

September 1, 2019

Sermon Series: "Nehemiah"

Sermon Title: "Why Pray?"

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Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Our text today is essentially one big prayer, prayed by the most famous cupbearer this world has ever heard of, he's practically the Michael Jordan of cupbearers. The man is Nehemiah, cupbearer to the king of Persia. You may have heard of Nehemiah, but it's likely that you haven't ever read the whole history that he wrote. He can be a pretty overlooked character in the Bible. God didn't use him to start a nation like Abraham or lead a nation out of slavery like Moses. He didn't get stuck inside a fish like Jonah or write his own biography of Jesus like Matthew. But he still has his own book here in the Bible. God still used him to do some amazing things.

Nehemiah lived an incredible life of faith and trust in God. He was continually challenged by others, trying to distract him from the task that God had set before him. But Nehemiah did not lose focus. He never forgot the great things that God did for His people, despite the tough situations that he faced.

At the very beginning of our text we find Nehemiah in one of those tough situations. Let's set the scene really quick, to see where Nehemiah is and why he is there. We find Nehemiah in Susa of Persia, asking about the Jews in Jerusalem and learns about the devastating situation they are in.

Nehemiah was a Jew himself, but he wasn't in Jerusalem, he was in Persia. Well, there were a lot of Jews in Persia at this time. The people of God had been thrown into exile many years before Nehemiah's time. Their kings had been wicked, they followed after foreign gods rather than the God of Israel. Because of their wicked ways, God sent them into exile in Babylon. The whole city of Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, was left in devastation. The temple of God was burned and the wall was torn down, but God promised not to leave them in exile. In the first chapter of Ezra we read that God used King Cyrus of Persia to send some people back to Jerusalem to rebuild His temple.

Since the rebuilding of the temple, Jews had slowly been returning back to Jerusalem, but the city as a whole was far from rebuilt. In verse three of our text, we hear the terrible news that Nehemiah gets from his brother in Jerusalem. Let's read verse three together, "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire."

Hearing this news breaks Nehemiah's heart. Nehemiah still knows that Jerusalem is his home, the city that God gave to His people. To hear that the people there are living in fear and shame, with no wall surrounding the city to protect the people is the worst possible news Nehemiah could hear.

How often do we find ourselves hearing news that just breaks our hearts? News that shakes us to our core, leaving us with our head in our hands wondering what we can do. How can this situation ever get better? Maybe it's a phone call telling you of the unexpected passing of a loved one. Maybe it's the doctor coming in to give you a negative diagnosis. Or it's the fact that almost every time you turn on the TV there's another mass shooting or natural disaster that leaves dozens and hundreds of innocent lives in utter devastation.

Nehemiah finds himself in one of these tough situations, hearing news that just tears him apart. But upon hearing this news, he does something incredible. He knows that there is nothing physical he can do at the moment. He can't just hop on the next donkey out of Susa and head off to Jerusalem. He can't just abandon his job as a cupbearer. But this news breaks him. He knows he must do something.

But Nehemiah's life was pretty comfortable, even though he was in exile. As I mentioned before, Nehemiah was cupbearer to the king. A cupbearer was a body guard of sorts. He would be next to the king during almost all of his meals, protecting the king from any physical harm and making sure that no one poisoned the king's food or drink. He had to be a very trusted person to hold this position. Nehemiah could have turned his back on the tough situation in Jerusalem and carried on with his life in Susa. But he didn't. He trusted in God. He knew what God had done for His people and that He promised to never forget His people. So Nehemiah prays. Read verse four with me, "As soon as I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven."

*As soon as he heard.* He didn't listen to his brother and then think, "Oh man that stinks, but I'm all the way over here in Susa, there's nothing I can do about it. I hope it gets better for them." No, Nehemiah knows what prayer can do. He knows that prayer is a conversation with God, a conversation with the great and awesome God of heaven. God promises to listen when we call on Him and Nehemiah knows that no one other than God can come to his aid.

*So he continued praying before the God of heaven.* Nehemiah trusted that God's ways were better than his own and he knew that God would act in His own time. Nehemiah did not ask for God to work at one time or another. He simply called on Him and continued to call on Him, trusting that God would answer in His own time and His own way.

Do we trust that God will listen though? Do we trust that God will act? When we hear the news that breaks our hearts, when we find ourselves in those tough situations, do we always run to God first? We can often become distracted by the immensity of the situation and think about ourselves. What can I do to fix this? How am I going to make it through this situation? We look inward because that seems easier. It can be scary to rely on God. If we put the situation in God's hands, then it's not up to us, we are no longer in control. We admit that we can't do anything to fix those tough situations. And that can be downright terrifying.

Nehemiah knows he can't do anything to fix the situation in Jerusalem. So he comes before God humble. He admits his sins and the sins of the people of Israel. Nehemiah knows that he is helpless without God, yet he also knows he has no right to come before God in prayer, he acknowledges that he has not kept God's commands, yet God promises to listen and wants to hear from him. Nehemiah knows that this is nothing to ignore. The God that created the heavens and earth out of nothing, the God that redeemed His people from slavery in Egypt, this great and awesome God promises to listen to him, a lowly cupbearer.

We too come must come before our God humble. Just like Nehemiah, we know that we are sinful. Every Sunday we begin our worship by admitting our sin. We are humble before God, because we know that on our own we have no right to go to God in prayer, but we are thankful that are not on our own. That same God that created all things out of nothing. The same God that delivered the Israelites out of Egypt, is the God that sent His Son to this earth to die for you. The great and powerful

God that raised His Son from the dead to redeem you, to forgive you, wants to hear from you. The great and awesome, redeeming, God leans down from His throne in heaven, puts His ear to your lips to listen to you. We come before God humble, in awe of His greatness, thankful that He desires to hear our prayer.

Nehemiah came to God humble, trusting that God will do what He promised to do, which is be with His people and remember them, because God has always remembered His people. In verse ten, Nehemiah is praying for the people of Israel, God's people. Read it with me, "They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand." God has already redeemed His people. They don't need to be redeemed a second time. Nehemiah has not forgotten what God did for His people all those centuries ago in Egypt. God redeemed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. He brought them out of captivity and brought them to the home that He promised them. God brought them to Jerusalem, the place that He promised to dwell. God never forgets His promises. He will not leave His people without a home.

God still does not forget His promises. God has already redeemed you and His redemption will never fade away. God will never forget what He has done for you. That He has forgiven you through His Son's death and resurrection and He has claimed you as His own, but we cannot take that for granted. It can be easy to neglect prayer because we know what God has done for us. Or we become so used to the knowledge that God has saved us that don't think prayer is that big of a deal. We think we don't need to pray because we are already "in."

It is because we are saved that we should pray. Because we are saved, we rely on God in all that we do and reliance looks like prayer. We pray because we know we cannot do it all on our own. Through Christ's death on the cross we now know that we are not on our own, so we call on God. The one who promised to be with you in every situation.

Nehemiah called on God. As soon as he heard that terrible news, he prayed to the God of heaven. But in praying to God, Nehemiah admitted that it was out of his hands, he trusted that God's timing was better than his own. So Nehemiah settled in, bringing to God his tough situations day and night, living a life of prayer.

We too must live a life of prayer. We humbly come before the great and awesome God of heaven day and night, bringing before Him the tough situations of our lives. And we trust in Him. God will answer your prayers, in His time and in His way. It may not be what we expect, but God's will is always perfect. He promises to answer your prayers, and God always keeps His promises. He promised to send a Savior and He sent His Son for us. It is because of His risen Son, Jesus Christ, that we humbly come before our great and awesome God, trusting in Him, even in our tough situations.