



On March 20, 1990, a football coach and his friend were driving to a Fellowship of Christian Athletes banquet in Pueblo, Colorado. They talked and prayed and sang as they often did on those trips, but on this particular night the coach shared with his friend a dream. He had a dream to gather Christian men from around the country to worship and challenge them in their walk with God. Three months later he gathered 71 men and shared his idea with them. They agreed this was a critical need so they committed to pray and fast once a week for it to happen. The next summer they held their first conference—4,200 men came. One year later they did it again—22,000 men came. Each year it grew until one summer over a million men gathered in various stadiums around the country. The movement, of course, was called Promise Keepers and the coach was Bill McCartney.

That's a great example of how God calls ordinary men and women to do extraordinary things for him. He doesn't use just professional pastors and Christian workers; he uses coaches and secretaries and plumbers and physicians and housewives. The Bible says every single person who knows Jesus has a calling. Each one of us has a unique combination of God-given natural talents, spiritual gifts, life experiences and passionate concerns that together make up our calling.

But the question I want to ask this morning is how does this call relate to prayer? We've been talking about prayer this summer. We've looked at a number of Old Testament prayers and learned about how to approach God. But one thing we haven't looked at yet is the relationship between what we do in service of God and prayer. How does prayer fit into the equation of our work for God. What kind of prayer prepares us for action?

Nehemiah shows us that prayer is the hinge on which all our activity swings.

To answer that question turn to the first chapter of Nehemiah. Let me give you a little background. The story begins in Persia. About 150 years earlier the Babylonians had invaded Jerusalem and hauled most of its inhabitants back to Babylon. But while they were there Babylon fell to another world power called Persia. Persia was led by King Cyrus. Cyrus was friendlier toward the Jews and allowed many of the Jews to return to Jerusalem. So starting in 538 BC groups of Jews began going back and eventually they were able to rebuild the temple. After that they started to rebuild the walls around the city as well. Walls were

essential in order to defend your city. But that didn't go as well and 75 years went by before anyone did anything about it.

This is where Nehemiah comes in. He was a Jew living in Persia in about 445 BC. He held an important position in the administration of the king of Persia who by now was a guy named Artaxerxes. Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the king. That may sound like he was some kind of glorified dishwasher but in fact this was a position of great importance. Only the most trusted man could hold that position. It was his job not only to choose the wine for the king but to taste it before the king drank it to make sure no one was trying to poison the king. More importantly he was a confidant to the king. Notice Nehemiah wasn't a religious professional (priest or scribe). He was a layman. It was in that capacity that God would use him.

Nehemiah was a layman with a passion for God and for God's city of Jerusalem. So one day he asked some people who had just been to Jerusalem how things were going there. They told him that the place was in shambles. The Jews in Jerusalem were in great distress, the walls were broken down and the gates were burned with fire. That broke his heart. It crushed him. What do you think Nehemiah did? Remember he was a man with some pull. He was a man in position to do something about this situation. He was in a perfect position to take action, and eventually he would. But what do you think he did first? Look at v. 4 says, *"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."* The first thing he did was pray. We're going to take a look at his prayer in a moment but for now I want you to see that prayer was the hinge upon which all of his activity would swing. His activity would be born out of prayer. And notice a few things about this.

Notice he prayed and fasted. For a period of time he went without food, not to lose weight or clean out his system, but as a way of humbling himself and focusing his attention on God. Throughout the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, fasting accompanies prayer in times of great crisis. Even in the book of Acts we see the early believers fasting and praying at critical times (Acts 13:3). There are times in our lives and in the life of a church when we're called to not just pray but to fast and pray.

Notice also he prayed corporately. While it might appear that Nehemiah prayed alone we know that some of this praying was done with his fellow Jews in Persia. If you skip down to v. 11

he mentions *“the prayer of your servant and the prayer of your servants.”* Nehemiah mobilized other people to pray with him. There are times we need to do that. There are times God’s people should gather together to pray and fast.

Finally, notice that he prayed for many days. We know his praying lasted about 100 days because in v. 1 it says it was the month of Chislev when he first heard the news about Jerusalem and then in 2:1 we read it wasn’t until the month of Nisan that he finally got permission to go back to Jerusalem. There are three months between Chislev and Nisan. For three months he prayed and waited on God. You know Nehemiah wasn’t the kind of man who liked to wait. He was a doer; a strong-willed, get-the-job-done kind of guy. Waiting on God was against everything he was about. But it’s often only through waiting on God that conviction is forged. If he would have acted impulsively before the right time everything could have been blown. Sometimes we have to persevere in prayer, waiting on God.

Nehemiah shows us how to pray in times of crisis.

Now if prayer was the hinge upon which all his activity swung, what did Nehemiah pray? In verses 5-11 we see a summary of what he prayed during that three month period. In recording this prayer, Nehemiah wanted to teach us something of how to pray when we face a crisis that concerns us and want to do something about it. Often when we face a crisis we don’t think much about **how** to pray. We just sort of barge into the presence of God and unload. Our emotions take over and our mind is put on hold. I’m sure that Nehemiah did that as will. But, this is a well thought out prayer that indicates somewhere along the lines he’d thought through the right way to approach God on these matters. And we can learn a lot from him. Listen to his prayer.

I said, “I beseech You, O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments, 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 sinned against You; I and my father’s house have sinned. 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. Remember the word which You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples; 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 cause My name to dwell.’ They are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power and by Your

strong hand. O Lord, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your name, and make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man “ Now I was the cupbearer to the king” (verses 5–11).

His attitude

One of the things that jumps out in this prayer is the overall attitude with which Nehemiah prays. Eight different times he uses the word *“servant”* to describe himself and his fellow Jews. This catches something of Nehemiah’s heart as he approached God. Even though he was a very important man his heart was humble before God; he understood that God calls the shots and his job was to listen and obey. He didn’t know what God wanted him to do, but whatever it was he was poised to do it because that’s what servants do. When you come to God you don’t call the shots, he does. You’re a servant. You’re **his** servant. This was the byproduct of his view of God.

His address

Nehemiah addresses God as the *“God of heaven”* and he focuses on two attributes of God. He focuses on God’s power first, calling him the *“great and awesome God.”* He can do anything. Nothing is impossible for him. But he also focuses on God’s love and faithfulness. He’s the God *“who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness.”*

When we come to God in a time of crisis there are two things to remember. First, God is able to do something about our situation. We need to believe that he’s equal to the task. But that’s not enough. We also need to believe he’s willing to act on our behalf; he’s a God who loves us and is faithful to us. Most of us have little problem believing that God is powerful enough to do anything, but we struggle believing that he loves us enough to act on our behalf. Perhaps we’ve had experiences with prayer before where God has disappointed us. There are times when God says “No.” But, the biggest reason we doubt is because of what Nehemiah alludes to in v. 5. He says God is faithful to those *“who love him and keep his commands.”* We fear God isn’t willing to act on our behalf because deep down we know we haven’t kept his commands. This brings us to the next part of the prayer.

His confession

Nehemiah confesses his own sin and the sins of his people. He says they’ve acted *“very corruptly”* and haven’t kept God’s laws. We know that during this period the priesthood was corrupt, the Sabbath was neglected, tithes weren’t being paid, the poor were taken advantage of, divorce was rampant. All these things were a violation of God’s law. Sounds like the church today!

When we come to God in prayer, it’s critical we allow him to search our hearts and reveal to us areas where we need cleansing and forgiveness. This is what Nehemiah did. As a leader he’s a

great model of transparency. We need leaders like this today. Men and women who don't set themselves above people; who recognize there are things in our life that are out of order and need changing. Men and women willing to say, "I and my father's house have sinned."

Is that part of your prayers? When you pray for change in your family or your church or your nation, do you search your own heart and confess your own sin? I know a lot of people who have a deep burden for our nation and a real concern about some of the ways we've gotten off track. But rarely do I hear them say, "I'm part of the problem." Instead they spend a lot of time pointing the finger. It's the same way with the church. Many people are concerned about the church as a whole in America and ways we've compromised. But rarely do I hear these people say, "I'm part of the problem. I need to confess my sin. The problem is not just with **them**, it's with **me**."

His recollection

The next portion of this prayer is what I call "recollection." He says, "**Lord, remember your word to Moses...**" Then he places before God the promises he'd made to his people. God had promised if his people rejected his commands they would be scattered around the world. And that's what happened. But, Nehemiah reminds God that he'd also promised to regather them to Jerusalem if they returned to him.

Why would Nehemiah feel like he needed to remind God of these promises? God's not up there saying, "Oh boy, Nehemiah, I'm sure glad you reminded me of that. Now where did I say that again? What was the chapter and verse?" No! This was just a way of asking God to make good on his promise.

Notice Nehemiah was a man of God's word. He was steeped in it. He's praying God's word. If you're not in God's word you can't pray God's word. This is the root of our confidence in prayer. We bank on God's promises given us in his word, and these promises guide us as well as embolden us in what we pray. It was the fact that he knew his prayers were rooted in God's word that allowed him to persevere in prayer for three months before anything happened. It's this that will keep us praying when all hope seems lost.

In the classic book *Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian and Hopeful were caught by the Giant named Despair and flung into his dungeons in Doubting Castle. Their spirits were low. But, Christian suddenly remembered a key he had been given called "promises." Pulling it out, he discovered it unlocked every door leading out of Doubting Castle. The Giant Despair died as he saw the pilgrims escaping. Have you learned that you possess a key called promises that will lead you out of the grip of doubt and despair? It's true; they can do that. And we have more of them than even Nehemiah had. We have what Peter called "**his precious and magnificent promises.**"

His petition

We've yet to look at what's perhaps the most crucial aspect of Nehemiah's prayer. Have you noticed he hasn't yet asked God for anything! He's in the midst of a crisis but he doesn't get around to asking for anything until v. 11 where he prays for success and compassion before the king. He doesn't mention the poor people back in Jerusalem in his prayer. He doesn't ask for the walls to be rebuilt. He just asks for compassion before the king. Why?

I believe in the process of praying through the problem for months, he developed a conviction that God was calling him to use his position with the king to secure permission to go back to Jerusalem and lead the rebuilding project. That's why it's not until after the prayer he reveals he's the cupbearer to the king. Besides creating a sense of climactic surprise, it hints it wasn't until after much prayer that he realized his position was crucial. I believe during this three month period Nehemiah heard God whisper in his ear and nudge him in this direction.

Prayer isn't a monologue. It's not us just laying our plans out before the Lord and asking him to bless them. True prayer is a dialogue. It involves listening not only for direction on what to do but direction on what to pray. As you come to the Lord with an issue or a problem and you begin to lay that need before him, God will often begin to give you a conviction about what to do or what to pray for. We have to be careful about that. If you think God is speaking to you it better be something consistent with God's word. You ought to also get some counsel from someone you trust.

But don't be surprised if God calls you to do something that pushes you to the very edge of your faith. This was no small request! It had been only a few years since this same king had made a decree to stop any work on the city of Jerusalem. Historians tell us that the Persian Empire, though still great, was beginning to show some weaknesses. This was a time for a king to crack down on his subjects rather than loosen up. And cupbearers were needed every day; it's not likely that they got vacation time. This was a bold request. Have you ever felt like God wanted you to do something but someone in authority over you was in your way? How do you handle that? You pray about it!

Do you know what will help you make this request? Look again at his request in v. 11. He asks to be granted success and compassion "**before this MAN...**" The Persian King was considered by everyone to be a god. But because Nehemiah knew who the God of heaven really was, he could refer to the king as just "this man." He knew the ancient Proverb, "**The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes**" (Prov. 21:1). That person that's in your way? He's just a man. His heart can be turned wherever God wants. And this king's heart was turned. If you read chapter 2 you'll see how God

moved him to not only allow Nehemiah to go back but to make it an all expenses paid trip!

CONCLUSION

All of this happened through prayer. Prayer is the hinge upon which all our activity must swing. In prayer we're reminded we're just a servant. In prayer we remembered God is both powerful and loving. In prayer we see how we've contributed to

the problem and confess our sin. In prayer we remember God's promises. In prayer we develop a conviction that God is calling us to do something for him. God has called each of us to serve him. He's called each of us into ministry. But apart from prayer all of our activity will be in vain.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.