The Praying Cupbearer

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[0:00] Last week we started the book of Nehemiah and we talked about how the book itself would teach us three actions that are good things to do in any situation.

We talked about how it would teach us to pray, how it would teach us to plan, and how it would teach us to persevere. When you couple those three things with God's providence, you've got quite an unbeatable combination there.
And when we started the book last week, we covered the first four verses plus the last sentence of verse 11 in chapter 1. For just a little bit of review, remember that possibly Nehemiah's great-grandparents were taken into captivity when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians.
Nehemiah was likely born in Persia sometime during or soon after Zerubbabel's ministry in Jerusalem. We learned last week that Nehemiah served as King Artaxerxes' cupbearer, and the office of cupbearer came about in ancient societies because of the danger that the emperor or the king might be poisoned by some rival.
And naturally, that cupbearer became a very trusted advisor to the king. In most cases, the cupbearer also guarded the king's sleeping quarters, so you can see just how much the cupbearer really had the king's life in his hand.
[1:29] Of course, because he was the cupbearer to the king, he had a pretty cushy job. And despite that cushy job, Nehemiah was deeply moved when visitors from Jerusalem told him about the poor condition of the city and its people.

That news drove Nehemiah to pray, and we'll actually cover that prayer tonight as we look at verses 5 through 11a in chapter 1. To remind us of the full context, though, let's read all of chapter 1 before we focus on the new verses.
It says,
This prayer that we'll look at tonight is the first of ten prayers found in the book of Nehemiah.
All are prayers from Nehemiah himself except for one. So we know from that already that Nehemiah was a praying man. And this prayer is longer than any of the other prayers from Nehemiah in this book.
[4:28] Most of his other prayers are short prayers prayed on the spot during some crisis. We'll see one of those next week, but tonight we'll focus on this longer prayer. Put that all together, though, and you see that he was in a constant attitude of prayer and could pray quickly whenever necessary.

And, of course, that's a wise and profitable attitude for all of us to have. We're going to cover this prayer in five sections tonight.
In verses 5 and 6, we see the consciousness of God's position. The consciousness of God's position. Here are verses 5 and 6 again.
And I said, Before we break down the verses, remember what Hebrews 4.16 tells us.
Hebrews 4.16 tells us, Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace and help in the time of need. Nehemiah clearly understood that principle, even though Hebrews was yet to be written when Nehemiah prayed that prayer.
[6:03] Nehemiah also understood something else. We should never take the privilege of prayer for granted. In our access to our Maker, we should be careful that we don't venture into irreverence.

If we feel that our Maker is our friend, we must never forget that our friend is also our Maker. We'll go through verse 5 phrase by phrase.
Nehemiah begins by saying, I pray, Lord God of heaven. This combination of names means that the God of Israel is the only God.

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Lord is the translation of the covenant term Yahweh, which carries the ideas of love and personal relationship. The phrase God of heaven alludes to three truths about God.
God of heaven first alludes to the strength of God. And we'll talk about the strength of God here. The term God of heaven proclaims God as the creator.
[7:09] No one could be God of heaven if he had not created the heavens. And the greatness of the creation demands great strength for the creator. It demands a powerful creator.

Later in this prayer, we'll see another reference to the great power of God. The second truth that we can learn from the God of heaven is the sovereignty of God.
So the sovereignty of God is the second truth. We can talk about the sovereignty of God because he who is God of heaven is certainly also God of this earth.
He who rules heaven also rules the earth. So Nehemiah also praises God here for his sovereign rule over all of mankind. Few praise God for his sovereign rule.
And that's because they don't really want God to rule in their own lives. But Nehemiah understood the importance of the sovereignty of God. The last thing that the God of heaven phrase alludes to is the sacredness of God.
[8:15] So the sacredness of God is that last thing. We must give God great reverence and holy fear. And this is what speaks of his sacredness.

In other words, it speaks of the holiness of God. And holiness is God's fundamental attribute. It should cause us to give him holy respect and fear.
And for the believer, holy fear is the fear of dishonoring God, the God who has provided our redemption. In verse 5's next phrase, Nehemiah refers to God as, O great and awesome God.
The words great and awesome are mindful of God's power and majesty. Surely such a God could answer Nehemiah's prayer. Great and awesome God indicates Nehemiah's appreciation of who God is.
The one whom Nehemiah feared and the source and object of his deep faith. That's the God that Nehemiah is talking about. God's awesomeness is the impression his total character and person leaves on all who encounter him.
[9:27] The last phrase of verse 5 is the longest. It describes God as, You who keep your covenant and mercy with those who love you and observe your commandments.

Covenant and mercy in the New King James also can be translated covenant and steadfast love. Steadfast love is the quality of God's faithfulness to Israel in his covenant with them.
One central theme of the Old Testament is God's special covenant relation with his people. That's the word hesed in the original Hebrew. For those of you who were here Sunday night, that's the same word we saw throughout Dan's message on 2 Samuel 9.
And that word is closely related to the covenant and it contains the idea of loyalty. It also emphasizes God's mercy and love to his people.
Nehemiah understands that God shows this special love to certain people and God shows this special love to those who love God and keep his commandments. When we talk about God's faithfulness, we should expect to see something in return.
[10:40] And God's covenant faithfulness requires Israel's love in return. So this love also includes faithfulness. Obedience then is the proper response to God's love rather than a precondition of it.

Listen to that last part again. Obedience is the proper response to God's love rather than a precondition of it. Remember that we loved him because he first loved us.
And of course that's a New Testament reference with that last quote I gave you. We also see that reference throughout other parts of the New Testament.
And that view of obedience being a proper response to God's love carries over in John 14.15. For just one example, John 14.15 says, If you love me, keep my commandments.
The message of both the Old and the New Testaments is that love is necessary to produce obedience. And obedience is the evidence of love. If we don't obey somebody, we reflect deficiency in our love for that person.
[11:50] And of course that also translates to how we treat God as well. If we want to evidence our love for God, we'll do so by obeying him. Some say that they love God, but their disobedience betrays their lack of love.

When we look at Nehemiah 1.5 as a whole, Nehemiah's earnestness is obvious. He focuses his thoughts on the greatness of the one whom he is approaching.

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He stands in reverential awe of the majesty of God. He recognizes God's superiority as well as God's sovereignty. The greater God becomes to him, the smaller becomes his problem.
Once again, the greater God becomes to Nehemiah, the smaller becomes Nehemiah's problem. Does that same principle hold true for us today? God certainly has not changed even after all of these centuries.
Let's move on to verse 6 now. Nehemiah prays to God, Please let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, that you may hear the prayer of your servant, which I pray before you now, day and night, for the children of Israel your servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against you.
[13:09] Both my father's house and I have sinned. Let's consider what Nehemiah meant by asking God to keep his eyes and ears open.

The first part of verse 6 almost sounds a bit rude when you talk about asking God to keep your eyes open, keep your ears open. But we can tell by the phrase, Please, at the beginning of the verse, that Nehemiah likely has the correct attitude here.
In fact, we'll see from the rest of the prayer that we know that Nehemiah has the correct attitude. Nehemiah asked God to look at him and listen to him as he prayed. Really, these words were designed to encourage Nehemiah, because Nehemiah is reminding himself that God does not turn his ears from or close his eyes to his people.
Nehemiah knew that God would hear, so he was asking God to take action. That in itself tells us something about the greatness of God, because how great is God that he can pay attention to each of our prayers, millions of them around the world, individually and simultaneously.
We may not be able to comprehend it, but we know that God is beyond our comprehension. We also see from verse 6 just how much Jerusalem and its citizens' predicament weighed upon Nehemiah.
[14:32] Look at how often he prayed. The earnestness in his praying is seen in his phrase, day and night. So we see that he persevered day and night.

He was so earnest in his heart that he would ask God again and again. Earnestness is necessary for success in prayer. Delay in answering our prayers is not necessarily denial, but it may be a test regarding our earnestness.
So this perseverance in praying must not be thought of as the vain repetitions which Christ condemns. The prayer that is answered simply because the worshiper is too persistent to be satisfied is the prayer that we're talking about here.
And that type of prayer does not come into the category of vain repetitions. That type of prayer is anything but empty. The last part of verse 6 could go with the next section of the lesson, but we're going to cover it here because it completes the sentence.
Nehemiah says, I confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Both my father's house and I have sinned. Two important principles are in play here.
[15:49] First, Nehemiah recognizes the principle of solidarity. He's one with the people, so his sins are their sins, and their sins are his sins.

He doesn't try to distance himself from them. It would have been real easy for him to say, don't blame me for what's going on in Jerusalem. I haven't been there in a long time, if ever.
He doesn't do that, though. He identifies himself with the people. Secondly, Nehemiah recognizes that he himself is a sinner. There's no sin of the people that led to the fall of Jerusalem, of which he is not guilty or capable of being guilty of, given the same circumstances.
We can see from this a secret of true leadership, too. A true leader is not so much aware of the talents or gifts he has that others do not have, as he is aware of the fact that he is weak and as capable of sin as anyone else.
When leaders forget their sinfulness, that's when they risk falling into sin and risk losing their leadership ability. How many times have we seen that from leaders recently?
[17:01] We'll move now to the second section of the lesson. In this section, Nehemiah expands on the confession of sin that he just introduced. Verse 7 details the corruption of God's people.

Once again, verse 7 details the corruption of God's people. In verse 7, Nehemiah prays, Most of Israel's troubles in Nehemiah's time had their root cause in sin.
Persecution was definitely a factor in their troubles, but as we talked about last week, the greatest enemy of Israel was not their wicked neighbors who were oppressing them, but their own wicked

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nature.
If we want the blessings of God, we must confess and forsake the sin that has kept his blessing from us. Sin defiles the sinner.
It dirties the sinner. And when we talk about evil things, we often say things like dirty books, dirty magazines, and dirty language. So you can see that this dirty description is certainly correct.
[18:23] Twice, once in verse 6, and once in verse 7, Nehemiah said that he and the people had sinned against you, talking to God. Anything that is against God, dishonors God.

All sin is against God, and therefore all sin dishonors God. All aspects of our sin make it bad, but nothing makes it so bad as the fact that it is against God himself.
Just remember what sin is. Sin is disobedience to God's laws, and men often make their own laws to try to sanction the breaking of God's laws.
No matter how many laws men try to make to sanction evil, doing evil is still disobedience to God, and disobedience brings punishment. That's why judgment is not a result of an unkind God.
It's a result of a disobedient people. So we've seen the consciousness of God's position and the corruption of God's people.
[19:27] In verses 8 through 10, we see the clarity of God's promise. The clarity of God's promise. Here are 8 through 10 again.

Nehemiah continues, Remember, I pray, the word you commanded your servant Moses, saying, If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations.
But if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I will gather them from there and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for my name.
Now these are your servants and your people whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. Nehemiah wisely bases his request for blessing from God upon the promises of God.
It's always good to plead the promises of God. When we base our prayers upon God's promises, we will have our prayers answered. In verses 8 and 9, we're going to see four things about God's promises.
[20:38] The first thing we see is the place of the promises. Once again, we see the place of the promises. Look at the beginning of verse 8.

It says, Remember, I pray, the word that you commanded your servant Moses. So do you see the place of the promises there? The place was the word of God.
The promises in God's word are the promises to encourage and guide our prayers. We must know the word of God as Nehemiah certainly did if we're going to plead those promises in our prayer.
The second point about the promises is the particulars of the promises. Once again, the particulars of the promises.
Nehemiah pleaded two promises for help with the problems in Israel. The first promise concerned judgment. He said, If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations.
[21:45] Obviously, we know that came true. The second promise, though, concerned restoration. And that says, But if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I will gather them from there and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for my name.

Few will appeal to the promise of judgment, but we see Nehemiah doing that here. He saw in the promise of judgment just as he saw in the promise of restoration that God keeps his word.
So in this prayer, Nehemiah confessed sin and then claimed God's help in remedying the problems that got Israel to that predicament. And he knew that God would keep his word to help those who repented.
So that's important for us to remember that when we see the promise of judgment come true, it's proof that God keeps his word.
And that's why it should encourage us. And we could go several places to prove that these promises are based upon the word of God. We're going to spend just a couple of minutes here in Deuteronomy chapter 4, and we'll look at verses 25 through 31 in a couple of chunks.
[23:03] We'll see both judgment and restoration promise there. Once again, we're going to Deuteronomy 4, verses 25 through 31.

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And Deuteronomy 4, 25 through 28 are where we see the promise of judgment. Moses was speaking to the nation of Israel, and Moses said, When you beget children and grandchildren and have grown old in the land and act corruptly and make a carved image in the form of anything and do evil in the sight of the Lord your God to provoke him to anger, I call heaven and earth to witness against you that day, or this day, that you will soon utterly perish from the land which you cross over the Jordan to possess.
You will not prolong your days in it, but will be utterly destroyed. And the Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the Lord will drive you.
And there you will serve God's, the work of men's hands, wood and stone, which neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell. That section is pretty clear, isn't it?
Fortunately, though, it gets better from there. Listen to how Moses summarized the promise of restoration in the next three verses. These verses are Deuteronomy 4, 29 through 31.
[24:28] He said, But from there, you will seek the Lord your God, and you will find him if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul. When you are in distress, and all these things come upon you in the latter days, when you turn to the Lord your God and obey his voice, for the Lord your God is a merciful God, he will not forsake you, nor destroy you, nor forget the covenant of your fathers, which he swore to them.

It's interesting, Moses doesn't say, if you seek the Lord your God. He says, when you seek the Lord your God. So he knew they were going to turn away, and he knew that some people would bring them back.
The third thing we see about the promises is the people for the promises. We're going back to Nehemiah chapter 1 now and looking at verse 10.
And verse 10 begins, Now these are your servants and your people. We need to keep one thing in mind here. All promises in Scripture do not apply to all people.
But the promises Nehemiah was placed pleading in prayer applied to the Israelites for whom he was praying. When we plead the promises of Scripture, we need to make sure they apply to us.
[25:52] The strange doctrines and the religious cults and all of the isms that have come about have come about because people have misapplied and misinterpreted the Scripture. Nehemiah knew, though, that the promises which he applied here applied properly to the people of Israel because he rightly knew the Word of God.

And we know that rightly dividing the Word of Truth will help us apply the Word properly to our lives.
The fourth thing we see about the promises is the power for the promises.
the power for the promises. We see that from the end of verse 10. So that the sentence flows well, here's the verse in its entirety.
Nehemiah said, Now these are your servants and your people whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. Redemption involves the payment of a price to reclaim someone from slavery.
And here, reference is made to God's act in delivering Israel from slavery in Egypt. The Exodus theme is used many times in the New Testament, too, to emphasize redemption from the power and judgment of sin and the resulting relationship between the Redeemer and the redeemed.
[27:12] We won't look at them tonight, but you can find a couple of references in 1 Peter 1.18 and Revelation 5.9 and also Revelation 14 verses 3 and 4.

Nehemiah mentions the great power and strong hand of God and these things speak of God's might. Nehemiah knew he wasn't praying to a weak God.
We talked earlier about how this God was the same God who created the heavens, so he certainly has the power to redeem Israel and remedy Israel's problem.
So if God had the power to remedy the problems in Israel, does he still have the power to remedy any problems we have as individuals or as a church? That's one of the key takeaways we can have here.
I've quoted some great theologians tonight already, but to quote one in particular, the great theologian Mike Dersham said this last week. Mike Dersham said, instead of sitting on the premises, we should be standing on the promises.
[28:21] Instead of sitting on the premises, we should be standing on the promises. And if you treat him nicely, he might give you his autograph tonight as well. So we've seen the consciousness of God's position, the corruption of God's people, and the clarity of God's promises, and we just saw

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how these promises reference God's great power, and that power reference leads us directly into the fourth section of our lesson.

In verse 11, we see the calling for God's power. We see the calling for God's power. Nehemiah says, O Lord, I pray, please let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to the prayer of your servants who desire to fear your name, and let your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.
The first thing we notice about verse 11 is that Nehemiah acknowledges that others also are praying. He asks God to be attentive to the prayer of your servant, which of course is Nehemiah, but also be attentive to the prayer of your servants who desire to fear your name.
He knew that other godly souls also were exercised in heart and mind about the matters in Israel, and Nehemiah mentions them in his prayer. Nehemiah is going to be a star player in helping to solve the problems that the lack of walls cause in Jerusalem, but he knows that there are other Israelites who, even though they don't have the spotlight, are still essential to the work of God. These people are praying too, and they'll later help with the walls, and we need to remember these partners in prayer and service. They are also part of the team.
[30:14] They won't get their names in the headlines or their pictures on the front pages, but without them, Nehemiah would not be able to perform, and Nehemiah was not arrogant like many other performers who ignore the essentialness of the supporting cast.

In the second part of verse 11, though, Nehemiah makes a request directly for himself. He asked God to let God's servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. Nehemiah had prayed for days and probably months, but now he was arriving at a decisive moment. After prayer was to come action, and Nehemiah had determined that the action time was this day.
This man in Nehemiah's petition is the king himself, the king that Nehemiah serves as the cupbearer, and the this man reference reflects the fact that Nehemiah has been focused so much on the one who is far greater than King Artaxerxes.
After focusing so much on the greatness of God, Artaxerxes' greatness fades into nothing more than being just this man. It's kind of interesting, isn't it, how he's changed his perspective perspective on the king a little bit, and that perspective will help him be more willing to approach the king.
[31:40] We'll end this lesson similar to how we ended last week's lesson. We'll loop back through the verses to see the fifth thing that we can learn from this passage, and that fifth thing is the consistency of God's providence.

The consistency of God's providence. God used Nehemiah's own prayer to call Nehemiah to action, and that's the main illustration of God's providence in tonight's passage.
By becoming aware of what God wanted done, Nehemiah was led to reorder his priorities. He came to understand his role in solving the dilemma of his people, and he found that he was to become a vital part of the means that God would use to achieve the ends for which he prayed.
Prayer not only established Nehemiah's priorities, it also gave him a sense of purpose. The realization that God had sent him would sustain him through the uncertainties he would face as he began rebuilding the wall of the city.
Humanly speaking, Nehemiah had no reason to expect favor from King Artaxerxes. We touched on this last week, but according to Ezra 421, this same Artaxerxes had earlier issued a decree to stop work on the city of Jerusalem, perhaps on the wall itself.
[33:04] So Nehemiah was getting ready to make a request clearly contrary to royal policy, and in that day especially, that type of request could prove very dangerous.

But Nehemiah referred to the king as this man, perhaps to stress that he was only a human under God's sovereignty. Nehemiah knew the seriousness of his undertaking, and he put his case in God's hands.
Like many since his time, Nehemiah's greatness came from asking great things of a great God, and attempting great things in reliance on God. Nehemiah's final comment of the chapter, which isn't part of the prayer, is, for I was the king's cupbearer.
We studied it last week, but the comment is significant enough to touch on again. Nehemiah's final comment may be an acknowledgement that God had already begun to move on Israel's behalf by placing Nehemiah in such a strategic position that had access to the king.

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This likely encouraged Nehemiah, and probably at the same time terrified him too. God allowing terrifying trials is a weighty principle in God's ways with his people.
[34:19] We know that many a saint is permitted to go through deep waters and to pass through severe trial, both of body and mind, not only for his own profit, but that he may be better fitted to be a channel of blessing to his brethren when cast down and in distress.

We have no way of knowing how often prayers have changed the course of history. We do know that as a result of Nehemiah's prayer, God stepped into a seemingly hopeless situation and working through one man, accomplished what seemed impossible.
Let's recap what we should learn from Nehemiah's prayer. For prayer to be effective, it must be preceded by a knowledge of need. Alan Redpath said, much of our praying is just asking God to bless some folks that are ill and to keep us plugging along.
But prayer is not merely prattle, it is warfare. Nehemiah was distraught by the news of Jerusalem's condition and the people's predicament, and he used that to make specific requests.
For prayer to be effective, it should also be conducted in an attitude of reverence. Remember how Nehemiah began his prayer with adoration and worship. Next, for prayer to be effective, the prayer should be based upon Scripture.
[35:43] Nehemiah may have been raised in a land that was given over to idolatry, and he may be serving in a pagan court, but this still didn't prevent him from cultivating his spiritual life.

His prayer shows the extent to which he had mastered the Word of God and how much the Word of God controlled his life. For prayer to be effective, the prayer should also be persistent.
Nehemiah's persistence is noteworthy. We talked about how he continued in prayer for his people day and night. I don't know about you, but sometimes I promise to pray for somebody else's need only to forget our commitment and my commitment as soon as that person passes out of my presence.
Nehemiah could have prayed for the people once or twice and then left everything to the Lord. Nehemiah, though, persisted in prayer until God answered him. He knew that when God takes a hand in our affairs, he uses means, and in this instance and at this time, prayer was the means that God was using to accomplish his purpose.
For prayer to be effective, it must be based upon the promises of God. We saw where Nehemiah said, remember the word you commanded, and then he paraphrased the teaching of several places in the Old Testament, and by doing that, he claimed the fulfillment of God's promise.
[37:06] Nehemiah's confidence in the Lord is so complete that he knows God is going to work out the details. He concludes by referring to the people as God's servants. So this implies renewed submission to God's authority and the reestablishment of the covenant relationship.

Here's a quote by Dr. R.C. Trench. He said, prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance. It is laying hold of his highest willingness. In what God accomplished through Nehemiah, there's encouragement for us.
He's ready and willing to do the same thing through us if we learn the secret of unlocking his power. Our daily prayers lessen our daily cares.
They should also keep us in the place where God can use us. When we're in a bad spot, we should remember Moses' words to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 4, 29 through 32.
This same principle still applies. Those verses say again, but from there you will seek the Lord your God and you will find him if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul.
[38:16] When you are in distress and all these things come upon you in the later days, when you turn to the Lord your God and obey his voice, for the Lord your God is a merciful God. He will not forsake you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant of your fathers which he swore to them.

With that, let's close in prayer. Father, as we go through a time of transition, help us remember the importance of prayer in fulfilling what you would have us do, both as individuals and as a church. Let us learn from Nehemiah how to be persistent and how to structure the prayer so that we can be effective prayer warriors for you. Help all of us as we go through the rest of the week and bring us back safely as we celebrate your resurrection on Sunday.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. .

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