

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(March 9, 2008)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

SERMON SERIES: Pray!

Prayer – IMPACT Requires It

(Nehemiah 1:1-4ff)

Study #2

Introduction: The way it's supposed to be...

While I was in Russia the Lord gave me more opportunity than I have had for some time to pray and to dream and to envision a future given to God-sized tasks.

I believe that He was directing my thinking in some of these times of reflection into a couple of areas where I'd just LOVE to serve and to make impact over the next ten to twenty years – and more!

In the weeks since I've been back, I've continued to pray about these God-sized tasks. And it has seemed to me that the more I think about them and the more I pray about them, the more **essential** it seems that I pursue these dreams.

I've told you that I will tell you what has so captured my imagination - and I will. Soon.

But I want to ask you, now, since we're thinking about making impact, and God-sized tasks, if you have stopped lately to reflect on what God might long to see you give yourself to? Have you considered where He might long to see you make impact? Just as important, given the years that may be in front of you, what would you love to do, for Christ's sake?

This morning, a big piece of what I want to address concerns the impact that each one of us wants to make for Christ and how we might become people (and a church) of God-sized impact.

All I wanted to say last Sunday is that COMMUNITY Requires Prayer. If we long for community as the Bible describes it - deep, rich, transparent, life-changing community - **prayer** (brothers and sisters talking to their Father together) must be a significant component.

And all I want to say this morning is that IMPACT Demands Prayer.

We were made to make impact. When we're honest with ourselves, we all long to be used by God to re-fashion the world to reflect His original purpose and design.

We want to be change agents in the worlds of our own personal character, our family and other key relationships, our church, and even the broader world of our society.

To be catalysts for change in such God-sized ventures assumes God's power. It is beyond us to make the kind of impact we long to make. That's why I call them "God-sized tasks." Therefore, prayer is not just helpful - it is **critical**.

To bring this truth into sharp focus, we're going to turn to the Bible now. We're going to look at one slice of the world as God intended it to be.

This morning, as we look into the Old Testament, I'm going to set the stage for some drama. And when we get to the narrative for today, we'll all see that what happens is 2008 relevant.

Today, we consider God's plans, His dreams, His vision for the city of Jerusalem.

God's Vision for Jerusalem

Jerusalem - A City of Promise

Jerusalem, a city of major importance today, still makes news. Tragically, the news this past week was because of the horrible bombings that took place in an Israeli seminary.

But week in and week out, year in and year out, Jerusalem continues to capture the imagination of the world as one of the central sites of three of the world's major religions (Islam, with the Dome of the Rock built on the site of the ancient Jewish Temple, and of course, Christianity).

My own familiarity with Jerusalem comes mainly because of it takes center stage in the telling of much of Old Testament history. But I've learned that there was a city on the site long before it became the capitol city of the nation of Israel.

The area was populated as early as 3,000 BC by the original inhabitants of Canaan. And that's two thousand years prior the Jews' habitation of the site!

Jerusalem was a perfect place for a city.¹ It was elevated above the surrounding terrain, positioned on a series of hills.

Ancient peoples chose the site because it provided good lines of sight to watch an advancing army, was easy to defend against enemies, and had good access to water (from the Gihon Spring in the Kidron Valley).

The Bible takes notice of it, beginning around 970 BC, when David took leadership of the nation as its King.

God had given the entire land of Palestine to the Jews, so it was within David's right to take Jerusalem. And since the city held a strategic position in the Promised Land, he had every reason to try to possess it.

How strategic?

Jerusalem - Capitol City of the Jews

Jerusalem under David

Well, Jerusalem was located on a border between the two Jewish tribes of Benjamin and Judah, so was not claimed by either. Having the capitol in a neutral city was a definite advantage.

Plus, it was centrally located in Palestine (almost equidistant to the Mediterranean Sea and the Dead Sea) and was on a major trade route.

By the time David conquered the Jebusites who lived there, it was already a heavily fortified² city, so was well suited for defense. David immediately made it the capitol city of God's people.

To closely identified with David did Jerusalem become that the main area of the city that was conquered by David, Zion, became known as "the city of David."

Most importantly, of course, Jerusalem became the center for the worship of the one true God.

David brought the Ark of the Covenant, symbol of the presence of God, into the city. He built a royal palace for himself and his family. He made plans and collected materials for a Temple for God.

Under David, Jerusalem became the capitol and was well on its way to becoming a world class city.

After thirty three years of a good reign, David's son, Solomon, took Jerusalem forward to fulfilling its destiny as one of the great cities of the ancient world.

Jerusalem under Solomon

Two of Solomon's building projects put Jerusalem on the map. First, he built a royal palace that put David's "shack" to shame.

It took thirteen years to build this home and was called The House of the Forest of Lebanon, because it was built with the cedars of Lebanon. (Can you imagine the wonderful aroma this house must have had?)

The throne in the house was made of ivory and overlaid with gold. On either side of the six step stairway leading up to the throne were 12 life-sized carved lions!³

² See 2 Samuel 5 for the account of David's conquest of Jerusalem.

³ I wonder if the House of the Forest of Lebanon might be a model for the new parsonage... ☺

¹ So, as of today, it is some 5,000 years old!

Then, of course, there was the Temple.⁴

David charged Solomon with the responsibility to actually build it - using heavy taxation and a labor force of some 150,000 men.

The Temple was built on Mount Moriah, where God had appeared to David, and where, centuries earlier, Abraham had almost sacrificed his son, Isaac.

To maintain an air of reverence, Solomon put in place a noise ordinance at the construction site. *“[1 Kings 6:7] The house, while it was being built, was built of stone prepared at the quarry, and there was neither hammer nor axe nor any iron tool heard in the house while it was being built.*

Folks, this was one amazing structure! The foundation stones for the temple were of two sizes - huge and enormous! Some were fourteen cubic feet; the rest were twelve cubic feet.

The Temple was approximately one hundred and eighty feet long, and about 30 feet wide. Much of the inside of the temple was overlaid with gold.

All the wood trim work was in cypress or cedar wood, which means that it was not only beautiful, but aromatic.⁵

And while the outside of the temple was impressive, a sense of the majesty of God would have been overpowering as you walked inside.⁶

All of the doors were of olive wood (a hardwood with beautiful grain). Intricate engravings graced the walls of the building.

The “bronze sea” located in the outer court of the Temple (from which the priests would perform all the ceremonial washings), stood on the backs of twelve oxen cast in bronze, and held over 10,000 gallons of water.

⁴ Solomon levied taxes from the Israelites, and used foreign and domestic forced labor to get the temple construction project under way. That labor force included 70,000 men to carry loads at the job site, and 80,000 men to quarry stone.

⁵ My dad’s home in Dallas had a cedar-lined closet, and when you opened it, its fragrance just about knocked you over. The whole temple smelled like that!

⁶ Cf. 1 Kings 5-10; 1 Chronicles 22,23,29; 2 Chronicles 1-9.

There were (quite literally) **tons** of bronze utensils, other basins, and bronzework throughout the rest of the temple precincts.⁷

And then, in the inner sanctuary of the Temple, the Holy of Holies, there were two carved angels (the cherubim) made of olive wood with wingspans of fifteen feet apiece. These angels were ten feet high, overlaid with gold, and positioned in such a way that they appeared to hover over the Ark of the Covenant.

One of the greatest days in the history of the nation came at the dedication of the Temple. On that day, the people made so many sacrifices that they literally lost track and stopped counting!

After Solomon offered a prayer of dedication⁸, God appeared to him for the third time (and last, as far as we know) in his life.

At the dedication’s conclusion, the Lord sent fire from heaven to consume the sacrifices that were being offered, what is called the “shekinah glory of God” filled the Temple, and the whole ceremony ended with King Solomon dismissing the people with a blessing.

However, not only did Jerusalem boast the manifest presence of God and unparalleled majesty. In the days of Solomon, it was also an economic powerhouse and at the center of Middle Eastern politics.

Jerusalem - Worldwide Renown!

During Solomon’s reign, rulers from other nations came to pay their respects to him and to gawk at the grandeur of the city.

The queen of the Arabian province called Sheba⁹ discovered the wisdom of Solomon as she saw the riches and glory of Jerusalem.¹⁰ The Queen of Sheba concluded her awed praise with this, *[1 Chronicles 9:8] “Blessed be the Lord your God who delighted in you, setting you on His throne (i.e. - in Jerusalem) as king for the Lord your God...”*

⁷ I envision the Temple as a model of our new Multi-Purpose facility. Again ☺.

⁸ Recorded in 1 Kings 8 and in 2 Chronicles 6.

⁹ In southern Arabia, the most fertile section of Arabia, in what is now Yemen.

¹⁰ 2 Chronicles 9:1-9.

And this queen joined others in paying annual tribute¹¹ - gold, silver, precious stones, spices and beautiful wood.¹²

And what was the secret to Jerusalem's greatness? It was really no secret. God Almighty had simply chosen to bless Jerusalem.

Jerusalem - A City Chosen by God for Greatness

Centuries before David and Solomon, Moses had predicted that there would be a place where God would choose for His dwelling, a place that would be the home of the Jews.¹³ Without a doubt, that place was Jerusalem.

God desired to have Jerusalem as His habitation.¹⁴ He wanted His "Name" to dwell in Jerusalem.¹⁵ His intent was that Jerusalem would be a lamp, shining His holiness through the nation of Israel to the nations of the world.¹⁶

The psalmist praised Jerusalem with these words:
*[Psalm 48:2] Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth,
 Is Mount Zion in the far north,
 The city of the great King.
 [3] God, in her palaces,
 Has made Himself known as a stronghold.*

¹¹ This was predicted in Psalm 68:29 - *Because of Your temple at Jerusalem Kings will bring gifts to You.*

¹² The servants of Hiram (sometimes spelled Hiram) gave algarum trees for making beautiful stairs and instruments. Chronicles add this, *[2 Chronicles 9:13] Now the weight of gold which came to Solomon in one year was 666 talents of gold, [14] besides that which the traders and merchants brought; and all the kings of Arabia and the governors of the country brought gold and silver to Solomon.* (see also Psalm 68:29)

¹³ *[Deuteronomy 12:5] But you shall seek the Lord at the place which the Lord your God will choose from all your tribes, to establish His name there for His dwelling, and there you shall come.*

¹⁴ Psalm 132:13.

¹⁵ 2 Kings 21:4; 2 Chronicles 6:5-6 - *[5] "Since the day that I brought My people from the land of Egypt, I did not choose a city out of all the tribes of Israel in which to build a house that My name might be there, nor did I choose any man for a leader over My people Israel; [6] but I have chosen Jerusalem that My name might be there, and I have chosen David to be over My people Israel."*

¹⁶ 1 Kings 11:36.

God's vision was that Jerusalem would be such a moral and spiritual and military and economic and political force that other nations would recognize His hand of blessing and be drawn to Him.¹⁷ His plan was that Jerusalem would be a magnet, attracting all the peoples of the world to Himself.

And deeply embedded in the psyche of every Jew, from Solomon's day forward, was an understanding of God's purpose for Jerusalem. To be glorious. To be holy. To attract the world to God!

However, things turned ugly toward the end of Solomon's reign. He rebelled against the Lord and introduced gross sin into the nation and into the capitol city of Jerusalem.

Sadly, to trace the nation's path from Solomon forward is essentially to trace a path to national self-destruction.

The Shattering of the Vision for Jerusalem

Falling Away in the North

After nearly two centuries of unrelenting apostasy, the ten tribes that made up the Northern Kingdom known as "Israel" fell to the Assyrian empire in 722 BC.

You can read that sad story in the books of First and Second Kings.

But Jerusalem lay in the south, in the part of the Jewish nation known as "Judah." Her apostasy came slower - but just as surely. With her apostasy, just as surely came her destruction.

Falling Away in the South

Spiritual defection

Jerusalem, the city of God and His people, became a center for idolatry of all kinds.

¹⁷ Psalm 102:21.

Sexual orgies took place in the Temple. Idols were brought into the Temple. Child sacrifice took place on the hills surrounding the city - and some believe that even this took place in the Temple!¹⁸

And because Jerusalem and her kings refused to listen to the Lord's warnings to repent, destruction came to the apple of God's eyes, Jerusalem, as it had to the northern kingdom of Israel.

Total destruction

Fix the date **586 BC** in your mind.

That was the year in which the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar, invaded Judah.

He broke down the walls around Jerusalem (**an ancient city was nothing without walls**), destroyed God's Temple, sacked the city, carried off much of the city's population into exile in Babylon hundreds of miles away, leaving Jerusalem impoverished and third world, at best.¹⁹

In this way, the nation of Israel began one of the darkest periods in her history. This is the time known as "the Babylonian captivity" and it lasted seventy long years.²⁰

It was a season of discipline from God for His people's rebellion. But God wasn't through with His people – and He wasn't through with Jerusalem, either!

During these seventy years, there was lots of activity in the world!

In 539 BC, roughly fifty years after Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, Babylon itself was conquered by the Persian King, Cyrus the Great.²¹

And Cyrus allowed - no, he encouraged - the conquered Jews who by this time had been in Babylon for fifty years to return to Palestine, to re-settle their homeland.²²

The fifty thousand Jews who returned to Jerusalem came back with a collective memory of the city's greatness and a collective vision of restoring it to that greatness.

Among those who returned was Zerubbabel who oversaw the work of rebuilding the Temple.

And the Temple was rebuilt in 516 BC, exactly seventy years from the destruction of the first Temple, completing the predicted seventy years of exile from the land which had been prophesied by Jeremiah (25:11; also Daniel 9:2).

Status report

So, as of 516 BC, the city had made some progress since its destruction. Jews populated the city. There was a Temple for worship.²³

But there was still a lot of work to be done. Jerusalem was no longer a world-class city - far from it! She was surrounded by enemies. She had no military. Israel was still poverty-stricken.

And this wasn't God's plan for the city!

Remember, His vision for Jerusalem was that it be a light on a hill, directing people to Him. He wanted Jerusalem to be glorious so that all nations would see His glory!

But, the disparity between what Jerusalem should be and what Jerusalem was to remain in place for a long time to come. In fact, there would be no progress toward God's original intent for the city for many decades.

¹⁸ See 2 Kings 21 for details of this.

¹⁹ See 2 Kings 25 for a description of this invasion.

²⁰ I count the dates of the Babylonian captivity from the destruction of the Temple (586 BC) to its rebuilding (516 BC).

²¹ The Persian Empire lasted another couple of centuries until they were defeated by the armies of Alexander the Great ca. 333 BC.

²² The vast Persian Empire covered some 2,000,000 square miles (of which Judah was a very small part).

²³ Although as a note, this was nothing compared to Solomon's original. Some of the old people who had returned from captivity and remembered Solomon's Temple openly wept at the trivial Temple built under Zerubbabel. What demoralizing must THAT have been!?

Now, fast-forward to the twentieth year of the reign of King Artaxerxes, a Persian king, fifth in line from Cyrus the Great.²⁴

This is one hundred and forty years after the destruction of the city and seventy years after the Temple was rebuilt.

Here, the biblical story picks up the narrative in one of the most interesting of all of the Old Testament's books, recounting the story of one of my favorite biblical characters: Nehemiah.

Re-VISIONING Jerusalem's Glory (Nehemiah 1:1-4)

Nehemiah, in Susa (v. 1)

[1] The words of Nehemiah²⁵ the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capitol...

Nehemiah was one of many Jews who either had not been able to or had not chosen to return to Jerusalem. Still a loyal, God-fearing Jew, Nehemiah was in service to the great King of the Persian Empire, Artaxerxes.²⁶

This explains why Nehemiah was in Susa, the royal residence during the winter month of Chislev.²⁷

While Nehemiah was living in Susa, performing royal service, he received visitors.

THE QUESTION (v. 2)

Meet Hanani

Hanani, Nehemiah's brother, was one of the visitors. Hanani came with others from Judah, with news from home.

Of course, even for those Jews who had been in captivity for three generations and had never set foot in the Promised Land, Palestine was always "home." Jerusalem was always their hometown.

So, Nehemiah asked Hanani the question that was most on his heart, and at the forefront of his mind.

How is Jerusalem?

[2b]...and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped and had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem.

Remember. Jerusalem was always, in every Jew's mind, where the action was. To the Jew, Jerusalem was where God was at work in the world.

Jews through the ages had heard the stories of the plans God had for Jerusalem. They all know that it was the national capitol, made so by David. They knew that it had been a world-class city it became under Solomon. They had heard stories of Solomon's palace - and especially of the Solomonic Temple.

I'm confident that Nehemiah had never been to Jerusalem. But, he did know that Zerubbabel had rebuilt the Temple. He knew that Ezra, the scribe, had traveled there fifteen years earlier to re-establish right worship at the Temple.

He had every reason to suspect that Jerusalem was operating at peak capacity, shining for God, attracting the nations to God's glory.

So, maybe he expected Hanani to report, "*Nehemiah, you would be amazed at the prosperity of the city. Jerusalem is in great shape. All is well. Jews and non-Jews are worshipping the Lord! Hallelujah!!*"

²⁴ That would be 445 BC.

²⁵ His name means "*the consolation of YHWH.*"

²⁶ From elsewhere in the book, we discover that Nehemiah came from the tribe of Judah, and (from chapter 2) that he had a prestigious role in the palace as the cupbearer to the king.

²⁷ Susa was located near the Persian Gulf, to the east of Babylon, on the Kerkha River.

Remember, news traveled slowly in those days, and it was easily eight hundred miles from Susa to Jerusalem. So there was no way that Nehemiah could have known how things were really doing back home.

It has been one hundred and fifty long years since Babylon wrecked Jerusalem. Listen as Hanani gives his brother Nehemiah a status report.

Jerusalem Status Report (v. 3)

[3] They said to me, “The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire.”

And immediately upon hearing Hanani’s words, Nehemiah knew that his people had lost. Really lost. The HUMILIATION kind of loss.²⁸

This was not what God had intended. This was not the world as God envisioned it. This was not Jerusalem as He designed it.

Something horrible has gone wrong with God’s good plan. Something is broken, twisted, messed up.

A century and a half after Jerusalem’s defeat, the walls were still broken down. And in the ancient world a city was nothing without walls.

Walls protected the city against invading armies. Walls were a city’s pride and protection and glory.

Without locked gates and lofty walls a city was nothing more than a village waiting to be sacked. But this is Jerusalem, God’s city!

And people walked over the wreckage of the gates to enter the city. Traders laughed as they hopped over the broken down walls to do business in Jerusalem. Children played with the rubble. Enemies mocked the defenseless city. Nobody took Jerusalem seriously.

Now, how would you have responded to this report, had you been Nehemiah?

How to Respond to an Unfulfilled Vision (v. 4)

Emotionally devastated (v. 4a)

“When I heard these words, I went to the nearest bookstore, and bought a book on wall re-building.”

“When I heard these words, I registered for an upcoming seminar on ‘Ten Key Steps to Building a Wall’.”

This is NOT what Nehemiah did.

[4a] When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days...

He is shell-shocked, and immediately did NOTHING. Nehemiah took no action. He didn’t move to remedy the situation. He expressed his grief and broken-heartedness, as he says, ***“for days.”***

Have you ever had a Nehemiah 1:4 moment?

Have you ever honestly looked at things the way they ARE and wept and mourned that they are not the way God intended for them to be?

For your family? For your relationships with your friends? For your personal character? For your church? For your community?

If not, why not? If not recently, why not?

God has placed you here for impact. He wants you engaged in tasks that are impossible without Him.

²⁸ What would a New York City resident say if today, there was not construction going on at the site where the twin towers had stood? If rubble still littered that great space? If the wreckage had not been cleared away from Ground Zero after 9/11? What a humiliation that would be! We Americans would all know - the terrorists won.

We'll never see the possibilities of what He might have for us to do if we don't allow for a Nehemiah moment. This is a moment when we honestly take stock of the disparity between God's plan and life ACTUALLY.

No God-sized task gets done unless and until God's people see the disparity between His dreams and the newspaper.

Nehemiah courageously embraced the reality of the situation and mourned. Deeply. He was not afraid to face up to how things were going in Jerusalem.

But that is not where things remained. The narrative continues.

Drawn to prayer (v. 4b)

[4] When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days AND I WAS FASTING AND PRAYING BEFORE THE GOD OF HEAVEN.

Nehemiah didn't leave his response at the level of grief. He turned to God in prayer.

Nehemiah allowed himself to be devastated by the disparity between what he knew God wanted and reality. Then, he allowed that devastation to drive him to his knees.

We read a summary of his days, weeks, and months of intermittent fasting, prayer, and mourning in the verses that follow.

Prayer - The Method of First Resort (vv. 5-11)

[5] I said, "I beseech You, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments [6] let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins²⁹ of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father's house have sinned.

²⁹ Sin here is the Hebrew *chata*. This word signifies missing the mark. Judges 20:16 - anything less than a bull's eye.

[7] "We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses. [8] "Remember the word which 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 those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.' [10] "They are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand. [11] "O Lord, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight³⁰ to revere Your name, and make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man."

Now I was the cupbearer to the king...

And the remainder of the book of Nehemiah shows this man energized for the task of rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem! Through a remarkable series of events, he goes to Jerusalem as the new governor. And within two months time, has walls in place that had lay in rubble for a century and a half.

Something was accomplished that most would have said was impossible. Jerusalem was again on a track to bring glory to God. Nehemiah was the change agent the Lord was able to use to accomplish this God-sized task.

His impact was launched by prayer.

And the prayer that launched his God-sized impact was launched by a desperation over how different things were from God's ideal.

Prayer that leads to impact grows only in the broken hearted soul of a person who honestly looks at the rubble - and sees God as the only answer to the devastation.

³⁰ "Delight" (Hebrew, *chaphez*) is a highly charged emotional word.

Conclusion:

Remember that at the beginning this morning, I asked you to reflect on what God might long to see fulfilled in some arena of your life (ministry, character, relationships) or of the church or of society.

How does the reality of the situation stack up against what you understand to be God's dream?

If it is not a one-to-one correspondence, how does the disparity make you FEEL?

Are you prepared to weep over the disparity? To mourn over the fact that things are not as they should be?

If so - GREAT! Breakthroughs could be just around the corner.

But we need to carefully consider what Nehemiah did following his grief.

The book of Nehemiah tells us that he prayed and fasted intermittently for four months.

He knew that IMPACT (specifically, the restoration of Jerusalem to the state God longed for it to have) was dependent on God. So, he prayed.

Will you now follow Nehemiah's lead and PRAY?

God-sized IMPACT in any arena of life demands that we pray.

Brothers and sisters, let us pray!