

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(November 6, 2022)

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Sermon manuscript

**Sermon Series:** A Prayer Life...for ALL of life  
(Learning prayer from Nehemiah)

### **Prayer-Full Days**

(Selected passages from Nehemiah 2, 4, 5, 13)

Study #2

#### **Introduction: Embracing limpiness...**

The grandson of faithful Abraham, Jacob, was no Abraham.

From the womb forward, Jacob was a conniver. He cheated his older brother, Esau, out of a blessing and a birthright. He finagled his way to riches, wives, and children while in the employ of his father-in-law, Laban.

But Jacob changed as he aged. He became a man of God. His life ended with an act of worship, and he is included in the New Testament Hall of Fame of Faith. (Hebrews 11)

What happened? Well, the change began, I believe, when he wrestled with God (likely an angel; Genesis 32) before crossing the Jabbok River to meet his brother.

Jacob was holding his own in this wrestling match until the angel touched him on the thigh, giving the conniver a taste of his own medicine.

From that day forward, Jacob walked with a limp, a reminder of his failed attempt to best God.

Every step he took for the rest of his life reminded him of his weakness and of his dependent relationship with God.

Our look into Scripture this morning invites us to live in light of our moment by moment weakness and dependence on God by praying that He will do for us what only He can do.

*Review...*

Over the course of four Sundays, we are exploring the book of Nehemiah to learn what we can from Nehemiah, the man, about prayer.

Last Sunday, we saw that the life of prayer into which God invites us is big enough for those times when we see that the work of God is broken, it is stuck. When we are broken-hearted over that brokenness, we can take that grief to God in prayer.

Nehemiah grieved the state of Jerusalem, God's city, where the walls were still broken down one hundred and forty years after they had been destroyed by Babylon.

He took that grief to God and the rest of his book shows us that his prayers turned into a vision, his vision turned into a plan, and his plan turned into action.

We can have confidence that God will do similar things with us, that He will lead us into a kingdom-of-God expanding work, when we take our griefs and our burdens to Him and pray.

This morning we're looking at another aspect of prayer that Nehemiah models for us.

Our focus for the next few minutes is not on protracted seasons of prayer, as important as those seasons are. We're not even looking at regular times we set aside to get alone with God to pray.

Today, Nehemiah lets us see the beauty of prayer at the drop of a hat, prayer-full days, bullet prayers we pray on the run, and days filled with unceasing prayer (1 Thessalonians 5:17) about anything and everything that comes our way as we walk with Jesus.

We learned last Sunday that Nehemiah was a descendant of Jewish exiles who had been taken away from Jerusalem and shipped off to Babylon.

We enter today's story as Nehemiah was serving the Persian king, Artaxerxes, at the winter palace in Susa as the king's cupbearer.

### **When Needing Courage and Clarity, PRAY (Nehemiah 2:1-8)**

#### **Nehemiah - Serving as Cupbearer...sadly (vv. 1-2)**

*Nehemiah's faultless service as a cupbearer (v. 1)*

***[2:1] And it came about in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, that wine was before him, and I picked up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence.***

That last comment about not being sad is significant, because to be sad in the king's presence was an insult to the throne.

The thought was that simply being in the king's presence should be enough to gladden anyone's heart. And to be sad before the king was such a serious offense that the sad person could have been put to death.<sup>1</sup>

Ever since Nehemiah's brother, Hanani, had delivered the news about the terrible conditions back home in Jerusalem, Nehemiah had done a good job of pasting on a smiley face while he was with the king.

But on this day, he was too overwhelmed by the brokenness in Palestine. Today, he couldn't fake happiness - and the king noticed.

*Nehemiah's risky sadness (v. 2)*

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<sup>1</sup> The thought was that simply being in the king's presence should be enough to gladden anyone's heart.

***[2:2a] So the king said to me, "Why is your face sad though you are not ill? This is nothing but sadness of heart."***

We have to understand that the king wasn't being polite or sensitive. He was deeply offended at Nehemiah's sadness.<sup>2</sup>

So, Nehemiah ***[2:2b]...was very much afraid***. But what will he do now that he's been accused of sadness?<sup>3</sup>

Will he mask his true feelings one more time, laugh, assure the king that everything was fine, and tell him a good joke?

No. Nehemiah took a huge risk. He told the king *that* he was sad and *why* he was sad.

#### **Nehemiah - Pleading His Case to the King (vv. 3-4)**

*Nehemiah explains his sadness (v. 3)*

***[2:3] And I said to the king, "May the king live forever. Why should my face not be sad when the city, the site of my fathers' tombs, is desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?"***

That self-exposure was courageous. He admits, *"My king, not even being in your presence can ease this sadness."*

The question now is, what will King Artaxerxes do?

As king, he had been insulted by Nehemiah's sadness and by his refusal to apologize for it. As king, he had authority to pass sentence on Nehemiah. Listen.

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<sup>2</sup> From historical records, we discover that King Artaxerxes was usually described by the adjectives fickle, arrogant, unreliable, and spendthrift.

<sup>3</sup> There is a similar scene in the book of Esther. There was a point at which Queen Esther chose to visit the King (Ahasuerus), uninvited. If the king had not extended the royal scepter to her, she would have been put to death. But, because of her conviction that she needed to advocate for her people, she took the risk and marched into the king's court. The same kind of risk is in place here.

*The king's gracious response (He didn't kill Nehemiah!) (v. 4a)*

**[2:4a] Then the king said to me, "What would you request?"**

We could have easily read, "Off with his head!" Instead, we get, "Tell me what I can do to help, Nehemiah?"<sup>4</sup>

Certainly, that response speaks volumes about the king's esteem of Nehemiah. But let's not miss: God is in this.<sup>5</sup>

Humanly speaking, the likelihood that the king would offer help was about nil. But Solomon wrote in Proverbs (21:1) that the Lord turns the heart of the king wherever He wishes. And the KING has turned the Persian king's heart so that he will be merciful toward Nehemiah - exactly as Nehemiah had prayed! (1:11)

Before he answers the king's question with the vision and plan that has developed over five months of prayer and fasting, though, Nehemiah did exactly what we would expect that he would do.

*Nehemiah's prayer*

**[4b] So I prayed to the God of heaven!**<sup>6</sup>

No, Nehemiah didn't drop to his knees or leave the room to spend a protracted time with the Lord. He may not have even closed his eyes or moved his lips. He just shot up a quick bullet prayer.

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<sup>4</sup> This is all the more amazing in light of what Artaxerxes did only a few years earlier, when Ezra the scribe made the identical request. He, too, wanted to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem. The king nixed Ezra's plan. The background is that King Cyrus had authorized work on Jerusalem. However, during Ezra's time, Israel's enemies had sent a letter to Artaxerxes, who was, by then, the Persian king, telling him of Jerusalem's rebellious past. On the strength of the enemies' complaint, Artaxerxes ordered the work of wall rebuilding stopped. (Ezra 4:6-23)

<sup>5</sup> **[Proverbs 21:1] The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes.**

<sup>6</sup> As we see so many times in this book, Nehemiah prayed at the drop of a hat for guidance, wisdom, and for God's active intervention. Here is proof positive that prayers don't need to be long to be effective.

This is one of two times today when we are told that Nehemiah prayed without knowing the content of his prayer. That begs the question, what did he pray...?

Well, it would have been short.

It might have been really short, "Help!" Or, with five months of prep for this one moment behind Him, knowing what he was going to say to the king's question, "Well, here we go, Lord!" Or, maybe, fully aware of how much was at stake at this moment, "God, strengthen me to say the right thing in just the right way!"

Whatever it was, Nehemiah asking God for something.

And, then, after speaking to the KING of kings, Nehemiah answered Artaxerxes' question as if reading off of a shopping list.

### **Nehemiah's Answer (vv. 5-8)**

He makes four big asks.

- One, he told the king that he wanted permission to go back to **"the city of my father's tombs"** to rebuild it.<sup>7</sup>
- Two, (in response to the king's question) he told Artaxerxes just how long he would be gone and when he would return.
- Three, he asked for letters guaranteeing safe passage through hostile territory.<sup>8</sup>
- Four, he asked for a letter from the king guaranteeing a supply of lumber for the building projects once he got to Jerusalem.<sup>9</sup>

This is the first of Nehemiah's five spur-of-the-moment prayers we'll see today. As far as we know, Nehemiah didn't limp. But there was

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<sup>7</sup> While what he did say was important, what he didn't say may have been equally important. He didn't mention the city by name because Jerusalem had a reputation as a rebellious city. Nehemiah didn't bring up that bone of contention.

<sup>8</sup> To travel from Susa to Jerusalem, Nehemiah would have to go through Media and Syria, to Jerusalem, eight hundred miles of hostile territory with great risk. But, with the letters in hand, he had diplomatic immunity.

<sup>9</sup> This lumber might well have come from the same forests that supplied the wood for the construction of Solomon's Temple.

a Jacob-like internal sense of weakness. He knew how dependent he was on God. What I'll call an internal limp prompted him to pray.

What I want us to see from this first prayer is that he knew he had freedom to pray, in the moment, when he was faced with a need.

He understood that God had invited him to pray, and that God would listen when he prayed.

And if that was true for Nehemiah, who served God under the Mosaic covenant, how much more is that true for us who believe in Jesus and who serve God under the New Covenant, who have the promise of the indwelling Spirit, and who are invited by Jesus to ***“ask, seek, and knock”*** (Matthew 7:7-8) by way of prayer to God.

What a great thing to remember when we are in a pressure-packed conversation with a king - or a boss, a friend, our spouse, a neighbor. Admit to weakness. Affirm the internal limp - and pray to God for help.

As we continue with the story, we read that Nehemiah made the trip to Jerusalem, that he conducted reconnaissance around the city at night, and that he called the people to join him: ***“Come, let's rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer be a disgrace.”*** (2:17)

He enlisted most of those living in the city to join in the good work of wall-building, which got off to a very strong start. (See chapter 3) Not surprisingly, opposition quickly rose up against the work.

### **When Opposed, PRAY**

#### **The Opposition of Sanballat (vv. 1-2)**

A guy named Sanballat was the leader of those who opposed the Jews.

Sanballat was upset because he knew that if Jerusalem became politically and militarily strong - which she likely would if her walls were rebuilt - his own nation (Samaria) would be weakened.

***[1] Now it came about that when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious and very angry, and mocked the Jews.***

The point of what Sanballat does next was to take the fight out of his enemies. His words were aimed at demoralizing the builders.

For some weeks, the Jews had thrown themselves into the work, laboring night and day. They worked hard at building the best walls and gates they could.

Now they are getting laughed at. And we all know that ridicule and mockery sting. Words meant to demoralize usually do the trick.

Sanballat fired away with a shotgun blast of five questions aimed at the hearts of the Jewish workers.

***[2] And he spoke in the presence of his brothers and the wealthy people of Samaria and said, “What are these feeble<sup>10</sup> Jews doing? Are they going to restore the temple for themselves? Can they offer sacrifices? Can they finish it in a day? Can they revive the stones from the heaps of rubble, even the burned ones?”***

These questions are skillfully phrased. They are aimed right at the heart of God's people. The heart attacks continue, now coming from one of Sanballat's partners in opposing the work, Tobiah.

#### **The Opposition of Tobiah (v. 3)**

***[3] Now Tobiah the Ammonite was near him, and he said, “Even what they are building - if a fox were to jump on it, it would break their stone wall down.”***

Tobiah was attempting the same thing Sanballat was. He was all about *discouraging* and *demoralizing* and *deflating* the workers.

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<sup>10</sup> The Hebrew word used here for ***“feeble”*** was used to describe a small plant that withered under the hot Palestinian sun.

So, how should God's people respond to such attacks? How should we, today, respond when we are opposed in what we want to do for God?

Let's listen and see what we can learn from Nehemiah's response to the heart attacks directed against him and his fellow Jews.

### **Nehemiah's Prayer (vv. 4-5)**

***[4] "Hear, O our God, how we are an object of contempt! Return their taunting on their own heads, and turn them into plunder in a land of captivity. [5] Do not forgive their guilt and do not let not their sin be wiped out before You, for they have demoralized the builders."***<sup>11</sup>

Now if that seems like a somewhat tough prayer, I get it. His prayer doesn't reflect the grace and love that we read about in the New Testament.

We remember that when Stephen was being stoned to death for preaching Jesus, he prayed to God for his killer's forgiveness - just like Jesus did from the cross.

So, we, today, want to bring Jesus' mercy to our response when we are opposed. But I think Nehemiah did well here. Think of the things that Nehemiah could have done.

- He could have thrown in the towel and quit the wall-building project, altogether.
- He could have held a pep rally for the builders.
- He could have taken the initiative against the enemies and fought them, personally.

He could have done a number of things. But he did the best someone can do to show dependence on God. He prayed.

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<sup>11</sup> This is called an "imprecatory" prayer. There are several places where these are found, including the Psalms, and in Jeremiah.

In that brief prayer we hear Nehemiah's heart for the work of God. We hear him asking God to listen to the attack that the builders have endured for God's sake.

He didn't make a single move to take vengeance on his enemies. No, he asked God to judge those who have tried to keep him and his fellow Jews from doing what was on their hearts to do for God.<sup>12</sup>

When you are doing what is on your heart to do for God, and you face hardships and opposition, follow Nehemiah's lead.

Don't take your own revenge. Leave judgment and justice up to God. Commend your case to God in prayer. He welcomes your prayer. He invites you to pray when times get tough. So, by all means, pray - in the moment of need - to the God who hears.

And stay focused on the mission. The story continues with the same heart to carry out the mission we have seen to this point.

***[6] So we built the wall, and the entire wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.***

The work resumed after prayer. But then, so did the opposition.

***[7] Now when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem went on, and that the breaches began to be closed, they were very angry. [8] So all of them conspired together to come to fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it.***

With opposition hardening, Nehemiah senses again that internal limp. He affirms his weakness. There is, again, prayer. **When the Need of the Hour is Strong Action, PRAY (4:9ff...)**

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<sup>12</sup> A similar thing happened when the project was almost finished and opposition came from Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem, and other enemies against the work. Their ploy was subterfuge as they sought to convince Nehemiah to get with them for a meeting to distract him from the work. Again, Nehemiah prayed a prayer of imprecation against them. (6:1-14)

## First Defense: PRAYER! (vv. 9-10)

*Prayer (v. 9)*

**[9] But WE prayed to OUR God...**

Did you notice? Up to this point it has always been Nehemiah praying. This is the first time we hear **“WE PRAYED.”**

Evidently, prayer is contagious. The rest of the Jews are sensing their own need for God. They are aware of an internal limp.

They prayed together.

Praying together is a kingdom win, not because the more people who pray, the more likely it is that God will say “Yes”, but because when more people pray, more people will honor God when He does what He alone can do.

They prayed at a moment when the work was continuing AND while opposition was becoming more unified. They prayed when the work was getting tougher.

We can know that the going was getting tougher when we listen to a popular song that was making the rounds in Jerusalem at this time describing the state of the builders.

*Depression (v. 10)*

**[10] And so in Judah it was said,  
“The strength of the burden bearers is failing,  
Yet there is much rubble;  
And we ourselves are unable  
To rebuild the wall.”**

THAT is a good picture of depression. These people are demoralized, on the verge of quitting the work altogether.

And it wasn’t that there is any more rubbish now than there was earlier when the work began. No.

The problem is that attacks that go on and on and on have a cumulative draining effect. The repeated attacks, interferences, and distractions thrown their way by the enemies has simply worn the workers down.

But they have prayed. And what do you suppose was the content of the prayer this time? What did THEY pray?

I’m envisioning another short-ish prayer for help and strength and courage to keep building despite enemies. I imagine them praying for God to direct them as to how to keep going while opposed.

If that is what they prayed, it is striking that what follows is a plan perfectly designed to help them keep going as the going got tough.

## Second Defense: Work / Watch (vv. 11-23)

The Jews set up a round-the-clock guard against any attacks by the enemies. (v. 9) Men with weapons were stationed at vulnerable points in the wall. Whole families were posted at strategic points in the city, ready to defend it, together. (vv. 13ff...)

I think that the plan was the direct outgrowth of the prayer.

God uses prayer to energize us for action. God uses prayer to open our eyes to possibilities and creativities. Prayer isn’t a substitute for work; it is a catalyst to work.

Though the centuries, believers have listened to people say, in various ways, *“We will keep you from doing what you want to do for God.”*

Through the centuries God’s people have successfully negotiated that threat by doing exactly what the Jews of Jerusalem did. They admit weakness and affirm their limpiness. And they pray.

The prayer here was yet another, on the spot, at the drop of a hat, declaration of dependance on God by prayer.

The other several times we see Nehemiah praying in this book in the middle of life are those times when he asked that God would remember him *“for good”* for what he had done for God’s people.

When we turn to Nehemiah, chapter 5, there is very unfriendly “friendly fire” going on. There was internal strife between Jew and fellow Jew.

Here’s what happened.

### **When Hungering for God’s Blessing. PRAY**

#### **After Standing Up for the Poor (5:19)**

In Jerusalem, there was an upper class of people who had financial resources and there were the poor who had no resources.

When the poor needed to borrow money from the rich, the rich lent them money at high interest rates. And in order to pay back the loans, the poor Jews were forced to mortgage their property and to even sell their children into slavery. (5:1-5)

At this time, there was a famine in the land. Nehemiah wasn’t angry about the famine. He wasn’t angry that some people were poor. He was angry at the lovelessness displayed by the rich against the poor.

So, he very publicly rebuked the rich for *“usury”* (lending money to the poor at interest) against the poor.<sup>13</sup> (5:7)

He then reported that he had used some of his own money to *“redeem”* (buy out of slavery) some of the Jews who had been sold into slavery. (5:8) Plus, he was lending them money and grain WITHOUT charging them interest. (5:10)

He called on the rich to stop what they were doing and to pay restitution to those they had cheated. (5:9)

Well, praise God, the rich agreed to all that Nehemiah demanded and they actually stopped their abusive ways. (5:12-13)

But that is not all Nehemiah did for the poor.

Above and beyond his regular salary as Persian official, he was also offered a Governor’s Food Allowance to entertain dignitaries. He never collected it because that money was raised from among the Jews and it would have simply increased their poverty. (5:14-15)

Nor did he buy any land, which he could have gotten at a cut rate price, given the general economic conditions at this time. Plus, he and all of his servants worked on the wall. (5:16)

And at the end of this long listing of all the ways Nehemiah served God’s people, he prayed: ***[19] Remember me, O my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.***

He asks God for His blessing.

Hang on to this prayer because there is another example of Nehemiah praying essentially the same thing in the book’s last chapter.

#### **After Preserving the Sabbath (13:22)**

After the wall was rebuilt, Nehemiah went back to Susa, in Persia to serve King Artaxerxes.

After a brief time there, he returned to Judah where he found things in a mess.

Among other things, the Jews were violating Sabbath law, doing all kinds of work on the Sabbath. Nehemiah shut it down.

He ordered that the doors and gates be shut from sundown on Friday until sundown on Saturday, to prohibit any work from being done. No exceptions.

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<sup>13</sup> They all knew that such practices were against the Mosaic Law. See Deuteronomy 23:20 and 15:7-8.

He then ordered the Levites who were responsible for the safe keeping of the city to make sure that no merchandising happened on the Sabbath.

And then he prayed, again, **[13:22] “For this also remember me, my God, and have compassion on me according to the greatness of Your mercy.”**

And the book ends with one more prayer for blessing.

### **After Fighting for Family Faithfulness (13:31)**

With Nehemiah back in Palestine from Persia, he uncovered yet one more way in which the Jews had disobeyed God. Many of the men who were already married took other women as wives (Wrong #1) who didn’t share their Jewish faith (Wrong #2).

He reminded them that this was exactly what Solomon had done centuries earlier and that these multiple wives enticed him to follow other gods. So, Nehemiah made the men put away these additional, foreign wives.

The book ends, predictably, with prayer. And this is yet another request for blessing: **[13:31] “Remember me, my God, for good.”**

Each of these three prayers for blessing come from a man who knew that only God could provide him with what he most desperately needed. He knew his own inadequacy and weakness. He was very aware of his internal limp.

People would soon forget his sacrifices, and he knew that. He’s asking God to remember them.

**“Remember me for good, O my God...”** is trusting God to reward his faithful service.

His prayers for blessing were instinctive, in the moment, cries from a believing heart for God’s *“Well done!”*

### **Conclusion:**

The life of prayer into which God invites us is not limited to protracted seasons of prayer. He wants us to pray on the fly, asking His help in the moment, praying for and with each other.

Nehemiah lived this out. But so did the Apostle Paul, frequently telling those who received his letters that he “constantly” prayed for them. He urged them to **“pray without ceasing.”**

To the extent that we “own” our own weakness and inadequacy we will pray. To the extent that we consider ourselves sufficient for life, in and of ourselves, we’ll likely not pray much.

Today, I’ve used the idea of limping, drawn from the Old Testament character of Jacob, to picture our need for God.

Every step Jacob took was a reminder of his own weakness in the face of God’s strength. We can use our own weaknesses - of whatever variety they may be - to remind ourselves of God’s sufficiency to do for us what we need.

The Apostle Paul dwelt on his own weakness - his own limpness - and was driven by it to a life of dependence and prayer. (See 2 Corinthians 12:7-10)

We can follow the examples of Jacob and Nehemiah and Paul, embrace our weaknesses and limps, and pray to the God who invites us to come to Him with our needs. (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)