

The Prayer Path

Nehemiah . . . Memoirs of an Ordinary Man – Part III

Nehemiah 1:5-11

Introduction

In the book of Nehemiah, chapter 1, verses 1 through 4, you discover a man who deeply wanted the maximum attention of God. He wept profusely; he fasted only because he had lost his appetite for food; he mourned as one mourned over the death of loved ones; and he prayed a lamenting prayer for four months.

He was a man who was deeply burdened over the condition of broken people. The burden of Nehemiah should become our burden as we seek to represent the glory of God in restoring a fallen, broken world.

Nehemiah's Burden . . . and Mine!

Nehemiah's burden is best defined with three components that help to complete a picture of what a godly burden looks like.

An overwhelming concern . . .

1. First, a godly burden is an overwhelming concern with some aspect of human distress or sin.

I got a call from an attorney in our church recently. He said, "Stephen, after studying Nehemiah's distress and burden over broken people, God convicted me. I've always been interested in helping Indians on one particular Indian reservation in North Dakota. I took a cross-country trip some time ago and visited and couldn't believe the poverty, the spiritual need, and the fragmentation. Do you think God may want me to spend time on that

reservation helping, serving, and, in whatever way possible, communicating the Gospel?"

A godly burden interrupts life. Rarely, if ever, is it convenient. In fact, it is most often inconvenient.

An irresistible conviction . . .

2. Secondly, a godly burden includes an irresistible conviction that God has an available remedy.

An unreserved compliance . . .

3. Thirdly, a godly burden surrenders with an unreserved compliance with God using me to deliver the remedy.

When you gain the attention of God, you share the anguish of God over a fallen world. Jesus Christ wept over Jerusalem. A godly burden has a way of disrupting your life.

The average Christian is burdened about nothing, because it will cost him something. For Nehemiah, his burden will cost him everything.

He seems to know it will. And so he prays, in verse 6a,

let Thine ear be attentive and Thine eyes open to hear the prayer of Thy servant . . .

Does Nehemiah think that God is not always listening? Does he think that God's eyes are not always open; that He's somehow absent-minded about His universe?

He prays again in verse 11a,

O Lord, I beseech Thee, may Thine ear be attentive to the prayer of Thy servant . . .

What is happening is that Nehemiah does not want to take another step until he knows that he has the maximum attention of God. This is maximum attention that could be described as that intimacy, communion, and fellowship with God that God will reward with courage, strength, and resources necessary to restore some part of a broken world.

Before any man, or woman, can walk the path of a restorer and re-builder, he or she must first, like Nehemiah, travel the path to God in prayer. The secret to service is discovered in secret. What made Nehemiah successful in public before mankind was that he was successful in private with God.

Chapter 1 is the public record of Nehemiah's private life. This is what he prayed in secret.

Four Steps Along the Prayer Path

For the purpose of our study, I want us to view the prayer of Nehemiah as if it were a path to God. Four stepping stones, along this path, gained for this believer, and every believer since, the maximum attention of God.

Priority . . .

1. The first step along the prayer path is a clear priority of sovereignty.

Notice how Nehemiah's prayer begins, in verse 5.

. . . I beseech Thee, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God . . .

Prayer that gets past the living room ceiling is prayer that recognizes, first and foremost, that God is the sovereign and man is the servant. Proper praying places God on His throne and mankind at His feet.

Prayer is not us having our way with God, it is God having His way with us. Prayer is not us manipulating and controlling God, it is God manipulating and controlling us. Prayer is not us pressuring God, it is God pressuring us. If you really do not want the pressure, whatever you do, do not pray.

Donald Grey Barnhouse once shocked his congregation by beginning a sermon on prayer with these words,

Prayer changes nothing.

You could have heard a pin drop. His comment, of course, was designed to make Christians think

about the sovereignty of God – that God is seated in the heavens, that nothing ever surprises Him or falls outside of His control. God cannot be bribed, cajoled, convinced, or impressed to change. That which is recorded in scripture where God seemed to change His mind, was actually part of His sovereign plan. He is unchangeable.

To Barnhouse's statement, I would add that prayer changes nothing of God and everything of us. And, until you are ready to pray (not so that you can change God but so that God can change you), you are not yet ready to really pray.

Nehemiah began,

. . . O Lord, God of heaven . . .

By the way, the Lord Jesus taught His disciples to pray after the same model. The prayer He taught His disciples in Matthew, chapter 6, verse 9, began with the words,

. . . Our Father who art in heaven . . .

Nehemiah prayed,

. . . O Lord God of heaven . . .

It is the same priority of sovereignty that introduces the prayer of an Old Testament believer and a New Testament believer.

The phrase "who art in heaven" or "O Lord God of heaven" is not so much a reference to God's address as it is to His attributes. "In the heavens" refers to His elevation above all creation. He is transcendent; above; majestic; sovereign. Although we happen to come boldly to this heavenly Father, we acknowledge He is a holy Father who is righteous in all His ways.

That is what David meant when he composed the hymn in Psalm, chapter 99, verses 1 and 5, containing,

The Lord reigns, let the peoples tremble; He is enthroned above the cherubim, let the earth shake! . . . Exalt the Lord our God, and worship at His footstool; Holy is He.

This has a way of reshaping the way you pray because it reshapes your view of God.

- This is the living God who told Job that He thundered with His voice;
- He wore the clothing of dignity and eminence, honor, and majesty;
- He commanded the morning and made the dawn to know its place;

- He laid the foundations of the earth and created its measurements;
- He entered the currents of the sea and walked the recesses of the deep ocean;
- This is the Sovereign God who knows where the light lives and the way of the east wind;
- He is the one who has created the purposes of floods and thunderbolts, ice and hail;
- He leads forth the constellations; He determines the orbits of planets;
- He counts the clouds and tips the water jars of heaven;
- He has created the animals with their instincts;
- He is the one who has spread the heavens like a mirror;
- He is the one exalted in power and surrounded by majesty.

Try praying to this One.

This God is not a genie who will give you three wishes if you rub hard enough upon the lamp of prayer. He is not a doting grandfather with lollipops in His pockets. He is not, as one man called Him, “a gumball machine” into which you insert your prayer quarter and get some candy.

This One is seated in the heavens. This One is both loving and terrifying. He is both gracious and holy. He is merciful and, at the same time, merciless.

As you pray, picture Him high and lifted up on His great and majestic throne with angels hovering about Him chanting continuously,

... Holy, holy, holy ...

How can you picture that? How can you describe Him? Nehemiah could only say, in the next phrase of verse 5,

... the great and awesome God ...

That is the best he could do.

J. I. Packer wrote, in *A Passion For Faithfulness*, that Nehemiah,

... had grasped the greatness of God.

This kind of perspective leads to the right kind of priority of God’s ownership and control.

Acknowledgement ...

I want to go on to say that a confession of God’s sovereignty always leads to and always involves a

confession of sin. In fact, this is the second step along the path of prayer. And, Nehemiah takes this step.

2. Not only does gaining God’s maximum attention require the priority of sovereignty, but it also includes a second step along the prayer path, which is, a contrite acknowledgement of sin.

One of the reasons we tolerate sin in our lives is because we do not understand the priority of God’s sovereignty and ownership over our lives.

Isaiah saw a vision of God’s glory and immediately confessed, in chapter 6, verse 5,

... I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips ...

Paul progressed in his own spiritual walk with Christ. And, near the end of his life, he remarked, in I Timothy, chapter 1, verse 15b,

... sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.

A person who does not have a clear priority of God’s sovereignty will never pray with a clear understanding of his own sin. Thus, the path of prayer is cut short of all its rich benefits.

Nehemiah, in verse 6, prays,

let Thine ear now be attentive and Thine eyes open to hear the prayer of Thy servant which I am praying before Thee now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Thy servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against Thee; I and my father’s house have sinned.

Notice the pronouns “I” and “we”. He does not say, “Oh, Lord, let me tell you what they’ve done. Man, did my forefathers mess up everything.”

No! “I and my father’s house have sinned.”

Perhaps for the first time, Nehemiah was struck by the fact that he was not supposed to be in the Susa, he was supposed to be in Jerusalem. He refers to the covenant in verse 5 and then, elaborates on it in verses 8 and 9. He calls God by His covenant-keeping name, Yahweh. The covenant with Yahweh that he refers to is the Palestinian covenant, which we will deal with later.

But, for now, he begins to confess, with a full understanding, that he was not where he was supposed to stay. He did not belong in the palace, he belonged in Palestine.

Verse 6b,

... I and my father's house have sinned.

Do you want the maximum attention of God? Can you say, and do you say, "Oh God, I have sinned."?

Notice he did not say, "Lord, I've made a few mistakes recently . . . I really flubbed up today . . . You know me and my indiscretion . . . You probably heard me tell that little white lie . . . You know how flexible my expense reports are . . . And I suppose you saw my little episode of righteous indignation. Lord, you know how I am . . ."

God does not forgive excuses, He forgives sin.

And, do not just stop with the word "sin". If you have trouble saying that little word, notice what Nehemiah goes on to say in verse 7,

We have acted very corruptly against Thee and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which Thou didst command Thy servant Moses.

We are guilty of sin, of corruption, of disobedience, and of breaking the Law. Did he leave anything out?!

The people who know how to gain the maximum attention of God are people who know they are sinners. And there are no loopholes in their prayers.

David wrote in his prayer of confession in Psalm, chapter 51, verse 17,

The sacrifices of God . . .

That is, the sacrifices that really get God's attention.

... are a broken and a contrite heart . . .

Brokenhearted people are used by God to restore a broken world. Why? Because they have come to see His greatness, and they have come to admit their guilt. They have caught a fresh glimpse of His sovereignty and their own sin and they have admitted to both. They have submitted to the consequences of both sovereignty and sin. We do not usually pray like this.

The Bible promises, however, in John, chapter 1, verse 9, to those who do,

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

My wife came home from the grocery store, recently, with the kind of beef hotdogs, or franks, we like to eat. They have no fillers, no by-products, no artificial colors, and no added flavors. This way you

know that you are not eating something collected off of the nearby highway.

The brand that Marsha brought home is called, Hebrew National Kosher Beef Franks. As we were eating some of those Kosher dogs, she read, to the children, the statement on the back of the package that she had noticed in the store. Immediately after she read it, I said, "That would make a great sermon illustration sometime in the future. May I keep the package."

She is used to this strange behavior and gave it to me. I have kept it for several months in this plastic baggie, so that it would not give my file drawer and my study an unusual smell.

Listen to what this company believes and prints on the front of the package,

Hebrew National

and underneath is the by-line which reads,

We answer to a higher authority.

Then, on the back, they have a paragraph that reads,

You've heard the word KOSHER, but did you know that it literally means "fit to eat"? Hebrew National must follow strict Biblical dietary laws, use only certain cuts of kosher beef, and meet the highest standards for quality. For over 95 years, our commitment to manufacturing products of only the highest quality means that artificial by-products are simply not allowed. Kosher also stands for quality and goodness, and that's why we believe our franks taste so superior. Hebrew National answers to a higher authority – so that you can enjoy the best.

Is that not great?! Imagine a company so convinced that they answer to a higher authority that it completely governs the way they make hot dogs.

Oh, if only every Christian lived as if stamped upon his hands and his feet and his heart were the words, "I answer to a higher authority."

I am accountable to a Higher Being. And when I go to Him in prayer, I do not tell Him anything, I answer to Him for everything.

"We answer to a higher authority."

What a great motto for the Christian life.

For those willing to adopt that as your standard for living, you are ready to take the next two steps in this path of praying. We will begin with that in our next study.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/13/2000 by Stephen Davey.

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