust Him, and to act in accordance with His will. But if he had a default switch, it was set on prayer. Let me show you his pattern before we look at his prayer. Have you noticed that Nehemiah interrupts himself in the telling of the story to pray? This is a pattern Nehemiah follows all the way through the book. When Tobiah and Sanballat oppose the work of rebuilding the temple by making fun of it and predicting the work would fail, Nehemiah tells us that, and then he prays, "Hear, O our God, for we are despised." (Neh. 4:4) Later on the same men accuse Nehemiah of doing all that he is doing for selfish gain: you just want to be KING, they said. Nehemiah answers them but then he prays, "But now, O God, strengthen my hands." (Neh. 6:9) When Nehemiah is not praying or leading, he is encouraging others to trust the Lord and keep working. "Do not be afraid," he says to them in chapter 4 when there are threats against them. "Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes." Are you going through something difficult right now? Most people are. Three powerful words of encouragement: **do not be afraid**. But how can I not be afraid when this thing is threatening to crush me? **Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome**. Oh, yeah. He is. So, what do you want me to do, Lord? Right, **fight for my brothers, my sons, daughters, wife and home**. I am not alone. When fear is put down and God is exalted, then the fight doesn't seem that hard because we are not alone. I don't want to preach that passage before we get to it, but it is hard to resist!
- See the pattern of Nehemiah's leadership? 1- He planned his work and worked his plan, as we will see as the story unfolds. 2- He prayed, and even interrupted his thoughts to pray. 3- He encouraged those around him. O God, would you do that again, Lord, in me? In us?
- We have talked about his pattern; let's take a look now at his prayer. Nehemiah prays Scripture. And he starts with praise and submission. Then he moves into confession. Then he goes into petition. And in each part of the prayer, he prays the Bible.
- **Praise and submission**
- "O Lord God of heaven." Nehemiah starts his prayer, as we should, in heaven, with God, who is the Lord of all. I am thinking either Nehemiah had been in Deuteronomy that morning for his devotions, or he had it memorized, because He praises the Lord as the "great and awesome God." Moses told the people of Israel as they prepared to go into the Promised Land that they were not to be in dread of the people they would have to encounter, "for the Lord your God is in your midst, a great and awesome God." (I heard a student give a speech this week about George Strait, whom some would call the king of country music, he said, and the student kept talking about how 'awesome' he is and how 'awesome' his music is and how 'awesome' it would be to go to one of his concerts.) I had to smile and I joked with him about it after the speech. There is only One who is awesome, and He is our great and awesome God. Moses also described God in Deut. 7:9 as the One who "keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep His commandments." Nehemiah prays that same description back to God in verse 5.
- He starts with praise, and that naturally leads to submission or humility, as Nehemiah acknowledges that he is the Lord's servant, and not the other way around. One of the best ways to get our hearts in the right place is to give God praise for who He is. Cyril Barber writes, "The self-

sufficient do not pray, they merely talk to themselves. The self-satisfied will not pray; they have no knowledge of their need. The self-righteous cannot pray; they have no basis on which to approach God." Nehemiah saw God right, and saw himself right, as simply a servant, and so he prays with humility, "let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant." It may well be that Nehemiah had been reading in 1 Kings that same day and remembered what Solomon had prayed in the dedication of the temple. **(1 Kings 8:27-30)** Three times Solomon refers to himself as God's servant, and five times he asks the God of heaven to listen to his prayer.

- **Confession**

- You cannot pray about God keeping His covenant with those who love Him and keep His commandments without heart-searching and confession, because who of us have kept His commandments? Nehemiah asks the Lord to hear his confession of the sins of his people, and for himself as well: "even I, and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, the rules." Nehemiah knew that his people were in the place of brokenness because of sin. That was the beginning point. Their sin led to God's judgment which resulted in their captivity and the city's destruction. If the city and the people were to be restored, it would only happen by going back to the beginning point, and to the confession of sins.

- When we see God where He is and who He is, we will always see ourselves where we are and who we are. Isaiah went into the temple in the year that King Uzziah died and he saw the Lord high and lifted up and his train filled the temple. He saw the seraphim and he heard them praising God saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!" And Isaiah knew at that moment that he was a dead man because even though the whole earth was filled with God's glory, his own heart was not. And he cried out, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" The direction of Isaiah's life changed that day, when God showed him the condition of his own heart and the condition of his people's hearts. The same happened with Nehemiah. When he heard that the walls were destroyed in Jerusalem, he was reminded of God's covenant, which Israel had not kept, and he saw his own sinful heart as part of the national problem. This is such an important truth about leadership. A real leader is not one who is impressed with his own talents and gifts, but is always aware that he is as weak and as vulnerable to sin as anyone else. Leaders who forget that are the ones most likely to fall into sin. Leaders lead by living a lifestyle of confessional prayer.

- **Petition**

- Derek Kidner says that Nehemiah came into God's presence empty-handed but not uninvited. He knows the promises of Scripture, that God would scatter the unfaithful but He would gather the repentant. So he comes with a petition, having his heart broken over what has broken God's heart. He asks God to remember His Word, specifically the promises God made to Moses in several places in Deuteronomy. Verse 9 is a paraphrase of what God says in Deuteronomy 30:1-4, that when God's people return to Him, He will gather them from the uttermost parts of the earth and bring them to the place He has for them and He will make His name to dwell there. Nehemiah is reminding God of God's passion for His own glory and His love for His people whom He created for His own glory. In verse 10, he reminds God of how He redeemed the people of God "by your great power and by your strong hand." That's a reference to Exodus, the deliverance of God's people from slavery in Egypt when all hope was lost. Nehemiah has the audacity to climb up on that strong foundation and ask God if He would "do that again," a second deliverance that will be as successful as the first.

- Genelle Guzman McMillan was the last person to be rescued from the collapse of the twin towers of the World Trade Center. She had been trapped in the rubble for 27 hours when finally firefighters heard her calling and pulled her out. This 30-year-old single mother had only been on the job as a Port Authority clerk for nine months when the terrorists attacked the World Trade

Center on September 11, 2001.

By her own description she was a Catholic who had become a "party-girl" and was living with her boyfriend in Brooklyn. But when the North Tower collapsed, Genelle's thoughts immediately turned to the Lord and her 14-year-old daughter. She prayed that her body would at least be found so that it could be buried. Becoming bolder, she revised her prayer and asked the Lord that if she had to die, that she could at least make it to the hospital so she could see her daughter one last time. But as faith seemed to bubble in her heart, she boldly asked her Heavenly Father to be rescued alive. "I was praying to God: 'God please save my life. Give me a second chance. I promise I will change my life and do your will.'" Genelle kept her promise, turned away from her sins and has deepened her walk with the Lord.

- One final thing. It struck me how much of Nehemiah's prayer was not about a 'list' of things he was trying to get God to do for him. Do you see that? At the very end, Nehemiah makes it personal, as he asks God to give him success and grant him mercy "in the sight of this man." Hey, God! I want to see my people delivered from their shame, and so I am asking You to give me favor with this man. He's talking about the King, but since He was talking TO the King of kings, he referred to Artaxerxes as a man.
- Nehemiah prayed the Bible.