



The question is not, Will we face challenges in life?

Instead the question is, How will we respond to the challenges?

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy." – Martin Luther King Jr.

So how will we respond to the challenges of life?

This last week my daughter Allie broke her leg. Poor thing is facing a big challenge: crutches; coming soon a week at an outdoor camp with a cast! Cassie and I faced a challenge as Allie rang her bell for us to prop her pillow, give her a drink, answer a question. Some of our challenges aren't personal per se, but spiritual challenges thrown at us: an unsaved friend, a hostile unsaved co-worker, an ethical dilemma at work that violates your Christian values.

The book of Nehemiah offers us some really great news about facing challenges. With God, we can rebuild our broken world. And this happens as God's people respond to crisis on their knees.

The book of Nehemiah is like a case study in overcoming life's challenges and brokenness because it recounts a season in this man's life when the storms hit hard and kept pounding him. After he passed through he was stronger, closer to God and more faithful.

In the 13 chapters of his story we learn that Nehemiah:

- » Lived as a prisoner of war
- » Received terrible news about his family and friends
- » Was called to a task much bigger than he could handle
- » Got death threats
- » Had people tell malicious lies about him
- » Struggled to lead people who were discouraged
- » Faced the depths of his sinfulness and of his people

When these challenges came and kept coming, Nehemiah turned to God three different times in prayer.

When challenges come your way, how do you typically respond? Some people curl up in a ball and say, "I can't take it!" Others get angry and lash out. Some are cool and indifferent; they've developed a protective shell around their heart. Some love challenges and say, "bring it on!" A friend asked me what I was preaching on today. I told him, "When trouble comes, turn to God in prayer."

He's not a Christian yet and that was the easiest way I could summarize this sermon. He said, "That's tough." What he meant was, it's really tough to trust someone else to solve your big problems. He's a very successful man and he's used to solving his own problems. And in his situation, that's really the best he's got.

But that's not the best a Christian's got. For anyone who's placed their faith in Jesus, we have the privilege and opportunity to turn to God during our darkest and most difficult times. This is what Nehemiah did when challenges came his way.

The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:1-2).

It's the month we know of as December and Nehemiah is with the king at his winter palace when he gets a surprise visit. A brother and some others have traveled 800 miles and they're having a little reunion. You can imagine Nehemiah's excitement! He can learn how everything is going in his homeland.

They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire" (v. 3).

The excitement of this reunion quickly takes a bad turn because the news is not good. The people in Jerusalem are facing horrible challenges and a broken wall. Nobody wants to hear that a special place you love is broken down: Your elementary school. Your college. The neighborhood from a special season of your life. A church you attended.

But there's more going on here. In verse 3 we're told that there's an atmosphere of disgrace in the region. If we look ahead to Nehemiah 2:17 it says the same thing. In the ancient world, a city without a wall was a disgrace. Walls provided physical protection, but they provided something psychological too—they were symbols of legitimacy and stability. "You've got a wall. You're an important place. Your god must be an important god." But if a city didn't have a wall, it was a lame and embarrassing place. You'd be better off being a Bedouin!

We're going to see from Nehemiah's response that he couldn't stand the thought that the city of God should have broken walls.

This was an insult to God. When Nehemiah hears of this, his heart sinks.

**When I heard these things, I sat down and wept.
For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed
before the God of heaven (v. 4).**

Nehemiah's immediate response to this challenge was to pray. He's sitting, weeping, mourning, fasting and praying for many days. Have you ever had a doctor check your reflexes with one of those rubber hammers? When they tap on your knee your knee responds immediately by kicking up. It's an automatic reflex. That's the kind of deep faith God wants to develop in you. When life kicks you in the knees—which it will—God wants your response, like Nehemiah, to be one of prayer.

Nehemiah not only prays, but the text says he fasted. Fasting is a spiritual discipline where you withhold from eating a meal in order to focus on God in prayer. People will fast for one meal, or a day. We know that Jesus fasted for 40 days.

Fasting is a way to teach our body, soul and spirit, that “man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Father.” We deny ourselves food so that we can feast on God. At this time of heartbreak, Nehemiah is filling his soul on God's presence.

How long did Nehemiah mourn, pray and fast? Well, he first hears about the news in December, the month of Kislev. Then, in chapter 2 it says he talked to the king in the month of Nisan. That's about four months. Incredibly, for four months Nehemiah made this crisis a matter of prayer. He wept, he mourned, he prayed and he fasted.

Before we look at the particulars of his prayer, let's talk about broken world prayer. Surprisingly, Nehemiah doesn't ask God for what's expected. The walls around Jerusalem are destroyed. His family, friends and nation are in great trouble and distress. The glory and splendor of his God isn't being revealed.

What's the expected prayer during a challenge or a broken world? If these circumstances were shared in one of our Community Groups, how would the group react? If you shared hardships like this with me, how would I pray for you?

- » Peace for family and friends
- » Relief from these challenges
- » “Help them rebuild those walls”

While I don't think any of these prayers are inappropriate, it's insightful and challenging to see that Nehemiah didn't pray for relief. And it turns out that it's uncommon to pray for relief in the scriptures. In Tim Keller's new book on prayer he said, “It is remarkable that in all of his writings Paul's prayers for his friends contain no appeals for changes in their circumstances.”

What does Nehemiah pray then?

Then I said:

“Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

“Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.’

“They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.”

I was cupbearer to the king (verses 5–11).

Did you see how different his prayer was? Instead of asking for relief, he exalted God. He shows true self-knowledge. He unapologetically wants God's attention. He bases one of his requests upon what God has said. He makes one simple request at the end: he exalted God.

“LORD, God of heaven”

“The great and awesome God”

“You keep your covenant of love”

“You redeemed your people by your great strength and mighty hand”

Prayer is primarily talking to God about God. It's adoring Him for who He is. Like Nehemiah, we should start our prayers with acknowledgment of God's raw unlimited power and God's tender compassion and mercy; God's trustworthy character; God's sovereign reign over the universe both from the beginning of time to eternity future.

You pray, not to get stuff from God but to get God Himself. That's the whole point. Tim Keller writes, “Prayer is both conversation and encounter with God...We must know the awe of praising his glory, the intimacy of finding his grace, and the struggle of asking his help, all of which can lead us to know the spiritual reality of his presence.”

We pray to be in his presence. Is that alone enough for you?

When I'm facing my challenges and directing all of my energy to solve them, I'm filled with anxiety and an unsettled spirit. Yet, when I exalt God in times of prayer, my perspective changes. My thoughts lift from temporary things to eternal things. My mind dwells on the solution, not the obstacle. And the weight of my burden shifts from my heart to the broad and always-capable shoulders of God.

As I exalt God, God Himself replaces my anxiety with His peaceful perspective. It's mysterious. It's counter intuitive. And this is the shared experience of many of you and Christians all over the world that comes from exalting God in prayer.

As Nehemiah is exalting God his self-awareness increases and he shows true self-knowledge. He calls himself "your servant" three times in verses 6 and 11. He calls his countrymen "your servants" five times in verses 6, 7, 8, 10 and 11.

"Servant" = slave. Nehemiah sees himself completely under the authority of God, which seems a logical flow after exalting God. In comparison to His greatness, no person is great. We are all equally small, broken and insignificant. Nehemiah is expressing this as he calls himself and everyone else God's servant. Then in verse 6 Nehemiah confesses: "I confess the sins ... acted very wickedly, not obeyed."

Nehemiah's confession not only shows us his humility, he show us that there's always something for us to confess. Nehemiah's personal sinful actions are not what's led to the broken wall in Jerusalem. He's living 800 miles away in another country. Yet, as he exalts God, his awareness of the purity of God is right before him. He's made aware of his part in sinning against God and he confesses it.

During my confession time of prayer, I was taught by my mentor to start with one simple question of God, "God, what do I need to confess to you?" After some time and it seems that I'm done confessing, I was taught to say, "OK. It seems that I'm done for now. Is there anything else I'm holding back?"

This is a scary experience because there's always something the Lord brings to mind that I need to confess. It's scary because I try to convince myself that "I'm doing fine. I've got it all together." And although I know that God loves me unconditionally, it's humbling to admit my sin. But it's worth the discomfort because there's healing in confession. In essence, healthy confession is like saying, "I'm sorry" to God.

Confession restores our relational connection with God just like an apology to a friend tears down the walls that separate us and reestablish the relational connection. If you want the closest relationship with God, follow Nehemiah's example and confess your sins to God.

You might think that with confession like this that Nehemiah would hide in shame like a disobedient dog caught by his master. But that's not the case at all! Nehemiah knows of God's limitless love, His endless second chances policy. So he unapologetically wants God's attention or he says, "Look at me! Look at me! Look at me!" ***"Let your ear be attentive to my prayer. Let your eyes open to hear and see me praying day and night"*** (v. 6). ***"Let your ear be attentive to my prayer"*** (v. 11).

Nehemiah has a blend of humility and confidence. He's humble because he knows that he's bringing nothing meritorious to God. Yet he's confident because God has granted him favor.

The Apostle Paul shows this same correlation between humility and confidence. In Romans 8, Paul expounds on the Christian's adoption into God's family. Our entrance into His family isn't based upon anything we've done, so he is humble. Yet he's been given the highest honor possible, as God's adopted child he's been given the right to call God his father. So we cry, "Abba, Father."

Isn't that an intriguing combination? Utter humility and extreme confidence. They seem to contradict one another but when you put exalting God together with confession of sin, this is the result.

Now, after all of this praying we get to part of Nehemiah's prayer that dominates most evangelical praying today—the requests. He bases one of his requests upon what God has said. ***"You said, 'If you're unfaithful, I will scatter you. But if you return to me and obey my commands, then I will gather all of my covenant people and bring them to Jerusalem and my temple'"*** (verses 8–9).

The request that Nehemiah is making here is for God to do what He's already said He would do—gather His people at the Jerusalem temple and do it in the style and grandeur that's fitting the God of the universe, not with broken down walls.

Then he makes one simple request at the end: favor with King Artaxerxes. After four months of praying, fasting and mourning, Nehemiah is ready to act. God has given him a plan. And Nehemiah asks God to make an opening: favor in the presence of the king.

I have a theory on Nehemiah's process that led him to the point of asking for this because I don't think Nehemiah had a vision for solving Jerusalem's crisis four months earlier. Do you ever feel like that? You're facing a crisis and you don't have any solutions! I think that was Nehemiah's situation.

Here's what I think happened: Nehemiah started by exalting God. Then he confessed his sin. He reminded God of what God said He would do and asked God to do it. These are three healthy fundamental prayer practices. As Nehemiah was doing these three things, I think he heard God say to him something like this, "Why don't you go to Jerusalem and rebuild those walls, Nehemiah?"

I know this passage of scripture doesn't say anything about this. But this has been a regular experience in my life and in the life of so many Christians. And typical for God—His plan, humanly speaking—was impossible. God's plan was for Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem and lead everyone to rebuild the walls around the city. There's no logical explanation for Nehemiah to be given permission to leave the king so he could go to Jerusalem. He was a slave. Nehemiah knew that, so he prayed and he kept on praying.

Hudson Taylor, the famous missionary to China once wrote, "It is possible to move men, through God, by prayer alone." Is there anything in your life that seems impossible? If so, that's God's speciality. He also said, "I have found that there are three stages in every great work of God: first, it is impossible, then it is difficult, then it is done."

How will the wall get rebuilt? It will happen through a man of prayer.

All of this reminds me of George Mueller. Mueller was the founder of the New Orphan House in Bristol, England. The first lodging was his own house for 30 girls. It expanded to 5 houses with 1,700 children.

The most unique characteristic of this orphanage was Mueller's approach. His motive for starting it was not to care for orphans; it was to give a tangible testimony of God's power and reality. He wanted nominal churchgoers to be strengthened in their faith. He wanted non-Christians to see the reality of God's power.

His method: He prayed and waited and prayed more. He reasoned that if God were going to receive the glory the way he'd envisioned it, Mueller didn't want to ever make a specific need known, nor would he ask people for anything. As he prayed and waited and prayed more, money came in for the rent of the first house. People would drop off eggs for breakfast, people would drop off bins of clothing. Donations would arrive through the mail. The entire organization, supporting 1700 orphans, was run by the power of prayer.

When Nehemiah faced brokenness that was way bigger than he could handle, he prayed. Nehemiah prayed and he kept praying and he kept praying.

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