Nehemiah's Prayer

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[0:00] Welcome to Built on God's Word, the preaching and teaching ministry of Highland Park Baptist Church in Bartlesville, Oklahoma.! Evan George teaches on Nehemiah 1.!

What is your instinctive response? What is your instinctive response?
Is it to worry? Is it to ignore? Is it to complain or to criticize? Maybe it's to try and fix it? Or is it an instinctive response to take it to the Lord, to take it to God?
As we start to think about that question, then we start to think about, well, how should we be affected by discouraging news about God's people or the advance of God's work? Today, as we read Nehemiah 1, I think we'll see a faithful example of how Nehemiah responds to saddening and discouraging news that informs how we should be affected and how we should respond.
Jeremy introduced us to Nehemiah last week. You'll remember that the people of God over many generations had consistently rejected God. They did not love Him rightly. They continued in persistent disobedience and sin, despite many of God's gracious invitations to return to them, reminders of His covenant to them, prophets that He had sent.
[1:50] And so because of that continued disobedience, they were sent into exile. So you have the northern kingdom, that would be Israel, the northern ten tribes. They're conquered by Assyria when Assyria comes. And then later, Babylon comes and conquers not only the Assyrians, but also the southern kingdom, which would be Judah and Benjamin at the time.

After the Babylonians conquer the entirety of God's people there, Persia comes along and conquers all of them as well. So at this point in history where Nehemiah starts, there if you start to look in these opening verses, that's how we get Nehemiah in Susa, the capital of Persia.
And particularly at this time, as we can go back and read in the book of Ezra, you have Zerubbabel and Ezra who have already gone back to Jerusalem.
So you have some of the exiles who have returned to Jerusalem, and the temple had already been rebuilt. So when the Babylonians came, they destroyed the temple. Jerusalem was left in ruin. Walls were destroyed.
The temple was destroyed. The temple has now been rebuilt. But as we'll learn, the wall is still in ruin. Our main emphasis for today, if you want to take one of the handouts in the center of your table, our main emphasis is going to be this.
[3:02] When great distress arises, a right love for God and His people moves us to fervent prayer and faithful action. When great distress arises, a right love for God and His people moves us to fervent prayer and faithful action.

Could I get a volunteer to go ahead and read all of chapter 1 for us? Thank you, Ed.
So the first section that we'll look at is a report of ruin. A report of ruin. That's the first fill in the blank. Here we see the book opens.
Nehemiah, the son of Hakaliah. We know that we believe Nehemiah to be the author here. These are his words. He tells us that it happened in Chislev, which is November, December time frame. He was in Susa, the citadel, which is going to be the capital of Persia. And then it seems one of his blood relatives, one of his blood brothers, comes with other certain men from Judah.
[4:05] We think that it's a blood brother just because there's no reason to make a distinction there with the other men who came if he wasn't. Hananiah. And then there in the back half of verse 2 he says, And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem.

So the Jews had been in exile since the Babylonians conquered them and took them off about 140 years before. Nehemiah here intentionally asks about the Jewish remnant and Jerusalem. Whatever prompted his question, the text makes clear that he still identifies himself deeply with

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God's people and God's purposes, even though he is hundreds of miles away from Jerusalem.
Then we look in verse 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.
News here is shared that the people of God are in great distress. And the word there used for great distress is translated as a great trouble. In your text it's going to be used as said, great trouble or great distress, depending on what version you have.
But that's the strongest word in the Hebrew language that depicts danger, calamity, or misery. What may be missed in our English translation is that we say great distress, but it's great distress.
[5:24] There's weight there. He's told that the walls are broken down, the gates are destroyed by fire.

Now a question, and this will be a large group, a question, why would the wall being broken down and the gates destroyed, why would that be such a problem? Yeah.
Yeah. Practically for any city in ancient time, without walls, there's no protection. A city without walls is a city without any sort of defense. It's vulnerable. It can't control its own fate.
Adversaries can easily come and easily cause issue. Extremely vulnerable. And so you have the practical issue of not having a wall, and then I think you have maybe even the greater theological issue with not having a wall.
Remember, think of what Jerusalem represents to the Jewish people, to the people of God. If we look at 1 Kings 11, 36, it says this, Jerusalem, the city where I have chosen to put my name.
[6:28] And remember the temple is there in Jerusalem. And a part of what's so magnificent, what's so wonderful about the temple, is it's where God is uniquely present among his people. Jerusalem was a place, in the Psalms described, as a place that could not be moved.

And so we understand that the condition of Jerusalem really represents the shame and apparent weakness of God's covenant people in the land God had promised them at this time, according to their disobedience.
We see other descriptions in the Psalms as Jerusalem being glorious, beautiful, joyous, because of the Lord's purposes there. Messianic prophecies and good were tied to Jerusalem and to Mount Zion.
So Nehemiah hears this report, and at these words, we see that Nehemiah is so moved. So there if you look at verse 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.
So we think praying, he's directly calling out to the Lord, addressing the Lord, talking to Him. He's fasting, so he's voluntarily abstaining from food for a period of time to devote himself more intentionally to seeking God in prayer.
[7:39] And here, especially, it seems to express the depth and urgency of his grief and his dependence upon God. So what I'd like you to do for the first discussion at your tables is consider this.

What do we learn about Nehemiah from the way he responds in verse 4? What do we learn about Nehemiah from the way he responded to the report in verse 4?
Okay, let's come back together.
So as you think about how Nehemiah responds there in verse 4 to the report he's been given, what do we learn about Nehemiah? Yeah, he's deeply affected by it. He's burdened by it.
There's a deep concern. Absolutely. Absolutely. What else? Yeah, it seems he's driven to utter dependence and seeking of the Lord.
[8:38] There are certain times we hear of news and we go to prayer, and then there's a depth of burden where we're moved to prayer and fasting. I think I heard it at one of the tables, but it was continued fasting and prayer.

It wasn't just one time for a minute. Yeah, it was over a period. There was some persistence there. I think I might adjust that slightly.
And I think we'll learn more about what he believes when we read his prayer. I think that'll shine forth. But I do agree with you that if we think of Zerubbabel had been back, the exiles had returned. They had been there for nearly a century.
And yet this is the report he gets. And so I think there was this expectation that God was going to fulfill the post-exilic promises. And so I think to your point when he hears this, it's this thought of the

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state of Jerusalem does not yet match the eventual hope and joyous outcomes that God you've promised.
And so I think there's this deep mourning. Though they had already been there nearly a century. And what seems to be very clear is that there's a genuine love and a heart for God, for God's purposes, for God's work, and for God's people there.
[9:47] We can think that if he showed no response, what would that have revealed? If there had been no response whatsoever? Probably that he didn't care. That he wasn't concerned by it.

I'm trusting in God's promises, you know, too. If I cry out to you, then you're going to bring it back. Yeah, I think you're right, Katie. There are a few things there.
We're going to read a little bit in his prayer later where he's going to admit that he has sinned, that him and his family have sinned. He's going to acknowledge their sin. So he's going to identify with them. He's going to fervently pray on their behalf in an intercessory way.
Absolutely. Okay, so we see this report of ruin. We start to see something of Nehemiah's response. Your second point there is going to be a response of righteousness.
So a response of righteousness. Now what I'd like to do is, if you're going to look there at discussion two, I'll read that.
[10:46] What do you notice about Nehemiah's response, including the structure and content of his prayer? What does Nehemiah say and what can be applied to our own lives today? So I'm going to read his prayer and the rest of Nehemiah verse 1.

I want you to listen to that and then consider what you notice about the structure and content of his prayer. What's he say? And how might that be applied in our lives today? So I'll read that. Go ahead and listen. And then you can discuss at your tables.
Starting in verse 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. And I said, 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 statues 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.
[12:09] 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 the cupbearer to the king. So what do you notice about Nehemiah's response, including the structure and content of his prayer?
So the first discussion question we had, it's kind of like a Venn diagram in the sense that there's some overlap between that first question and this question. But what do you notice about his response, particularly the structure and content of his prayer?
And observe his command. Yeah, I think you're right to point out the start of that really frames the rest of the prayer.
Like the rest of the prayer follows the starting point of, God, you're great, you're awesome. You're the one who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep your commands.
[13:18] And so yeah, it really does seem that Nehemiah has an instinct in distress to turn towards God. Right, because in verse 4, as soon as I heard these words, I sat down and prayed.

So the way that we're being told it in the scriptures is that it was Godward, is where he was going. And I think you're right that he begins with, who are you, O Lord?
And let that frame everything else that I'm about to plea for, ask for, think, say. Let's start with who you are and what we know to be true of you. Okay, what else?
Thank you for that. So in this moment of great distress and burden for what's going on, he doesn't complain about it.

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He doesn't immediately say, why God? Like, why did you do this? As if he's entitled or as if he is sinless. He acknowledges that he himself is a sinner. He acknowledges and identifies with the sin of his people.
[14:19] And he pleads on their behalf. And as we read about this and as we see the scriptures, this isn't trying to argue that, you know, I can repent for someone and therefore they can be saved on account of me.

Or that I am, I will give an account for someone else's sin. That's not what he's teaching here. I think what the point is, is that he's acknowledging his own sin, pleading before the Lord and identifying with these people in an intercessory prayer type of way.
Okay, what else? What else do we notice? Yeah, thank you for that, Sarah. So verse 8, 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've chosen to make my name dwell there.
Now he asked the Lord to remember. And I don't think that Nehemiah believes that God has forgotten. I think what Nehemiah is effectively saying is, Lord, act in accordance with the covenant promises you've already made.
[15:26] Because he's already set up above, he's reminded himself that, God, you're the God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with your people. And then in verse 8, he recalls back to what he commanded Moses in God's own very words in Scripture.

Or what else might we say about the content of the prayer? Yeah.
It was interesting, as you start to read through this verse, I think what you probably pick up on is, okay, here are some specific things I know in specific Scriptures. And then you're also starting to hear other words that would have been informed by the Scriptures.
And in fact, if you go look at this, I won't be able to go through all of them based on time, but Nehemiah 1.5, for example. Nehemiah 1.5, 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.
Verbatim from other Scriptures. So, Deuteronomy 7.9, Or Deuteronomy 10.17, Or Exodus 34.5-7, And so what you see is Nehemiah effectively has compiled, and the case is going to be true for the rest of the verses in this prayer.
[17:21] He's essentially stitched together verses from the rest of the Bible. So it's informed how he's speaking, what he's saying, and then verbatim different Scriptures. If you're interested, you can write these down, but Nehemiah 1.6-7, that's Leviticus 26.

Verses 40-42. Verse 8 is Deuteronomy 4.25-27. Verse 9, that's Deuteronomy 30.
Verses 1-5. Verse 10, that's Deuteronomy 9.29. Verse 11, that's Psalm 130.2. And those are only a subset of verses we could use.
There are also many others that could have also been used to reference those. And so I think as we get to one of the takeaways, we see here him praying Scripture, letting the Scriptures inform and shake what he thinks, what he says, what he wants, how he asks.
And to be able to ask this, you know what you have to have? Knowledge of the Scriptures. If he didn't know the Scriptures, he couldn't have prayed this way. So I think one practical thing that we might apply is considering, am I, in delighting in the Lord, continuing to know more and more Scriptures, that I might be more and more shaped by them according to the Lord, the Lord's will.
[18:43] And it seems like he's seeing, he's understanding these verses in the concept of where Israel is. They had sinned, they'd been taken into exile, now they're returning, and he hopes and prays and wants to work toward, as he's praying and as the actions he will undertake, to help Israel return to the Lord.

He's looking for not just the physical walls being rebuilt, but the people also following the Lord. Now for the sake of time, I'll kind of try and wrap up briefly here. But I think another takeaway that we can have from this is, this can shape how we pray.
We can model our prayers after this. We see elements of adoration towards God, of confession, of thanksgiving, of supplication, of asking the Lord for things. We can see here that he's interceding on the behalf of others.

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So we too can pray on the behalf of others. An example of what this could look like today is, Lord James chapter 1 tells me that if we lack wisdom, we should ask you, because you give wisdom without reproach.
Lord, we have fill-in-the-blank situation. Would you please give us wisdom that we might follow you? That could be a practical example of how you might apply that in your life today. Now Nehemiah did not stop at prayer.
[19:50] He's the cupbearer of the king, as he tells us there in verse 11. So he's the cupbearer of the king. He's a trusted servant of the most powerful king in the region. And I think what this is leading to in verse 11 there, where he says, Grant your servant mercy in the sight of this man.

And now I was the cupbearer of the king. What this anticipates is what Jeremy's going to teach us in chapter 2. But Nehemiah wasn't just stopping at prayer. He wasn't praying and then doing nothing. But as he's praying, as he's fasting, he's considering, Lord, how can I act faithfully?
And it seems as though, even here he's anticipating, how can I find an opportunity to go take a faithful step in helping this to happen, in addition to prayer? So Jeremy, we'll get to unpack that next week.
One thing I would want to leave you with is, as we read through Nehemiah, we'll see that Nehemiah is a great faithful leader. He's working for the rebuilding, repentance, and reformation of God's people, and the rebuilding of Jerusalem.
Yet we understand that we ultimately need a greater Nehemiah. Nehemiah can't save us from our sins. We see in Nehemiah's grief over Jerusalem here, a small picture of the kind of compassionate concern that we see perfectly in Christ.
[20:56] Jesus is greater than Nehemiah. Nehemiah here confesses the sins of God's people, but Jesus, our sinless Savior, is the one who actually bears those sins for us on our behalf. Nehemiah seeks the restoration of Jerusalem and the reformation of his people, but it's Christ who actually comes and accomplishes the redemption of his people.

And it will ultimately bring the restoration that Nehemiah's work can only anticipate. So again, our main emphasis for today, when great distress arises, a right love for God and his people moves us to fervent prayer and faithful action.
Nehemiah gives us a faithful but still imperfect picture of a servant who loves God's people, intercedes for them, and seeks their restoration. Jesus is that greater and final servant who perfectly loves his people, bears their sin, intercedes for them, and accomplishes their ultimate restoration.
This leads us to ask the Lord to change our hearts, that we might be more like Nehemiah in the ways that he's like Christ, that we would have hearts that care about others, that long for God's purposes to come to fruition, that know the scriptures and God's promises and delight in him, that confess our sin, that recognize God's greatness, that ultimately are moved to prayer and other faithful action as we follow him.
So a few quick thoughts on application there on the back of your handout. What situation involving God's people and God's work currently burdens you enough that you should bring it before the Lord regularly?
[22:19] Can you pray about that situation using scripture, more scripture maybe than your own words or desires, and pray like Nehemiah? And then finally, is there a faithful action God might be calling you to take alongside that prayer?

So that's where we will conclude for today. Let's pray and we can dismiss. Father, we praise your name. We're thankful for Nehemiah's example here, and we're ultimately thankful for Jesus.
Lord, we pray that you would move in our hearts to have a greater love for you, a greater love and concern for your people and your work. Lord, we pray that when we hear reports of our brothers and sisters in persecution and suffering, when we hear of what might be perceived as slow or ineffective gospel work that it's advancing, as we hear distressing and discouraging news, Lord, that we, like Nehemiah, would have an instinct to run to you.
Lord, that you would remind us of your covenant promises, that you're trustworthy, that you're faithful, and all the ultimate hopes that we have that are fulfilled in Christ Jesus.
Lord, we pray for hearts that long for you and long for others to know you. Lord, show us where we need to repent. And Lord, show us what additional faithful obedience and actions could look like, what you would have us do.

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[23:47] Lord, help us to know your word, to delight in your word, and to pray your word back to you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. To learn more, visit us in person or see the website at highlandparkbaptist.net.

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