

# A Model For Prayer • Nehemiah 1:4-11

## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. Power

1. A man who was in desperate need of a car was given one
2. But it would only start by being pushed
3. He owned that car for two years, and the entire time parked it on a hill so that he could start it without the need to get others to help him push it
4. Finally, he decided to sell it and buy another car
5. He found someone who was interested and told them the car's only fault, that it had to be pushed to start
6. The second man bought it, then opened the hood
7. He found a spark plug wire that was loose, connected it, and turned the key
8. Sure enough, the engine roared to life
9. Ephesians 1:19 & 20 says, "How tremendous is the power available to us who believe in God."
10. When we make firm our connection to God, His life and power flow through us

### B. Prayer

1. That connection is prayer
2. Prayer, in all its many forms, is the essence of fulfilling the purpose for our existence - which is to know and enjoy God
3. No one doubts that prayer is one of the most basic parts of the life of faith
  - a. just as food and water are necessary to the body, so prayer is necessary to the spirit
  - b. without it we would quickly waste away
  - c. as they say, 7 days without prayer makes one weak.
4. Today we are going to see a model for prayer from the life of Nehemiah

## II. TEXT

### A. Setting The Scene

1. Nehemiah was one of those Jews who were born in Babylon during the exile
2. He had risen to a place of prominence in the Persian court of Artaxerxes I
  - a. Artaxerxes's step mother had been the Jewish queen Esther
  - b. and it's very likely she's the one who had encouraged him to appoint Nehemiah to his position as Cupbearer
3. As we'll see on Wednesday evening when we have a chance to get in to more depth here, as cupbearer, Nehemiah was a close confidant of the king
  - a. he was part of an elite inner circle
  - b. that enjoyed tremendous privilege and power in the kingdom
4. The story opens with Nehemiah serving Artaxerxes in the winter palace at

- Shushan
5. While there, his brother, along with some other officials, arrived from Jerusalem
  6. They told Nehemiah how their people were suffering at the hands of the people among whom they lived because there was no wall around the city of Jerusalem
  7. When Nehemiah heard this, he was cut to the heart with concern . . .

**B. V. 4**

**{4} So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.**

1. The news that the walls of Jerusalem were in ruins could not have been new to Nehemiah
2. The Babylonians had destroyed them 150 years before
3. So why did he become so distraught now? What was it that caused this intense sorrow?
5. First of all, Hanani, the one who told him about the situation in Jerusalem, was his very own brother
6. The reality of the plight of the Jews became more *real* to Nehemiah when he heard about it from someone he knew so intimately
7. This is often the way it is with us
  - a. we hear about some need and while it is something we can agree is serious, we feel little connection to it
  - b. but if someone with whom we are close tells us about it, we tend to be more interested and moved to respond
8. Think about some of the great issues Christians have had to wrestle with
  - a. 150 years ago believers had to deal with the issue of slavery
  - b. and while most recognized it as an evil that needed to be corrected, few felt compelled to speak up
  - c. but one encounter with a case of abuse, or hearing someone who was passionately involved in the abolitionist movement, moved many to join the ranks of those who were actively seeking to free the slaves

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- d. today, many Christians are against abortion but don't really know what to do in a practical sense to bring an end to it
- e. then they meet someone who has been devastated by abortion, or they hear someone speak out against it and they are suddenly moved to a profound sense of grief over the 14 million children put to death in the US since 1973 and become involved in protesting, or counseling, or working in a CPC

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- f. another example of what we see in Nehemiah is in the area of missions
- g. most Christians realize that cross-cultural missions is a part of the mandate of the church to go into all nations and preach the gospel
- h. and while they are supportive of missions it's in a general way, they aren't passionate
- i. but then a friend goes on a short term mission, or a missionary visits

their church and shares about what God is doing on the field, and suddenly, a deep devotion to the mission task is birthed in their hearts and they devote themselves to the task of reaching the world for Christ

9. This is what happened to Nehemiah
  - a. his brother's report about the distress of his people in Jerusalem moved him
  - b. he sat down and wept and mourned for many days
  - c. this was no passing thing for Nehemiah
  - d. in fact, by comparing 1:1 with 2:1 we see that it was 4 months that he was mourning
10. And all throughout this time he was praying and fasting and asking God to help his people
11. When 4 months had passed, without the burden of grief lifting from him, Nehemiah knew that God was calling him to do more than just pray
  - a. and so it is with us
  - b. often times, we hear of some need and our spirit's grieve with the weight of it
  - c. so we pray and ask the Lord to intervene - then the burden lifts
  - d. you see, we have done what it was the Lord wanted us to do in that specific case - pray
  - e. but when we are burdened by the Spirit of God with some need, and we pray and the burden *doesn't* lift, then we need to ask the Lord if there is something *more* He wants us to do
    - 1) should we fast as well?
    - 2) and if fasting still doesn't see the burden lifted, there is something more we are to do
    - 3) and most likely, as in Nehemiah's case, that means being a part of actually meeting whatever need there is
12. After four months of constant, fervent prayer, Nehemiah knew that he was to lead in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem
13. As we look on to the rest of the story, we see that Nehemiah was a man of action
  - a. he was a gifted leader -
  - b. and a visionary in the truest sense of the word
14. But notice the first thing this man of action does - he prays
  - a. and he weeps, and he mourns
  - b. he took the need to God before he ever took it to man
  - c. and he did so for 4 solid months!
15. Alexander MacLaren says, "No man will do a worthy work of rebuilding the walls who has not wept over the ruins."
16. Some of us in this room this morning are people of action
  - a. we see a need, and we set out to meet it
  - b. we see a problem, and see try to fix it
  - c. often, the only time we pray is when our attempts to help don't work
17. Let's learn from Nehemiah who is a consummate example of a man of action
18. The first and best thing we can do is pray

- a. and not the short perfunctory prayers that hurriedly ask God's blessing on *our* work
  - b. the kind of prayer we need is the kind that waits on God to discover what He is doing, what He wants to do, and how He wants to use us to do it
  - b. like Nehemiah, we need to spend more time letting the reality and depth of the need pierce our hearts and less time glossing over the need with our quick and ready answers to all the world's troubles
19. Vs. 5-11 give us Nehemiah's prayer

### **C. Vs. 5-11**

**{5} And I said: "I pray, LORD God of heaven, O great and awesome God, You who keep Your covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments,**

**{6} "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. Both my father's house and I have sinned.**

1. Note how he begins

**LORD God of heaven, O great and awesome God,**

- a. Nehemiah understood well the heart of effective prayer
  - b. he begins just as Jesus taught His followers to begin their prayers 400 years later - with praise
  - c. "Our Father who is in heaven, may Your name be Holy."
  - d. the Psalmist said, "I will enter your gates with thanksgiving, I will enter Your courts with praise."
2. But Nehemiah's praise of God is not merely the means of getting on His good side, as though flattery could butter Him up and make him more inclined to show favor
  3. It's a reminder of the One before whom he stood and plead for help
  4. It would serve us well to meditate on the name of God before we ever begin our list of requests
  5. He is the God of heaven, the great and awesome God
    - a. and the fact of the matter is, if He were to pull aside the veil of time and space for one instant and allow us to see Him in His glory -
    - b. all of the things we think are so important and such a big deal would instantly vanish as we caught a glimpse of His perfection and power
  6. Kenny White races automobiles, and he is an expert mechanic who services his own race car
    - a. let's say Matthew his son was in his room making a model car and he was having some problems putting the wheels on it
    - b. from Matthew's perspective, his problem is a hard one, and he's been working at it for over a half hour but can't get it
    - c. he thinks about asking Kenny, his dad, for help, but he thinks, "I wonder if dad can help, after all, I've been working at this for a long time and it just won't go together."
    - d. but, not really having any other option, he walks in to the garage to find

- his dad
- e. and there's Kenny, he has the engine of his race car standing on an engine stand, and he's adding some new piece of equipment to it to make it faster
  - f. as Matthew looks around the garage at all the tools and the complexity of a real race car, he suddenly realizes just how expert his dad really is and how inconsequential his problem is compared to what his dad can do with the real thing
  - g. Kenny turns and says, "What's up Matt?"
  - h. Matt tells him, and Kenny takes the model, slips the wheels on, and it's fixed
  - i. what took Matthew ½ hour to do and couldn't, Kenny did in 2 seconds
7. This is why Nehemiah begins his prayer with praise - it reminded him of God's superior power

**LORD God of heaven, O great and awesome God**

8. Our God is great and awesome!
  - a. His power is infinite
  - b. stop and think for a minute about what that means - He is omnipotent - All Powerful
  - c. His power is not like our power
  - d. because our power is limited, when we do something it requires effort
  - e. the bigger the challenge, the greater the effort
  - f. but God's power is unlimited - it's infinite
  - g. when God does something, He exerts no effort
  - h. there aren't some things that are harder for God to do than others
  - i. it is not harder for God to move a mountain than a stone
  - j. He exerts no more effort to cure cancer than a headache
  - k. because He is all powerful, He exerts *no* effort whatsoever
  - l. He simply does what He pleases - and it is done
9. So our prayers are not an attempt to try to talk God into doing something that He isn't inclined to do because He doesn't want to exert the effort
10. He's not some kind of a heavenly throne potato we have to needle into action
11. Prayer is the process of aligning ourselves to His will and the best place to begin is with a focus on who He is
12. That is why Nehemiah begins with praise, and why our prayers, if they would be effective must start in the same place.
13. Then he says . . .

**You who keep Your covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments,**

14. In this we see the real basis of Nehemiah's prayer - the faithfulness of God
  - a. Nehemiah looks back to the covenant God had made with the Jews so many generations before
  - b. everything that he goes on to say is based on that covenant that God had initiated
  - c. it was God who has sought out the Israelites

- d. it was God who approached them and sought them
  - e. in this, Nehemiah saw the mercy and the grace of God
  - f. and he based his whole request for blessing on the graciousness of God
- {6} “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. Both my father’s house and I have sinned.**
- 15. Nehemiah sounds almost like a child pleading with it's father for a favor
  - 16. But the favor he asks for is forgiveness
- {7} “We have acted very corruptly against You, and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.**
- 17. There is no denying that Nehemiah was a godly and righteous man
  - 18. Yet he doesn’t stand off to the side, pointing an accusing finger at those who had lived before him who had rejected God and turned to idols
  - 19. Nehemiah could see the seeds of sin and failure in his own heart and stood with his people in confession
  - 20. He well understood that unconfessed sin hinders the flow of God's power and holds back His presence
  - 21. So he made confession, asked forgiveness, and sought to restore the open flow of God's grace to the nation
- {8} “Remember, I pray, the word that You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, ‘if you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations;**
- {9} ‘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.’**
- 22. See how Nehemiah's whole prayer is filled with scripture
    - a. he knew about God's covenant with Israel
    - b. he knew about God's promises to Moses
    - c. he knew about Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple
    - d. how could he have known these things unless he was well versed in the Word of God
  - 23. And following the pattern of effective prayer, Nehemiah merely took the promises God Himself had made, and asked that God fulfill them
  - 24. I like what Alexander MacLaren writes,
    - "Prayers which are cast in the mold of God's own revelation of Himself will not fail to be answered. True prayer catches up the promises that flutter down to us and send them up again like arrows."
- {10} “Now these are Your servants and Your people, whom You have redeemed by Your great power, and by Your strong hand.**
- {11} “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.” For I was the king’s cupbearer.**

### III. CONCLUSION

- A. Time For Action But Begin With Prayer

1. Nehemiah knew God was calling him to the task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem
2. So he ended his prayer with a request for favor with the king of Persia
  - a. he would need permission to leave his post
  - b. he would also need a vast amount of resources and the authority to get the job done
  - c. all of this he would need Artaxerxes to grant him
  - d. so Nehemiah asked God to move the king
3. In the same way, we should ask God to give us favor in working with the people around us
4. A young man approached the foreman of a logging crew and asked for a job
  - a. so the foreman gave him a test. He said, "Let's see you fell this tree."
  - b. he young man stepped forward and skillfully felled a great tree.
  - c. impressed, the foreman told him he could start on Monday
  - d. on Thursday afternoon the foreman approached the young man and said, "You can pick up your paycheck on the way out today."
  - e. the young man replied, "I thought Friday was payday."
  - f. the foreman said, "It is. We're letting you go because you've fallen behind. Our daily felling charts show that you've dropped from first place on Monday to last on Wednesday."
  - g. the young man was quite upset and protested saying, "But I'm a hard worker. I'm the first to arrive, the last to leave, and even work through my coffee breaks!"
  - h. the foreman, feeling sorry for the young man and seeing his sincerity asked, "Have you been sharpening your ax?"
  - i. the young man said, "I've been working too hard to take the time."
5. How about you? Have you been too busy, too hard at work to sharpen your ax?
6. Prayer is the hone that gives you a sharp edge.
7. Without it, the more work you do, the less you are able to accomplish
8. Parents, are you praying for your children?
9. Husbands and wives, are you praying for your spouse?
10. Those of you who are supervisors and teachers, are you praying for your workers and students?
11. Are you praying for your friends?

***12. Unless prayer comes before and follows after, then all the work you do in between may be largely wasted***

### ***B. The Real Goal***

1. You see, ultimately, what the Lord wants is not our work, not what we do for Him
2. What He wants is us
3. Prayer isn't really the means to an end - it is the end
4. These things that arise in our lives, whether they be ruined walls or just a

- ruined tire, they are the means God uses of moving us to come to Him and seeking Him
5. What is your attitude toward prayer?
  6. Jan Coopersmith , the pastor of a Calvary Chapel in Northern California shared something recently that I found moving
  7. Jan and his wife live close to his daughter and son-in-law and their two children
    - a. one day, while Jan was hurrying to finish his list of "to do's" he dropped by their house to kiss and hold his two grandchildren, which is something he tries to do every day.
    - b. when Jan's daughter opened her front door, her look was, "Oh, it's you, Dad"
    - c. you know, just very nonchalant
    - d. BUT Jan's 2 year old grandson, who was standing in front of his mother, broke into a HUGE smile, laughed out loud and clapped his hands repeatedly, saying, "Look you guys! My Grandpa's here! My grandpa came to see me!"
    - e. Jan said he almost melted on the spot to see the incredible joy in his grandson's face.
  8. Do we enter in to prayer with a nonchalance that fails to realize the incredible privilege that are ours?
  9. Or do we come like Jan's grandson, with unreserved joy that blesses the Father's heart?