

Praying Like Nehemiah 1:4-11

God said a long time ago in Ezekiel 22:30 *"I looked for someone who might rebuild the wall of righteousness that guards the land. I searched for someone to stand in the gap in the wall... but I found no one."* God is looking for people to use. God's looking for willing workers. Nothing happens until somebody steps up. We're always looking for better methods and mechanisms. God is looking for willing people.

Today we're going to get an inside look at the heart of Nehemiah - a man who stepped up and put himself on the line. Nehemiah was a man of prayer, nine different times in this book he prays. Nehemiah is one of the great prayers of the Bible and God seems to have liked to answer Nehemiah's prayers. The thing is, you can learn a lot about people by listening to their prayers. We're going to get an inside look at this man, Nehemiah. So let's get right to it and start with some things we learn immediately from Nehemiah.

First, Nehemiah shows us that **1. I Need to Pray Before I Do Anything Else.** People had come back from Jerusalem and told Nehemiah that Jerusalem is in ruins. In verse 4 Nehemiah says, *"When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven."* You have to do more than pray, but don't do anything else until you pray. Effective believers make prayer a first priority; ineffective ones make prayer a last resort.

In our culture where we're always doing something, how many of us often find ourselves too busy, to preoccupied or just too inattentive to pray? Then we fill up any spare time with television and other screens. I'm certainly not against those things, but we need to have our priorities in line. Nehemiah shows us that before we do anything else we must make time to pray.

Now, Nehemiah's a man of action. He's an organizer, a motivator, a manager. He likes to do things. He got that wall built around the city in just 52 days. But when he started in on the problem, instead of immediately going out and doing something, the first thing he did was get alone with God. He got alone with God and prayed. This was the pattern of his life. He was a man of prayer.

Nehemiah also shows us that, **2. When I Pray I Need to Depend on God.** In verse 6, Nehemiah says to God, *"...listen to my prayer! Look down and see me praying night and day for your people Israel."* He was depending on God for an answer. He felt that he couldn't move ahead without God being on board. He knew it was more than he could handle. One reason why we don't pray more is because we usually don't feel like we need to. We think we can handle most of life by ourselves. We think we can do most things on our own. When you have a problem the natural human reaction is to think, "So what am I going to do about this?" instead of stopping and saying, "God, what do you want to do?" Yet Jesus says in John 15 *"Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing."* That's the only way we bear fruit.

There is little God won't do for the person who is depending on him. My usefulness begins when I recognize my total dependence on God. The way I know that I'm really depending on God is that the first thing I do when a problem comes is I pray.

Part of the reason why Nehemiah prayed was because he was a sensitive, compassionate person. He felt things deeply - he wept over the ruins. But rather than simply moaning and groaning, he prayed. He took the problem to the Lord. He didn't just wallow in self pity. He took his broken heart to God.

The name Nehemiah literally means, "Comforted by Yahweh" in Hebrew. God honors prayer that comes from a genuinely concerned heart. He longs to hear us say, "Lord, I can't handle this. I don't know how to do it. Help me!" That's prayer God likes to answer.

Isaiah 40:31 says *"...those who trust in the Lord will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint."* If you're going to be an authentic Christian, the life we are called to live produces stress. It's not from the Christian lifestyle that we find comfort, comfort and strength. The life of a believer is difficult; it involves sacrifice and hard choices. We find our strength and our comfort in prayer.

Because Nehemiah was willing to depend on God and trust in God, he got to be part of the restoration of the nation that God told Jeremiah the prophet about in 588 BC. Jeremiah 33 says, *"While Jeremiah was still confined in the courtyard of the guard, the Lord gave him this second message: "This is what the Lord says—the Lord who made the earth, who formed and established it, whose name is the Lord: Ask me and I will tell you remarkable secrets you do not know about things to come. For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: You have torn down the houses of this city and even the king's palace to get materials to strengthen the walls against the siege*

ramps and swords of the enemy. You expect to fight the Babylonians, but the men of this city are already as good as dead, for I have determined to destroy them in my terrible anger. I have abandoned them because of all their wickedness. Nevertheless, the time will come when I will heal Jerusalem's wounds and give it prosperity and true peace. I will restore the fortunes of Judah and Israel and rebuild their towns. I will cleanse them of their sins against me and forgive all their sins of rebellion." Nehemiah prayed in 445 BC - 143 years later - and depended on God and God made him a part of the fulfillment of that prophesy; a part of the restoration, revitalization and rebuilding of his people.

In a sense, prayer can do whatever God can do! Prayer taps into the resources of God. Sincere prayer can bring you into harmony with God's intentions. And when God is brought in on a project, it turns the impossible into the possible.

So given all of that and how effective Nehemiah's prayers were, let's look at exactly how Nehemiah prayed and use that as an example of how to pray today.

We have a great sample of this faithful person praying in Nehemiah 1:5-11. You can learn a lot by the kind of prayer a person prays. A completely canned prayer can indicate a dry spirit. A wish-filled prayer can indicate a selfish spirit. Some prayers are like Christmas lists. Impressive, grand prayers can indicate an arrogant or prideful heart.

We learn a lot about Nehemiah by looking at the kind of prayer he prayed. When Nehemiah first heard about the ruin of Jerusalem, he prayed for four months. This isn't casual, off-hand prayer. This prayer gives us a pattern for successful praying. If you want to know how to pray, study the book of Nehemiah and particularly this prayer.

With that in mind let me give you four elements of prayer for us to take from the life of Nehemiah.

1. I Focus on Who God Is, Not on Who I Am. We trust God because of who God is. We trust because God is a faithful God, a great God, a loving God, a wonderful God. God can handle anything! In verse 5 Nehemiah says, "*O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of unfailing love with those who love him and obey his commands.*" Nehemiah said a couple things about God right up front: 1. You're great and awesome - that declares God's power. 2. You keep your promises - that honors God's covenant and affirms God's faithfulness. Nehemiah acknowledges who God is and how great and worthy God is. That's what praise is. Acknowledge who God is and his greatness. Nehemiah knows that the problems in Jerusalem are great but that God is greater. It's a big mess but God is bigger than any mess. He has the right focus and perspective. It's based on God's character.

The next thing that Nehemiah does that we need to do is, **2. I Confess My Failure and Confirm God's Authority.** The people had disobeyed God. As a result, God had said, "If you don't obey me you're going to lose the land I gave you." And they did lose it and were taken into foreign captivity all because they had disobeyed God.

In verses 6 and 7 Nehemiah prays "*...I confess that we have sinned against you. Yes, even my own family and I have sinned! We have sinned terribly by not obeying the commands, decrees, and regulations that you gave us through your servant Moses.*"

So he based his request on who God is and that God is worthy but he also had to admit things about who he was and that he was unworthy; that he was part of the problem. He doesn't talk about others being bad he talks about himself and his family. Even when he talks about the people, he includes himself by saying "we." He says things like, "I confess... *we have sinned... my own family and I... We have sinned terribly... not obeying the commands... you gave us.*" It wasn't Nehemiah's fault they had been taken into captivity. He hadn't even been born when it happened. Yet, he includes himself. He says "I'm part of the problem".

There's personal confession, group confession, community confession and there's national confession. In America we're individualistic in how we look at things. We act like if I didn't actually do the specific thing that started something, then I have no responsibility. That's not Biblical. In our culture I'm taught to confess my sins. When was the last time you confessed the sins of the nation... or the sins of your family... or your church... or your group of friends... or of your cultural or social group? We don't think that way. Our society has taught us that you're only responsible for you. And that's just not true! You are your brother's keeper. We are all in this together. One phrase I hate hearing is "I've got to do what's best for me!" All kinds of things get justified with that phrase. Nehemiah shows in his prayer that not only do we have personal sin to confess but we have corporate sin. We are part of any sin of our culture; we are part of any sin that is part of our heritage; we are part of any sin where we

benefit from the results of someone else's loss - even if we weren't one of those who caused us to have that benefit. Authentic believers accept the blame. *"We have sinned against you."*

We confess that we are part of the problem, and that God has the right and authority to hold us accountable. The point is that all sin is ultimately against God. David said, *"Against you, and you alone, have I sinned; I have done what is evil in your sight. You will be proved right in what you say, and your judgment against me is just."* He knew and acknowledged that sin is against God and that God has the authority to hold us responsible for it.

3. I Recall God's Faithfulness and Rely on God's Promises. Verses 8-9 say, *"Please remember what you told your servant Moses: 'If you are unfaithful to me, I will scatter you among the nations. But if you return to me and obey my commands and live by them, then even if you are exiled to the ends of the earth, I will bring you back to the place I have chosen for my name to be honored."* Notice it says "if ... I will" It's a warning and a promise.

Nehemiah prays to God and says, "I want you to remember what you told Moses." God warned us through Moses that if we were unfaithful we would lose the land. But God also promised that if we repent he'd give it back to us. In the Bible you often find God's people reminding God about what he said he wants to do. David did it. Abraham, Moses and the prophets did it.

So does God need to be reminded? No of course not. Does God forget what he's promised? No. Then why do this? Because recounting it helps us remember and acknowledge what God has done and what God has promised. It pleases God when you remind God of one of his promises because that demonstrates that you're paying attention.

Part of prayer is taking God at God's word. It's asking God to do what God's already promised and wants to do. God wants to bless you even more than you want to be blessed. But God sets things up so that you have to be part of it. You need to pray to experience the promises of God.

Nehemiah could go to God about these promises because he knew them. Parts of the promises he mentions in these verses come from several prophecies, including the prophecies of Jeremiah, some of it comes from Leviticus 26:27-33 and Deuteronomy 30:4 - *"Even though you are banished to the ends of the earth, the Lord your God will gather you from there and bring you back again."* Nehemiah knew all of this, so he could pray as God intends us to pray. The strength of my prayer life is measured by how well I know the promises and purposes of God. For that we need to know the promises of God.

4. I Pray Specifically for Detailed Situations. Make specific requests. For one thing, if you make general prayers, how will you know if they are answered? For another, God already knows what's needed and knows what you want. Prayer isn't about informing God, it's about you being a part of what God is doing in your life and in the world around you. Specific prayers are prayers that you are involved in. General prayers are lazy - you're not bothering to think them through or get all that involved.

In verses 10-11 Nehemiah includes the who, what, and when. He says, *"The people you rescued by your great power and strong hand are your servants. O Lord, please hear my prayer! Listen to the prayers of those of us who delight in honoring you. Please grant me success today by making the king favorable to me. Put it into his heart to be kind to me."* Nehemiah has the whole prayer just to have that one little request at the end. *"Please grant me success today by making the king favorable to me."*

Nehemiah was willing to go to Jerusalem and to do what was necessary to promote the rebuilding project. But he knew he'd have to get the king's permission and help first and the king was definitely not a believer. Nehemiah was the king's right hand man and you don't just let a valued guy like that; a guy who would be very difficult to replace, walk away. Nehemiah was asking a leave of absence for three years, to go and rebuild a wall the king had previously ordered not to be rebuilt. So there were significant reasons to ask God for success before he went to talk with the king.

He's not hesitant to pray for success. He's bold in his prayer. Have you ever prayed, "Lord, make me successful!" If you haven't, why haven't you? What is the alternative? Don't make me too bad of a failure? There is nothing wrong with praying for success if what you're doing is for the glory of God. Pray boldly. Pray that God will make you successful in life for the glory of God. That's what Nehemiah did.

The thing is, if I can't ask God to bless what I'm doing, then I'd better start doing something else. If you can't ask God to make you a success at what you're doing, do something else. God doesn't want you to waste your life. William Carey who founded the modern missionary movement used to say, "Expect great things from God; do great things for God." That's a good motto for every Christian.

Just as a conclusion I want to quickly share four important specific qualities to Nehemiah's prayer that are the same ones we need to have in our prayers if we're going to be believers who pray effectively:

1. It's a Prayer of Affirmation. He affirms who God is. He proclaims that God is a just God, a great God, that God wants to hear prayers and wants to answer prayers. He's acknowledging who God is. Our prayer should always affirm God's identity, God's worthiness, God's sovereignty. This is what praise is about.

2. It's a Prayer of Admission. He admits his inadequacy and the inadequacy of all of God's people. It's acknowledging what I am and who I am; saying "God, I've blown it. I've made mistakes and I'm imperfect." Be specific.

3. It's a Prayer of Assurance. It's a prayer of faith in what God has promised. God's promises can be relied on and we need to live our lives in the light of that. You've got to learn those promises and act in accord with them.

4. It's a Prayer of Action. He's willing to be part of the answer; to do what needs to be done. We must be ready to say, "I'm willing to be part of the answer. God, You can use me. I commit myself. I'll be part of the solution."

Believers influence their world – if they don't then they're probably not believers. Each of us influences the world in some way. We either influence it for God, influence it to get our own selfish desires, influence it negatively, or allow it to be influenced by the broken, impersonal forces of this world. The issue isn't whether you're influencing the world or not, it's whether you're a good influencer or not. The first step to being a good, Godly influencer is to develop a passionate prayer life; time alone with God as part of a personal, daily, devoted relationship. Learn to pray like Nehemiah prayed and watch what God will do.

Real Prayer

"When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven. Then I said, 'O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of unfailing love with those who love him and obey his commands, listen to my prayer! Look down and see me praying night and day for your people Israel. I confess that we have sinned against you. Yes, even my own family and I have sinned! We have sinned terribly by not obeying the commands, decrees, and regulations that you gave us through your servant Moses. Please remember what you told your servant Moses: "If you are unfaithful to me, I will scatter you among the nations. But if you return to me and obey my commands and live by them, then even if you are exiled to the ends of the earth, I will bring you back to the place I have chosen for my name to be honored." The people you rescued by your great power and strong hand are your servants. O Lord, please hear my prayer! Listen to the prayers of those of us who delight in honoring you. Please grant me success today by making the king favorable to me. Put it into his heart to be kind to me.' In those days I was the king's cup-bearer.." Nehemiah 1:4-11 NLT

" I looked for someone who might rebuild the wall of righteousness that guards the land. I searched for someone to stand in the gap in the wall... but I found no one." Ezekiel 22:30 NLT

Two Things We Learn Immediately from Nehemiah

1. I Need to Pray Before I Do Anything Else.

"When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven." Nehemiah 1:4 NLT

2. When I Pray I Need to Depend on God

"...listen to my prayer! Look down and see me praying night and day for your people Israel." Nehemiah 1:6 NLT

"Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing." John 15:5 NLT

"...those who trust in the Lord will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint." Isaiah 40:31 NLT

"While Jeremiah was still confined in the courtyard of the guard, the Lord gave him this second message: 'This is what the Lord says—the Lord who made the earth, who formed and established it, whose name is the Lord: Ask me and I will tell you remarkable secrets you do not know about things to come. For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: You have torn down the houses of this city and even the king's palace to get materials to strengthen the walls against the siege ramps and swords of the enemy. You expect to fight the Babylonians, but the men of this city are already as good as dead, for I have determined to destroy them in my terrible anger. I have abandoned them because of all their wickedness. Nevertheless, the time will come when I will heal Jerusalem's wounds and give it prosperity and true peace. I will restore the fortunes of Judah and Israel and rebuild their towns. I will cleanse them of their sins against me and forgive all their sins of rebellion.'" Jeremiah 33:1-8 NLT

Four Elements of Prayer from Nehemiah

1. I Focus on Who God Is, Not on Who I Am.

"O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of unfailing love with those who love him and obey his commands." Nehemiah 1:5 NLT

2. I Confess My Failure and Confirm God's Authority

"...I confess that we have sinned against you. Yes, even my own family and I have sinned! We have sinned terribly by not obeying the commands, decrees, and regulations that you gave us through your servant Moses." Nehemiah 1:6-7 NLT

"Against you, and you alone, have I sinned; I have done what is evil in your sight. You will be proved right in what you say, and your judgment against me is just." Psalm 51:4 NLT

3. I Recall God's Faithfulness and Rely on God's Promises.

"Please remember what you told your servant Moses: 'If you are unfaithful to me, I will scatter you among the nations. But if you return to me and obey my commands and live by them, then even if you are exiled to the ends of the earth, I will bring you back to the place I have chosen for my name to be honored.'" Nehemiah 1:8-9 NLT

"Even though you are banished to the ends of the earth, the Lord your God will gather you from there and bring you back again." Deuteronomy 30:4 NLT

4. I Pray Specifically for Detailed Situations

"The people you rescued by your great power and strong hand are your servants. O Lord, please hear my prayer! Listen to the prayers of those of us who delight in honoring you. Please grant me success today by making the king favorable to me. Put it into his heart to be kind to me." Nehemiah 1:10-11 NLT

Four Qualities of Prayer from Nehemiah

- 1. It's a Prayer of Affirmation**
- 2. It's a prayer of Admission**
- 3. It's a prayer of Assurance**
- 4. It's a prayer of Action**