

Daring to Draw Near, 2

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Quickly when we talk about our Lord Jesus Christ descending into hell, what we're talking about is what we refer to, as theologians refer to as the substitutionary atonement which is to say that Jesus of his own accord and according to his own righteousness did not deserve hell but you and I did and Jesus descended into hell to receive that which we deserved in his own body so that through faith in him we might inherit the gift of eternal life that he gives to us freely. All that happened on the cross.

Some day we'll talk about that at length but today we're continuing in our study of "Daring to Draw Near," a study on prayer. And in England during the middle of the last century, a group of people gathered at the Eagle and Child Pub in Oxford on Tuesday mornings. It was an informal literary group but the members of that informal literary group have been culture changers and authors of renown and you've heard of them. I know you've heard of a couple of them for sure, probably a third. Among the regulars were one Charles Williams, J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. Can you imagine sitting at a table with those guys? And they would read their works and they would interact with one another about the things that they were writing, but there was an unseen member of that group that was one who had long since passed and yet C. S. Lewis wrote of this unseen member, "He was my Master," and that one was one George MacDonald.

George MacDonald was himself an author and a pastor and he was influential in his day. He was a mentor to one Lewis Carroll who wrote, what? Alice in Wonderland, Through the Looking Glass. And George McDonald was a mentor to him. George McDonald wrote of an encounter where one asked about the nature of prayer. I put this in the outline because I thought this was such a good quote and we're going to be talking about this idea, it's going to come to us through Nehemiah but George McDonald is going to touch on it. In this encounter with a person, the person asked George McDonald, "But if God is so good as you represent him and if he knows all we need and better far than we do ourselves, then why should it be that we should find it necessary to ask him for anything at all?" Now, this is a question for the ages and a very good question for a Calvinist like me and a Calvinist like George McDonald and I want you to hear what George McDonald said in answer to that question. And again, you'll find this in the outline that I provided for you. "I answer, What if God," what if he, that is God, "knows prayer to be the thing we need first and most? What if the main object in God's idea of prayer be the

supplying of our great, our endless need - the need of himself? Hunger may drive the runaway child home, and he may or may not be fed at once, but he needs his mother more than his dinner. Communion with God is the one need of the soul beyond all other need; prayer is the beginning of that communion, and some need is the motive of that prayer. So begins a communion, a talking with God, a coming-to-one with him, which is the sole end of prayer." In other words, whatever we ask of God is relatively insignificant to the ultimate purpose of prayer which is to know God, to have an encounter with God.

I liked this so much that I have already posted it on our church's Facebook page. You didn't know that we were in the 21st century here, did you? We actually have a Bay Presbyterian Church Facebook page. I posted that quote on there and on our blog. Our blog's address, you can find it on the front of your bulletin. Take it home, reference that. But that quote is on our blog, it's on our Facebook page and I begin with this quote in our look at the first chapter of the book of Nehemiah because apparently Nehemiah had this all figured out and I say this because I hope that we're going to see today that Nehemiah considered prayer a first resource instead of a last resort as I'm afraid too often we, I know I do, treat prayer. Further, I think Nehemiah treated prayer not as a cosmic vending machine of some sort but as a communion, as a talking with God, a coming to one with him, and today as we consider Daring to Draw Near, I'm hoping that we're going to see a culture on the brink, an audacious prayer, and a providential encounter.

First of all, a culture on the brink. As Nehemiah served the king in Susa, which was the capital city of Persia; keep in mind now that the children of Israel had been taken away from their country, from their homeland, and had been carried away into what is now modern-day Iraq. In the day, it was called Persia. They were carried away to this land of Persia by Nebuchadnezzar and as Nehemiah unfolds the story, he is serving the king in Susa. The Jews were on the ropes.

Nehemiah was not a man of pedigree. We're told of his background only that he was the son of Hacaliah. He had no special education or training. He was just a guy. Just a guy. Just a guy willing to embrace responsibility and so Nehemiah who was a Jew with a pathos for his own people and a heart to make a difference for God, he took the Gospel into the very presence of the king of Persia, King Artaxerxes.

But something else was going on 800 miles away, an entire culture was on life support. Nehemiah's brother, Hanani, and some folks from Judah, came up to Nehemiah with a report on the conditions in Judah and I suspect that it was known that Nehemiah was in a position of influence among the people of Judah and that Nehemiah was in Persia and was serving the king and so they brought along these people and said, "If we get Hanani from Jerusalem to come up to Susa to talk to Nehemiah, maybe we can pressure Nehemiah to leverage his influence and to risk life and career and freedom for the sake of Jerusalem and his people."

Look at the words they use to describe the situation in Jerusalem. It's in verse 3. The people survived, rather, he didn't use the word "conquered" or "prevailed." The people in Jerusalem were survivors. They were in trouble. They were in shame. They were broken.

They were destroyed. Things were in tough shape. One could make the case that the Jews never were in that bad of situation in the history of the nation before. The walls of Jerusalem had been reduced to rubble by Nebuchadnezzar. Raiding parties came in to loot the city, sifting through the rubble to see if they could find anything that might be salvaged and there was no security for the people. The people of God at that time that were the remnant living in and around Jerusalem were very vulnerable and more than that, the center of Jewish culture, civilization and religious worship, the temple, lay in ruins and it was pointless to rebuild the temple until the walls themselves had been reconstructed lest the temple be looted and leveled again.

You know, as I was studying this last week on this particular passage, I thought about the Place of Hope in Haiti and the reason why I thought about that was because I had been writing Andre for a while, for a couple of years, "Andre, you have to start producing food. You have to start producing food from inside. If you build the buildings and still can't feed the children, you're a failure." You see, Andre knew something that I didn't know and so he kept on stiff-arming me when it came to that and what Andre knew was that there are a lot of hungry people in Haiti and some of them don't live at the compound, some of them live in the community around and if word got out that they had food and there were no security walls to protect that food, they'd lose all their food. And so Andre has been working with the board and you met Dick Stonecipher here. We had him here a few weeks ago who was on the board of the Place of Hope and between the two of them they started the construction of a wall, a security wall, that went all the way around a 7 1/2 acre plot of ground, and that wall is made out of block and it's about, I'd say maybe...Pete, what would you say? Ten feet? Ten feet tall and so they have a 10 foot security wall; it's the most expensive piece of structure on that property but, you see, now they can start producing food because they have the security.

You see, the people of Israel longed to worship the living God again. Now, they had fallen into times when they were less anxious to do that but they were coming out of that and they were coming to a place where they wanted to present themselves before God's very presence and have that presence with them in Jerusalem in the temple but it would be pointless to rebuild the temple if they didn't have the security that the wall would provide.

The people are vulnerable and because the center of civilization, the center of religious worship for the Jews was gone, the temple, the civilization was on the brink. We read about this in Nehemiah 1:1-3,

1 The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel, 2 that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. 3 And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire."

So what we read about next is an audacious prayer. How people deal with trouble and adversity tells a lot about their character and when things go well, anyone can look good, but it's trouble that tells a person's character. Nehemiah in the verses that follow, turned inward, upward and outward.

First, inward. He wept and he mourned. Now, this is not necessarily to the exclusion of anything else he did but he first acknowledged his own emotions. You know us guys, we don't do emotions very well but Nehemiah was doing emotions very well. It's important that you feel your grief deeply. It's important to acknowledge the deep feelings of others. If you trample others feelings, you can forget about being heard by that person at a later time. And if you stuff your own feelings, in the long haul you'll find that they come out in inappropriate ways at the worst possible times. So feel your grief deeply. Nehemiah did not say, "I'm a man of God. I should not mourn." No, rather he wept and mourned for days.

That was the inward look of Nehemiah. He also had an upward look. He fasted and he prayed apparently for days. Now, fasting is a symbol of dying to yourself. Jesus said, "If you want to follow me, you must die to yourself. A grain of wheat," he said, "must die before it can reproduce and produce fruit." Fasting is a symbol of dying to self and every time a hunger pang strikes, it's a reminder to pray. Just like our 10:02 and my Fitbit. My Fitbit, you probably didn't know this but during the announcement, my Fitbit was screaming at me to pray and while I was making announcements today, you didn't hear me, but I was praying because it was 10:02 and I've gotten in the habit because of my Fitbit and the alarm I attached with it, I pray at 10:02. And so at 10:02 today, I prayed. My Fitbit had gone off. That is a little bit like what fasting is, when the hunger pang hits, then you pray. It's a reminder to us to pray and Nehemiah lets out an audacious prayer. When someone prays a prayer like this, it tells me that he is no stranger to God. He knows what it is to pray and to pray big.

Nehemiah also had an outward look to him. It's in Nehemiah's mind to rebuild the wall and to do that could easily be construed by the king as rebellion; that he was seeking autonomy from the king. And we know he has at least a general plan because he prays for success in verse 11, and we know it is audacious and dangerous because in verse 11 he asked God for mercy. This is how his prayer went. I'm reading Nehemiah 1:4-11,

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. 5 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, 6 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. 7 We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. 8 Remember the word that you commanded your servant

Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, 9 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.' 10 They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. 11 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.

So we have an audacious prayer and then comes a providential encounter, remember we talked about providence is the work of God in this world among us. The big things, the miracles such as Carolyn H., we saw God reach in there and take care of that surgery and what could have been very precarious surgery has turned out to be positive for Carolyn. But it's not just the big things that we refer to as providence, it's the little things, sometimes the imperceptible things that we don't see, the potential dangerous situation to your kids actively averted by God yet in such a way that you'll never know. Big and little, seen and unseen is God's work in us, among us, and for us. It's God's providential action.

Nehemiah is cupbearer to the king. That's not a throwaway position. The cupbearer, he ensured that the king's drink had not been tampered with at all and there's an extraordinary amount of trust that exists between the cupbearer and the king, so much so that the cupbearer was frequently, as was the case with Nehemiah, the top advisor to the king. Four months after Hanani, Nehemiah's brother, had arrived, Nehemiah was serving the king his wine. Sadness had come over him. He was a little bit on the transparent side because of the plight of his people. Nehemiah was given an opportunity to make his case before Artaxerxes because Artaxerxes called him in and said, "What is this sadness that has overtaken you? I perceive this to be sadness of your heart. What's bothering you?" And so Nehemiah breathed a prayer and in an audacious and dangerous request, went to the king and the king would accept. This is how we read it in Nehemiah 2:1-5.

1 In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. 2 And the king said to me, "Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart." Then I was very much afraid. 3 I said to the king, "Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" 4 Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. 5 And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it."

Now, I have a lot to say about what just transpired between Nehemiah and Artaxerxes and this is probably the greatest takeaway that I have ever made in any of my sermons at

any time and I'm going to put it off until next week. That's what we call a tease and how many people are going home this week? Okay, you're going to have to get the CD for this one. It'll be posted on SermonAudio. But I'm not going to go on. I have too much that I want to say and the clock says 11 o'clock and I resent it but that's what it says. And incidentally, I will tell you this: I will not be bound by the clock but today I'm going to be bound by the clock.

But I do want to close with this one thing and I think this is just as cool as it comes. Nehemiah, the cupbearer to the king, comes before the king and at great personal risk with the threat of death hanging over his head for what would have been a sin of rebellion on the part of him and his people, Nehemiah pleaded with the king for the lives of his people. Think about our Lord Jesus Christ who presented himself to the authorities and had them take him away under threat of death. Why? So he could plead for the lives of his people. Nehemiah pointed ahead. He pointed ahead to the Messiah who would plead before the king for the lives of his people. That's our Lord Jesus Christ. Nehemiah was pointing the way for us. Nehemiah was saying, "Wait, look down the road. Something big is coming." Now, it cost our Lord Jesus his life and he did that because his arm is not so short that he cannot save. Nancy and Rachel sang about that a little bit. You see, God, the great God of heaven and earth, the Creator God loves us and his attitude, his predisposition toward us is so much in love with us that we make him want to sing. Isn't that something? How many people in your lives can you say right now, "I want to sing over you"? I would say you probably could count them on one hand. But God loves us that much that his own dear Son would come and at risk of his own life plead with the Father for us, his people.

Would you pray with me?

God, we thank you for our Lord Jesus. We thank you for the fact that he came into this world to plead for us, to plead for our safety and our future and that we might have our place of worship before you in heaven one day. And so, God, we give you thanks for our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank you for Nehemiah who without knowing it was pointing us to the Savior. Thank you for a guy like Nehemiah who models prayer; who lived a life of obedience to his great God and King who is the same God and King to us. Thank you for loving us, for dancing over us, for wanting to sing over us. Thank you for that, God. We pray in the name of Jesus, our strong Savior. Amen.