

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 9/1/10

Series: *“Facing the Past, Moving Ahead for God’s Honor: Nehemiah”*

Current study: Nehemiah 1:5-11

It’s such a privilege to pray, to know that the God of the universe listens to us as we call on Him. But prayer can become routine, even vain if we’re not careful. That’s why models are so helpful, and the Scriptures are full of models of how real people prayed. This evening we’ll be looking at one of my favorites, Nehemiah’s prayer.

Nehemiah was quite a man of God. He lived in the fifth century B.C. Things were tough for God’s people then (as they are now—it’s never easy to live for God in an anti-God world). But things were especially hard for the Israelites then.

Why? God had just judged them. How? By sending them from their homeland into captivity in Babylon. Why? Because they’d turned from Him in disobedience. So in 586 B.C. He allowed the Babylonians to deport them to the far away land of Babylon where they stayed for 70 years.

At the end of the 70 years, in fulfillment of His promise, God sent home a remnant of His people—and He used the pagan leader Cyrus to bring it about. Here are some key dates:

*559-530 B.C. Restoration of Jews begins under Cyrus

*516 B.C. Temple rebuilt

But things still weren’t what they used to be. This was a time of rebuilding and restoration. As time past some new projects needed attention, and God raised up individuals to accomplish them.

*458 B.C. – Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the seventh year of Artaxerxes I

*445 B.C. – Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem

Why did God bring these two men home? Ezra was a priest and teacher of the Law. He was a “man of the cloth.” The Jews needed his spiritual leadership at this time.

What about Nehemiah? What task did he fulfill? As we’ll see in future weeks, he rebuilt the wall around Jerusalem. You say, “That doesn’t sound like a very spiritual task. Building a wall?”

That’s what I like about Nehemiah. Ezra taught the Word. Nehemiah put it into practice in the secular arena. By occupation, Nehemiah worked for the king, and eventually became a governor. He was a civil servant. He took the Word of God to the secular arena.

In the first four verses of Nehemiah 1, we’re introduced to Nehemiah and to a problem he learned about—the condition of the city of Jerusalem was still in shambles. There was no wall to protect it.

So what did Nehemiah do? He wept, mourned, fasted, and prayed. For days he did this. Then one day he prayed the following prayer, the one recorded in verses 5-11.

It’s an incredible prayer, from which we can learn much. It involves four ingredients: reflection, confession, remembrance, and petition.

Look at verse 5. What’s significant about how Nehemiah began his prayer? He doesn’t rush into God’s presence. He doesn’t begin by asking God for things. Rather...

I. Reflection (5-6a)—He reflects on the character of God.

Q: What characteristic of God occupies Nehemiah’s attention first?

A. He acknowledges God's greatness (5a).

Notice the three phrases he uses to refer to God.

--"LORD" (Yahweh)

--God of heaven

--the great and awesome God

Discuss: What strikes you about Nehemiah's view of God?

B. Then he acknowledges God's covenant faithfulness (5b).

Q: What does God do according to the end of verse 5? He keeps His "covenant of love." What's a covenant? A promise. To whom did God make covenant promises?

C. He expresses his desperate need for the Lord (6a).

Q: How does Nehemiah express his sense of desperation.

Problem: We're not that desperate. Too often, we think we can "work things out." We're not gripped by how much we need God and His help.

Discuss: How can we maintain an appropriate sense of desperation?

II. Confession (6b-7)—He confesses sin to God.

Q: What is confession? What does it mean to "confess" sin? (note Prov 28:13 to see the opposite of confession—it's *concealing* sin)

Q: Whose sins does he mention?

A. He mentions the sin of his people.

B. He includes himself.

Q: Against whom had they sinned, according to verse 6? "against You"

Q: What had they done according to verse 7?

--acted very wickedly; Towards whom? Towards *You* (God)

--not obeyed the commands, decrees, and laws...(i.e. disobeyed God's Word) Please realize it is a serious thing to live in disobedience to God's Word.

Discuss: What stands out to you about Nehemiah's confession?

Discuss: What must we do to "confess sin?" What does God do when His people confess sin? 1 John 1:9

III. Remembrance (8-10)—He reminds God.

Note the first word of verse 8, "Remember." Does that strike you as odd, asking God to remember? Does God forget? Does He need reminders? No. But He's pleased when His people remind Him of some things—because He wants these things to be on *our* hearts (they're already on *His!*).

In fact, "remember" is a key word in the book. Nehemiah uses it over and over in his conversations with God (see *NIVsb* footnote).

Here Nehemiah reminds God of two things...

A. He reminds God of His promise (8-9).

Q: Which promise, according to verse 8? The one He gave to Moses.

READ Deut 30:1-5

So here Nehemiah rehearses and claims God's twofold promise...

1. *You promised to scatter us if we were unfaithful.*

Which God had already done...

2. *You promised to restore us if we returned to You.*

Which He'd begun to do, but wasn't completed.

Q: If His people repented, God promised to restore His them. But *to where*, according to the end of verse 9? "To the place I have chosen for My dwelling." To Jerusalem.

Key: We learn an important lesson about effectual prayer here. What is it? We must pray in light of God's promises. God wants us to identify and claim His promises.

To do: Name some promises we can claim in prayer...

B. He reminds God of His people (10).

Q: Who is the "they" referring to at the beginning of verse 10? God's people. Namely, Nehemiah has in mind his post-exilic people, the ones in great need in his life-time.

Q: Of what does Nehemiah remind God concerning His people? Two things...

1. *We are your servants.*
2. *You redeemed us.*

Q: When and how did He redeem the Israelites?

This is key. God is concerned about His promises and His people. He will not forget either. That should encourage us greatly.

IV. Petition (11)—He brings requests to God.

First he brings a general request, and then a specific one.

A. He brings a general request. Here it is...

"Let your ear be attentive to this prayer"

Apparently, Nehemiah wasn't the only one praying about this matter.

How do we know according to verse 11? He says, "and to the prayer of your *servants*."

B. He brings a specific request.

"Give your servant success today"

Q: By doing what? "By granting him favor in the presence of this man."

Q: What man? Note the end of verse 11, "I was cupbearer to the king."

Q: What, then, is Nehemiah's specific request? What's on Nehemiah's mind?

Look back at verse 3. What information did he just receive from visitors? He learned about two things—broken walls and burned gates.

Let that sink in. What's bothering Nehemiah? The wall in Jerusalem is broken down. That's the problem Nehemiah is praying about and asking God's help with.

That's not a "spiritual" problem is it? We shouldn't pray about menial things like broken walls, should we?

Yes, God is interested, and yes, we should. Realize this. God's name and reputation are affected by all facets of the lives of His people. And God is concerned about the things that affect His reputation.

So Nehemiah asked God to help him as he approached the king—which he did in chapter 2—to request permission to take a leave of absence from his job in Babylon, and lead a work team back to Jerusalem.

Application: Let's discuss some lessons from this. What do we learn about prayer from Nehemiah? How can we improve in this vital area of our lives?