

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(October 30, 2022)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: A Prayer Life...for ALL of life

(Learning prayer from Nehemiah)

Responding to Life's Wreckage with Prayer

(Nehemiah 1:1-11)

Study #1

Introduction: The right tool for the job...

Every job worth doing requires the right tool.

Back when it was more possible to do car repairs at home, I learned the importance of having the right type and quality of tools for the job at hand. After a few sad experiences with the *almost* right tool and with *cheap* tools, I quickly came to appreciate quality tools that lasted and was very willing to pay extra for quality tools.

- If you're hauling a heavy trailer from a job site, you don't need my Ford Ranger. You need a TRUCK.
- A software design expert working on a tough programming problem needs a computer with lots of speed and power.
- A dentist needs just the right tools to do the work he does on our sensitive gums and teeth - especially Novocain.

And we who believe in Jesus need tools that will help us take our next steps with Jesus.

God has given us many of these tools, among them the priceless gifts of Scripture, the church, and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

He has also given us the gift of prayer, and it is to the great gift of prayer that we are turning for the next few weeks. I need help in learning to pray. I think many of us need help in prayer.

Prayer is a great gift, and we are grateful to God for this access we have to Him, to know that He always welcomes us to pray.

But prayer is also a tool. Learning how to pray as God wants us to pray will equip us with a prayer life that is big enough to handle all of life: life at church and at home, at work and at school.

We need a prayer life big enough to sustain us through a brutal 2022 election cycle and societal upheaval, big enough to guide us through great successes and life-altering setbacks.

Given our need for a big-as-life prayer life, we'll be turning to an Old Testament book written in times similar to our own.

This book records a season where God's people experienced lots of commotion and disruption. There were lots of hardships and lots of wrongs that needed to be put right.

The main actor in this book's story is a man of action, and his name is Nehemiah.¹

He is the author of the book by the same name. There is no question but that Nehemiah was a man of action. But I believe he has gotten some degree of bad press. Nehemiah was much more than a Type A, "get 'er done" activist.

When we pay attention to the details of his life, we find that he was a man of great faith. Before he was an activist, he was a man of prayer. In fact, prayer permeates his book, and it permeated his life.

This book is exactly what you and I need to equip us for a big-as-life life of prayer. And we are going to spend the next four Sundays learning prayer from Nehemiah.

¹ He is described as such in lots of the commentaries written about him and his book: Hand Me Another Brick - Swindoll; Man in Charge - Campbell; God's Builder - Sueme; The Dynamics of Effective Leadership - Barber.

Today, we're going to look at the first passage in the book.

But, before turning to today's biblical passage, I'm going to invite you to join me in taking a passage from October 30, 2022, to the world that led up to the life and times of Nehemiah.

Backstory to Nehemiah

Historical Background

Jumping forward to disaster

Much of the history of the Old Testament in our Bibles is a history of the nation of Israel, beginning with Abraham.

There are literally hundreds of highlight events and dozens of key men and women in the stories of Israel's past.

For our purposes today, we'll skip past fifteen hundred years of that rich history and will land near the historical end of the life of the nation of Israel.

After centuries of unrelenting apostasy, the ten tribes that made up the Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrian empire in 722 BC. And not long after that, the Southern Kingdom of Judah (including the capitol city of Jerusalem) fell to Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians.

At this point (about 586 BC), many of the most influential citizens were deported to Babylon, the glorious temple built by Solomon was destroyed, and the walls that protected the city of Jerusalem were flattened.

For the Jews, the destruction of Jerusalem was devastating.

The carnage of our own 9/11 back in 2001 gives us a sense as to how the Jews would have been impacted by Jerusalem's fate.

But it would have been worse for them because Jerusalem was more than a city. It was God's city. God's city had been laid waste.

Thankfully, while the destruction was devastating, that is not the end of the story of Israel.

Those Jews who had been left behind in the Promised Land clung to the old Jewish ways. And those who had been taken away to captivity in Babylon maintained their national identity. They even retained - more faithfully in exile than before! - their spiritual heritage.

Many of the exiled Jews longed for the day when they would be allowed to return to the land of Israel. Thankfully, they got that chance seventy years after Jerusalem's collapse.

A jump back into hope

After Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, Babylon itself was destroyed by the Medo-Persian Empire. And it was while the Persians were the dominant empire in the world that God gave the Jews repeated chances to return to their homeland.²

The first Persian king, Cyrus, actually encouraged the Jews to return to the Promised Land. Some 50,000 Jews returned to Palestine during Cyrus' reign.

Cyrus further encouraged the Jews to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, which they did under the leadership of a Jew named Zerubbabel in 516 B.C., exactly seventy years after its destruction.

Then, in the seventh year of the reign of Artaxerxes (the fourth king after Cyrus; roughly 458 BC), another group of five thousand Jews returned to Jerusalem. They were led by Ezra, a scribe, and he led the Jews in the re-establishment of right worship in the land.

So, to review...

1 - Destruction came in 586 B.C.

2 - Seventy years later, many Jews returned and rebuilt the Temple.

² The Persian empire covered some two million square miles (of which Judah was a very small part), including the present-day countries of Egypt, Israel, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Turkey.

3 - Sixty years after that, Ezra returned to put the nation back on track, spiritually.

And all of this brings us to the life and times of Nehemiah and to the first words of his book.

Nehemiah, the Man

[1:1] The words of Nehemiah³ the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capitol...

We can safely assume that Nehemiah was a descendant - maybe a sixth or seventh generation descendant - of one of the Jews who had been exiled from Jerusalem when it was sacked by Babylon. Nehemiah was still a Jew, but his whole experience of life was of Persia.

We learn (1:11) that Nehemiah had the all-important role of cupbearer in the service of King Artaxerxes, which explains why he was in the well-fortified winter palace at Susa.⁴

The cupbearer's job was to taste the king's food and to drink of the king's cup before it touched the king's lips. That way, if someone tried to poison the king - no more cupbearer, but *"Long live the King!"*⁵

The palace at Susa was Solomonic in its grandeur. It was built of cedar and was finished in gold, silver, and ivory. Artistically colored glazed bricks and relief designs of winged bulls decorated the place.

This was where Nehemiah was living. Even though he was a servant, he was living in splendor.⁶

³ From elsewhere in the book, we discover that Nehemiah came from the tribe of Judah. His name means *"the consolation of YHWH."*

⁴ For a point of reference, Susa was located very near the present-day Iran/Iraq border, near the Tigris River.

⁵ Risky job, true. But because the life of the king depended on the cupbearer, there often developed a deep trust between king and cupbearer, who had access to the king at every meal.

⁶ In the late 19th century, French archaeologists uncovered magnificent ruins of the royal residence at Susa.

The reference to *"the twentieth year"* tells us that Nehemiah was writing about events that began at the twenty-year point of the reign of Artaxerxes. That would put the time stamp at close to 445 BC, over a decade after Ezra's reforms.⁷

While Nehemiah was in Susa, performing royal service, he received visitors who had made the eight-hundred-mile trek from Jerusalem.

Seeking News from Jerusalem

Hanani, Nehemiah's flesh and blood brother, was one of the visitors. Hanani came with others with news from "home."

Even for those Jews who had been in captivity for generations and had never set foot on Promised Land soil, Palestine was always "home." Palestine and Jerusalem were home to Nehemiah.

So, he asked Hanani the question that was most on his heart, and at the forefront of his mind: ***[1:2]... I asked them about the Jews who had escaped and had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem.***

Like every Jew, Nehemiah knew Israel's ancient history. He knew all about Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph, the Exodus, and Kings David and Solomon. All the good stuff.

He also knew the bad stuff about Nebuchadnezzar's invasion, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the deportation of Jews - including his own family - into exile.

But he also knew about the more recent return of the Jews at the order of Cyrus. He knew about the rebuilding of the temple. He knew about the recent return of thousands more with Ezra.

⁷Cyrus: a tolerant, enlightened king who allowed conquered peoples to return to their countries and freedom of worship in conquered lands. Artaxerxes - with whom Nehemiah had to deal - was a fickle, arrogant, unreliable spendthrift.

Nehemiah had every reason to believe that things were going GREAT in Israel, that God's people were prospering, that God was being glorified, that God's kingdom was advancing.

It's easy to understand Nehemiah's ignorance of what was going on. He hadn't been back home.

So, he has asked his question. *"How are things back home?"* Here's the answer.

"Nehemiah, You Wouldn't Believe It!" (v. 3)

[1:3] "The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and disgrace, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates have been burned with fire."

Woah. One hundred and forty years have passed, and the city is still a wreck.

Can you imagine returning to New York City twenty-five years after the attacks of 9/11 - or fifty years later, or one hundred and forty years later - and finding the rubble of the Twin Towers still lying on the ground?

What would be the thoughts of every American who walked past "ground zero" if in 2022 or 2161 (140 years) there was not a beautiful memorial park, two large pools with waterfalls, and a stunning museum?

What would that say about New York? About the United States? It would say demoralizing defeat. The terrorists had truly won the day.

When Nehemiah heard Hanani's report about God's people living in these deplorable conditions, God's city still broken down and unprotected, God's purposes ground to a halt, he was undone.

In the ancient world, without locked gates and lofty walls a city was nothing more than a village waiting to be sacked. But, again, this is not just any city. This is Jerusalem. God's city.

In our own day, when we serve a crucified and risen Jesus, the purposes of God are fulfilled as we scatter and infiltrate and permeate and penetrate the world with the good news of Jesus.

But in the Old Testament, Jerusalem was to be that "city on a hill," glorious and majestic and God-honoring, a beacon to the nations.

Instead, it is in ruins - and Nehemiah was shell-shocked. This was not the way it was supposed to be.

The walls of Jerusalem were supposed to be up by now, the city protected and commanding respect among the nations, calling the world to the one, true God.

Now, the good thing is that while the beginning of the book is a wreck, the book ends very, very well.

The Rest of the Story

As you page through Nehemiah's book, you come to a scene in which King Artaxerxes gave Nehemiah permission to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the city's walls.

There was strategic reconnaissance prior to the beginning of the work. And when the work began, all the Jews (well, most of them) got involved in building.

Sure, enemies tried to stop the work. But they failed. And in the end, after one hundred and forty years of lying in ruin, the wall was rebuilt in fifty-two days, thanks to the grace of God, the work of God's people, and the leadership of Nehemiah.

THAT is "the rest of the story. It was a wonderful victory for the people and for the purposes of God.

But, how in the world did things change?

The story begins with a bad day for Nehemiah when he heard the most awful news a Jew could ever hear, debilitating, paralyzing

news. The story end with Nehemiah becoming a change agent who led the way to a great victory for the work of God on earth.

How did this happen?

Well, this is where we turn from the rest of the story to the best of the story.

The Best of the Story

[1:4] Now 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.

You and I are going to spend four Sundays exploring the life of prayer from the book and the life of Nehemiah.

On each of these Sundays, I'm going to highlight a certain aspect of life that invites us to pray.

The focus today is on those times when we are struck for the first time - or as if for the first time - by an aspect of God's work that is stuck and not making progress.

On the day when we are struck like never before by the stuckness of God's work, we will be, like Nehemiah, undone.

And it won't take long before we start to wonder what we are to do in response to this news of stuckness, this brokenness where what God wants to accomplish isn't happening.

I'm thankful to God that we have Nehemiah pointing the way forward when our eyes are opened to these things. He began with grief.
Grief

During the days following the report from his brother, Hanani, Nehemiah reflected on the brokenness back home in Jerusalem and he grieved the news of the wreckage there.

This period of "**days**" was something like five months beginning in the Jewish month Chislev (1:1 - November / December) and ending in Nisan. (2:1 - March / April)

Then, over time, he turned to God in his grief with intense prayer and fasting.

Prayer and Fasting

Little did Nehemiah know that this process was exactly what God was going to use to prepare him for a great work.

But grieve and pray Nehemiah did. And prepare Nehemiah to advance His kingdom is what God did.

The process that *ended* with Nehemiah engaged in an all-engrossing, kingdom-of-God blessing work *began* with the pain of acknowledging that something incredibly precious to God was very badly broken.

Let's stop and reflect on this.

[In]Action

Initially, Nehemiah took no action. He didn't move to remedy the situation. He didn't go to the nearest bookstore to buy resources on urban renewal and wall-rebuilding.

He simply entered into the reality of how bad things were for the kingdom of God, expressed his grief and broken heartedness, and mourned "**for days.**"

These kinds of eye-opening moments are not uncommon for any of us. They can happen at any time.

I'm thinking about situations like - but not restricted to - these.

- In your home - you are struck with the reality that what could be - a Jesus-centered worshiping and equipping place for you and your friends, for you and your husband or wife, for you and your kids - isn't. And you let the sadness of that reality sink in.

- At your place of work - or your school or your neighborhood - it becomes clear that you are not shining like the bright light Jesus called you to be. You are grieved by that realization.
- You become aware that brothers and sisters in Jesus, in lots of hard places, are suffering persecution. You realize that could be you in their shoes, and you mourn for them.
- You learn about the pressing need for children of all ages in our city to be fostered or adopted or big-brothered or big-sistered.

You really weren't surprised when you saw this brokenness. You could have guessed it was true. You even suspected it was true.

It simply hadn't "sunk in" that there was this or that wreckage.

Now, though, it has sunk in. It has registered. This part of where God wants to make impact is as broken as could be - and you see it as you've never seen it before.

When Nehemiah was struck with how bad things were in Jerusalem, he wept and mourned, prayed and fasted, for days.

When you see the brokenness, what will you do? Nehemiah invites you to join him in the inaction of doing nothing but grieve.

The season of inactive grieving isn't irresponsible. It doesn't mean that God isn't working. God works powerfully in the season of waiting.

Before Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt, he was forced to wait forty years while tending sheep in the deserts of Midian. Those were years of preparation.

God forced Israel to wait forty years before He allowed them to enter the Promised Land.

God's Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to wait through forty days of fasting before He began His public ministry.

The few seconds between "Get Set" and the starter's signal for the sprinters to leave the blocks are critical moments when the racers tense every muscle to prepare for blastoff.

Yes, waiting is hard. And it is tempting to believe that nothing is happening while waiting, that waiting is wasted time. Nothing could be further from the truth.

It is while waiting that God does His work of preparing you.

Your grief turns to prayer and fasting. Your prayers turn to a vision for beauty out of the ashes of what is broken. Your vision turns into a plan. And your plan turns to action.

We read about Nehemiah's initial pained response in the fourth verse.

The chapter continues with a prayer that serves as a model for prayers that we might pray when we are overwhelmed with the wreckage and the brokenness.

Nehemiah's Prayer

Nehemiah knows "Who Art in Heaven" (v. 5)

[5] I said, "Please, Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps the covenant and faithfulness for those who love Him and keep His commandments

Notice that the first focus of the prayer is God. Before anything else, any requests, Nehemiah reminds himself of God's greatness.

Jerusalem is in ruins and those ruins are a century and a half old and there will be logistical challenges to rebuilding and opposition to the rebuilding may well come - but God is great and awesome.

And...

- Your health may be deteriorating; God is great and awesome.
- People you love may have rejected you; God is great and awesome.
- The needs in your home are weighty; God is great and awesome.
- Your world might be coming apart at the seams; God is great and awesome.

When Nehemiah begins to pray, he begins NOT with his need, but with God. Then, he does turn to a request. That God will listen.

“If We Confess Our Sins” (vv. 6-7)

[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 sins of the sons of Israel which we have committed against You; I and my father’s house have sinned. [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.

We hear two kinds of confession in these two verses.

The first is corporate. It is a general confession of the sins of God’s people over generations. Nehemiah looks back at the history of Israel and affirms, *“We’re in this together.”*

The mess Jerusalem is in is directly because of God’s people’s rebellion against God. Nehemiah identifies as a part of that rebellion because he is a part of that people of God.

The second part is much more personal: ***“I and my father’s house have sinned.”***

Is he thinking of things that his father and grandfathers and great-grandfathers might have done to have helped Jerusalem, so far away, to no longer be a reproach? Is he wondering why they didn’t join the first groups of returning exiles?

Is he asking himself, *“Over the course of my life, have I done everything I might have done to further God’s work here in Persia? While serving in King Artaxerxes’ court, have I used every opportunity to help my people in Jerusalem?”*

I suspect he is.

And he has to accept the answer: *“No, I haven’t done all that I could.”*

He didn’t wag his finger at *“all those bad people”* out there who were responsible for the predicament in which Jerusalem found itself.

He included himself in the big club of people who have failed to work for the advancement of God’s kingdom. He can’t claim to be totally innocent regarding Jerusalem’s sorry condition.

Then the prayer takes on a different tone. Having confessed, Nehemiah turns another corner and asks God to remember.

Standing on the Promises of God (vv. 8-10)

[8] “Remember, please, 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 have My name dwell.’ [10] “They are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand.

He’s referring here to passages in Deuteronomy (chapter 30) and Leviticus (chapter 26)⁸ that promise God’s blessing when Israel returned to Him and repented of their rebellion.

Nehemiah knew God to be a God of His Word, Someone who could be counted on to do what He said He would do.

Nehemiah believed that God’s heart was for His people, that He was good, that (to jump to the New Testament), ***[Hebrews 11:6]...He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.***

He has realized through his meditation and mourning and praying and fasting and seeking God that the need of the hour is

⁸ It was common for devout Jews of the captivity to memorize Deuteronomy.

repentance. He humbles himself before God and turns his attention to God.

And he finishes up his prayer by turning yet another corner. He asks for something very specific.

With no smooth transition, Nehemiah moves from praise to confession to remembering God's warnings and promises, to a very bold ASK.

A Bold Request (v. 11)

[11] "Please, Lord, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight⁹ to revere Your name, and please make Your servant successful today and grant him mercy before this man."

This ending to the prayer is actually the ending to a five-month long season of prayer.

It is a very specific request that God would grant him compassion before King Artaxerxes and give him success in the fulfillment of a growing personal vision.

See, over the months of his praying, there has been this steady development of his perspective on Jerusalem's problems.

FIRST, he didn't know there was a problem: *"What problem?"*

SECOND, upon finding out that there was a problem, it grew into a desperate, *"This is terrible!"*

THIRD, it became *"WHY doesn't somebody do something about this problem?!"*

FOURTH, after months of weeping, mourning, fasting and praying, Nehemiah came to, *"I will be that somebody!"*

Conclusion:

The beginning of Nehemiah's book ushers us into the start of what will be, for Nehemiah, an epic quest, the journey of a lifetime.

And who knows into what journey God may usher any of us?

Just a brief word of warning as we close this morning.

Please don't take today's meditation on Nehemiah's prayer journey as a high-pressure tactic to prompt you to take action in this or that arena. That is not what today's message has been all about.

Rather, what we have from today's story is an invitation to sensitivity and attentiveness.

Rather, today's look at Scripture would say,

"Be alert when you identify a particular brokenness that hinders what God wants to accomplish."

"As that recognition of brokenness grows, take a cue from Nehemiah."

"Reflect. Meditate on the wreckage. Go ahead and weep - even for days, weeks, or months. In your grief, determine to turn to God in prayer."

"And remember: The story that began with Nehemiah's heartbreak over the state of God's kingdom ended with him leading the way to effect change. And the catalyst that God used to move him to action was prayer."

⁹ "Delight" (*Hebrew, chaphez*) is a highly charged emotional word.