

II. Nehemiah in Biblical Perspective  
*The Memoirs of Nehemiah - Arise and Build*  
“The Priority of Prevailing Prayer”  
Nehemiah 1  
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August 21, 2011 – Morning Sermon

We are in Nehemiah 1 and this is our second study in Nehemiah coinciding with our campaign “Arise and Build for Coming Generations” which actually comes from Nehemiah 2 which I’ll be looking at next Lord’s Day. We will begin by looking at Nehemiah 1:1-3 which says *1 The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah.*

*Now it happened in the month of Chisleu, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the capital, 2 that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. 3 And they said to me, “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.”* Now what will Nehemiah do when he hears that? We will walk our way through this text.

The grass withers, the flower fades, the Word of our God abides forever and by His grace and mercy may it be preached for you.

I have kind of come to Nehemiah in my Christian ministry a number of ways. As a child I remembered being taught who the four shortest people in the Bible. One was Zacchaeus because he was a wee little man. The other was Bildad because he was Bildad the Shuhite (shoe height). Then according to the King James, Peter was small because it says “He slept on his watch.” You have to be short to sleep on your watch. Then of course there was Nehemiah (knee-hi-miah!). But then as I became a believer and began to study the book of Nehemiah it was always presented as this marvelous example and it is of Christian leadership that God uses. So as we look at it we will be drawing those principles out.

Whenever you come to the Word of God, why do we study the different books of the Bible, like the Old Testament which we are doing now on Sunday nights? Now this isn’t exhaustively but whenever I open up an Old Testament text for personal reading or preaching, I know two things I can take to the bank. The Bible says in the book of Romans that these things, speaking of the Old Testament, were written for our encouragement and instruction. So it is no accident as we look at God expanding and renovating facilities at Briarwood to accommodate and push forward this marvelous ministry for Coming Generations to our children, youth and student ministry, that we have gone right here to Nehemiah 2. We will arise and build and the Lord our God will give us success, so Nehemiah how would you have us approach that?

The second thing I know about the Old Testament is that it always points us to Christ. Whatever road map is there for encouragement or instruction it is focused, founded upon Christ and it is penetrated by Christ so it is with the book of Nehemiah. Jesus Himself tells us this, “Beginning with Moses and all the prophets He explained Himself in all the Scriptures.” So how does Christ give us this road map of encouragement and instruction as Nehemiah points us to the Savior in all the issues of life, including whether it’s a facility expansion campaign or even in something bigger?

Nehemiah had a mission. God's people had a mission but they were under attack and they were like exiles. So it is with us. We are sojourners in this world. We are exiles and the walls are down.

Now the walls are not the walls of America. Certainly those walls are down. The walls that Nehemiah would point us to are the walls of the citadel of God. In the New Testament that is the church of God. How is it that we go about this? I want to walk through this text with you. In Nehemiah 1, if you have a concern for the work of the Gospel in this country and around the world, there are two essentials in this chapter that are non-negotiable. In other words, if we miss these two, I don't care what we do in this country or this campaign or anything, there is no way that the God of glory will give success because He will not be glorified and it will not be done for Him, by Him or unto Him.

What are the two absolutely non-negotiable essentials? To discover them let's take a look at the text in Nehemiah 1:1-3. The first thing we are told is that Nehemiah makes an inquiry. You live your Christian life by being a learner so he starts asking questions. People are asking if Hanani is really his brother and I don't know. I know it says the word brother but that could mean kinsman, relationship, some kind of uniting relationship or it can mean an actual brother in the family. So we don't know for sure but notice Nehemiah asks two questions. He wants to know about the people of the exile who have returned.

Let me stop right here and put this into context. God's people have been taken away by the disciplining hand of God when the Babylonians conquered them and Jeremiah said it would be for 70 years while God refines you and disciplines you. Then God will deal with the nation that took you into captivity by raising up a king who will free you and sure enough that was Cyrus and the Medo-Persians. They defeated Babylon and in 538 BC just like Jeremiah had said Cyrus gave an edict to send the people back under Zerubbabel and Joshua the High Priest. They go back and rebuild the temple. About 50 years later Artaxerxes the first sends another wave back this time under Ezra, the Bible teacher. The temple has been rebuilt the people are not worshipping or honoring the Lord so Ezra comes back to deal with them. Now we are at 445 BC, almost a hundred years after the first wave had come back and now we will see in the book of Nehemiah a third wave of people returning under Nehemiah's leadership.

How do we get there? Nehemiah makes an inquiry about two things. Nehemiah 1:2 says *And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem.* Here he is in this citadel of Susa, this pagan kingdom and he wants to know about the citadel of God, the capital of His people. Hanani tells Nehemiah two things about the people. Number one they are distressed and number two they are shamed. Another translation says "they are shamed and reproached." In other words, they are in distress and their shame I believe is not about what people are saying about them but the shame of their sin because amazingly Ezra tells us that the very thing that they had done that sent them into exile, they were back doing again. They were marrying outside the covenant, doing pagan worship, they didn't go to the temple and worship, weren't honoring the Lord and were starting to engage in the very pagan practices and pagan worships they had done before whereby God out of His love had decided to discipline them. So Ezra is coming back to teach them that is not right. Nehemiah finds out that it is still going on. They are burying the shame of their sin and are under distress.

Let me tell you about the condition of the city. The walls that Nebuchadnezzar tore down over a hundred years ago are still down and the ten gates he burned are still down. They are not hung and that's what the report is to Nehemiah. This is extremely crucial because when Nehemiah hears this, what is his response? He wept and he mourned.

Nehemiah 1:4 says *4 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.* So we are told that Nehemiah did two things in response when he heard the news. One he wept and mourned for days and two he fasted and prayed for days. I think that is extremely insightful and I want to draw it out for you just a little bit more in a minute.

So now let's take a look at how Nehemiah prayed. His prayer starts off in Nehemiah 1:5 which says *5 And I said, "O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments.* Nehemiah starts with adoration and not accusation. Why do I emphasize that? When difficult times come upon us and people we love what is our usual response? It is "God how could You let that happen?" We usually accuse God of being unloving, inattentive, and unfaithful. That is usually our response. The other day someone said to me, "Pastor we have a real political problem in our country because we have an entitlement culture." I said, "That is not a political problem that's a moral problem." Politics follows morals. We have an entitlement culture because we have an entitlement view of life where it's all about me. So we'll be glad to have any kind of policy that will support that. God exists for me and in fact you exist for me. That is our normal response but Nehemiah is someone who is saved and walking with the Lord.

When he hears this he doesn't accuse God of Him being unfaithful to him being the center of life. His first response is the adoration of God. He says "God, You are a God of grace, of loving kindness, who keeps covenant and has steadfast love forever." Nehemiah not only adores God for His loving grace and His steadfast love but he also draws out the marks of God's grace. How do you know those who are kept by God? How do you know those who are loved by God steadfastly? You know it by what he says in the next part for they love Him and keep His commandments. Those are His people.

You have two choices here. Either that is teaching those who love God and keep His commandments God will keep covenant and steadfast love. No, that's religion because any religion can come up with that. That's not Biblical Christianity. Biblical Christianity isn't "I love God and keep His commandments so God will love me and keep me." Biblical Christianity is God loves me and keeps me and because He first loved me, what do I do? I love Him. Do you think Jesus might be quoting this? Jesus said, "If you love Me you will keep My commandments." So loving Him and keeping His commandment is not the cause of His steadfast love and grace, it is the mark of His steadfast love and grace. How do you know someone is kept by the grace, love and faithfulness of God? You'll see it falteringly because they will never do it perfectly this side of eternity but they love Jesus and want to keep His commandments and when they don't they are convicted about it. There is something inside that says "That's not right." So Nehemiah starts off with adoration and not accusation.

The second thing is he goes to confession of sin and not covering sin. Nehemiah 1:6-9 says *6 let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants,*

*confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. 7 We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. 8 Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, 9 but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.'*

Nehemiah says here “This is what I know. God keeps His covenant. His people whom He keeps by grace love Him and keep His commandments. We are under distress, what does that tell me?” Nehemiah doesn’t say “God Your people are in distress and look at the condition of the city of God that must mean You aren’t keeping covenant.” No, the condition of God’s people and the condition of the city is not the occasion to accuse God of unfaithfulness, it is the affirmation of His faithfulness. Why are they in that condition? It is because they refuse to love Him and they refuse to keep commandment so God in His love is disciplining them. The condition is not the occasion to accuse God but it’s the evidence of what He said in His Word He would do, He is doing. He is actually dealing with them just that He said that He would.

Then Nehemiah gives petition and it is not with presumption. Nehemiah 1:8-11 says *8 Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, 9 but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.'* *10 They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. 11 O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”*

Somehow I see this all the time from television to radio where we think the evidence of our faith is shown in prayer in our arrogant presumption and demands of God. We say “God I’m demanding You do this because You said that.” No, that’s not it. Certainly God loves for you to bring His promises to Him but notice that the petition comes not with presumption but with humility and supplication.

Nehemiah also reason with God and doesn’t recoil. He says “God, I know we are in the condition that we are because You’re faithful to Your Word, now I’d like to tell You something else You said in Deuteronomy 30 and 31. (The chapters probably weren’t there but that’s what he is quoting from.) You said that You save us that we might love You and keep Your commandments and when we don’t You said that You will bring discipline upon us so You have done it. You also said that if we repent and return then You will gather us together and again Your Name will be feared, You will be loved, and Your Name will be honored in the city of God, the temple of God, among the people of God once again. So God for Your glory I bring You Your Word, now O God do Your Word.” So Nehemiah calls upon God.

Now I want to give you what I believe, is life transforming takeaways from this text. The first one is that when you walk through this text unmistakably the Holy Spirit through the writer of this memoir of Nehemiah who is leading the people to arise and build is getting to you the preeminence of prayer in the Christian life and in the Christian

endeavor. In a life that is given to the Lord the preeminence of prayer is not an add-on or a go-to or when someone says “The least I can do is pray for you” which is a giveaway that I don’t have prayer and preeminence. Prayer may not be the only thing I can do for somebody but it’s never the least thing and it certainly ought to be the first thing that I do.

I am very indebted to R.C. Sproul because of some insights he gave around this subject. He was much more cultured than I am in terms of art. He is a connoisseur of Rembrandt. I have one Rembrandt print in my office but that’s my one. He can quote all the Rembrandt prints and how Rembrandt always realized that art is something that is fixed. Once it’s done it’s done. Sproul uses the Rembrandt on Jeremiah, the Lamentations of Jeremiah and he gave a history on this. Rembrandt did fifty sketches before he came up with the famous Jeremiah portrait that he did. The portrait is what the moment is that captures the life. Somebody makes a movie and they want to advertise it. They have to pick out one still photograph to get you the message of the entire two hour movie. What is the one photograph you would pick out?

Here is an example. Here is God. I am only going to let you say one word about Him. What would be the one word you would say about God? We don’t have to guess on this one. It is holy. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty. The Bible teaches us that. Here is the Gospel and you don’t have time to explain the whole Gospel so Paul what is short hand for the Gospel? It is the Word of the cross. Is the manger important? Yes. Is the empty tomb important? Yes. Is the second coming important? Yes but it is all right there at the cross where the love of God meets the holiness of God so if I have to capture it at one place it’s the cross. He takes us right there.

In Rembrandt’s painting on Jeremiah, it’s Jeremiah holding the Bible while Babylon is destroying Jerusalem behind him but he is holding onto God’s Word, even as the city he loved was perishing. Take that forward to Nehemiah. If you had to draw a picture about Nehemiah what would you draw? Up until about three months ago when I was studying this I would have had Nehemiah holding the governor’s scepter or I would have had Nehemiah with a trowel working on the wall or with a sword and a trowel. I don’t think so anymore. If I could paint I would put Nehemiah on his knees just like Jeremiah when the city was in distress he grabbed the Word. Nehemiah knows the Word and he goes to his knees and grabs prayer. I believe that is what captures him. The preeminence of prayer has taken hold of him and is at work within him. As soon as I heard these words...Nehemiah wept, mourned and prayed.

What is interesting is what is not there. It doesn’t say as soon as he heard the words about Jerusalem and the people I got angry. He didn’t get angry even though he is capable of getting angry. When we get to Nehemiah 4 he gets angry. He gets so angry with one man that he snatches the hair out of his head. He can get angry but he doesn’t get angry when he hears this. He doesn’t make accusations and he doesn’t perish in the angst’s of life where he could have said “I guess I’ll just give up. The world is so bad. Look what they are doing to God’s people. I guess I’ll grin and bear it and go on to heaven.” He doesn’t have the paralysis of angst, the misdirection of anger, the futility of accusations against God and he doesn’t even get angry at the enemies of the people of God. Nehemiah is a man of action if you do further reading in this book you’ll see that so when he sees the walls are still down I would expect him to say “I’ve got a plan. My motion would be to rebuild the walls but I’ll go to prayer to get God to second the motion.” No, he immediately goes to prayer before any plan or strategy comes. He goes

to the preeminence of intercessory prayer and not immediately to action but to his knees and before the Lord.

The second takeaway is the priority of intercessory prayer. Why is prayer a priority with Nehemiah? Why doesn't he go to a plan first or sit down and think his way through it first? Why does he immediately weep, mourn, fast and lay hold of God in intercessory prayer? I think he does that for two reasons. Number one is that he knows God and knows that is his only help. The second thing is he knows himself and he knows people. He knows the answer is not in people and in the world. The answer is in God and I know God from His Word.

I want to give you an unspoken here. This chapter starts off by saying "Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah" and it ends with "Nehemiah the cupbearer to a pagan king." When I go through this and see the profound, prioritized, knowledgeable life quoting Deuteronomy 30, this is a man who was born in exile. He didn't have the benefit of being raised in a Christian environment with a Christian church. No, he was raised in exile. He was under the influence of pagans all over the place but somewhere he got to know the Word of God so that he could know God and have a right doctrine of man. He understood those things and that's why he was able to go to prayer.

Do you know who I think the unspoken hero is here? This is purely speculation. I think it is Hacaliah. He did not die in a pile in exile. He raised the next generation, his son. He raised him in the Word of God to understand it and to understand life so that Nehemiah would know the answer was with God. So the first thing I will do because I know the Word is to pray. He says "God here is what You have done and here is what we have done." Nehemiah knows God from His Word. He knows what we have done for we have sinned. The answer is not in us, the answer is in You. So the first thing I am going to do is go to You in prayer. That doesn't mean I don't have something I am responsible to do but I'm going to You because without You we can't do it. So it ought to be with us for we know more than Nehemiah does.

We have a New Testament text that tells us that "Without Him I can do nothing" (John 15:5). Do you believe that? You can do nothing that honors Him and has lasting impact without Him. You can go through the motions of life but you can't bring glory to God and enjoy Him without Him. The Bible also tells us that "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). That's why His reflex is priority and preeminence of intercessory prayer as he goes to the Lord.

Here is a third takeaway. If he has the priority of prayer and believes in the preeminence of prayer, then what does prevailing intercessory prayer look like? What is the effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man look like? I want to give them to you from this text. The first one is that prevailing prayer is intentional and intense. Very clearly in this text we are being told that when he heard this he intentionally went to prayer as preeminent and a priority. He also went with intensity. He wept and mourned. How do you intensify prayer? He fasted which is the intensity of what he did. There is an unused instrument in the life of believers today. The reality of sin and the overwhelming reality of our impotence sends us to "God, we don't even need food and drink, we need You." Notice also the intensity of duration. He did it for days. It wasn't like he said "Lord, we're in trouble can You help us out? Okay, I'm going to go get a plan." He laid hold and wrestled with God.

The second thing is he is theologically and historically informed. He knows his Bible and he knows history. He knows his Bible for God this is what You did. You put us in slavery in Egypt and then You fulfilled Your Word after 430 years You brought us out. You redeemed Your people. You delivered them. When they got to the Promised Land You warned us. You said “I have delivered you. I have redeemed you now love Me and keep My commandments. If you don’t I’ll raise up a nation...etc.” Nehemiah is actually quoting Deuteronomy here, what God had said. In other words, the situation doesn’t dictate the content of his prayer, the situation called him to prayer. His Bible dictated the content of his prayer. He knew the Word of God. He knew God and he knew what God was doing from His Word. God it isn’t that You’re unfaithful for You said You would do this and You’re doing it. He is historically informed. He knows the history of what God has done. Why would he do that? He knows that his God is the same yesterday, today and forever. Now his prayer is informed. God You also said, “If we repent and turn to You, You will gather us and put Your Name again at the citadel of God. We know that.”

The third thing is that Nehemiah is marked by humility and confidence, not arrogance. He is confident of who God is, the truth of God’s Word, the promises of God, not in himself but in God and in himself he approaches God with humility. Twice he says “O Lord, please be attentive (hear us)...”

Notice also that it is saturated with confession and repentance which is the fourth thing. He says “I have sinned, my fathers have sinned, we have sinned. It is amazing that worse has not happened to us because of our sin” which I’m sure he would have said. He realizes that God is being gracious and this isn’t a judgment of sin to cast His people away but it is the act of loving discipline to bring His people back to Him. So Lord, we confess and we repent. He doesn’t just ask God to listen to prayer but he asks God to listen to prayer that is given by people of a certain dynamic.

Nehemiah 1:9b-10a says **9**... *I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.* **10** *They are your servants...* I can’t tell you how different that is. My tendency is to read God’s Word and kind of see God as the genie in the bottle that I can rub three times with prayer and get Him to do what I want Him to do where God is my servant, instead of God served to save me that I might serve Him and surrender to Him. He goes on to say in Nehemiah 1:10-11 **10** *They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.* **11** *O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who (who does he want to listen) delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.*” That’s what he calls for.

Then, fifthly, he focuses his prayer on God’s glory. Why is he concerned about the temple of God, the people of God and the city of God? Two times he tells you in the text “because You chose to put Your Name there.” I want you to understand something here. I thank the Lord for the country I live in and God’s kind providence to us but the walls he is talking about directly here are the walls of the church of Jesus Christ when you bring it to the New Testament. That is what he is talking about. He wants God to build these walls up and hang the gates again so that His people would be secure in Him and then move out for Him. The reason is because God chose to put His Name on you. You, as the people of God are the citadel of God. He dwells in your midst. You are the

temple of the Holy Spirit so God build the walls of my life and the walls of Your church. This is not about us. This is about You.

I want to conclude with this takeaway that's not a simple takeaway but it's a takeaway. Here it is. Our undeniable need today is a Gospel Awakening, the absolute prerequisite is a revived church. I don't want to be misrepresented. I love and want things to happen in the country I live so that it might be a bastion which imperfectly but progressively the work of the Gospel is seen and expanded from here and around the world. I know what my country needs is not simply a president or a law. My country needs a Gospel Awakening.

Here is something else I know. You won't have a Gospel Awakening without the instrument that God chooses to bring that Gospel Awakening through and that's a revived church. The walls rebuilt in His people and in His church. That is what is ultimately needed today. It is the revived church that produces statesmen, sends men and women into business, science, education and media. It is that revived church fulfilling that Great Commission of making disciples.

I know we won't have a Gospel Awakening without a revived church and we won't have a revived church until God's people prioritize, prevailing intercessory prayer. That is a non-negotiable. We have not because we ask not and when we do ask we ask amiss to consume it upon ourselves. When we do pray it is self centered and not God centered. We need God centered, prevailing, prioritized prayer. In other words, this was 2500 years ago, when they take a snap shot of Briarwood or of me that it would come back – knees, prayer, they took everything to the Lord at the mercy seat.

I believe with all my heart as I look at the situation of the church of Jesus Christ it is impotent and at best five miles wide and one inch deep and I don't think we need another strategy. We don't need to re-engineer the church. We need to know the Word of God and then get on our knees before God and call upon Him with all of our heart. Let me use this facility campaign here at Briarwood. It is no accident as we lay out what God has brought before us and the opportunity for coming generations to impact our students and our children. It's no accident that the very next weekend is an entire weekend on revival prayer with great speakers like Al Baker.

I asked Al, "When you do these prayer conferences for churches to learn how to intercede for revival, how many come?" He said, "Harry I'm praying for a hundred." I thought we should have many more than that and I just got to thinking I really wonder how many we'll have show up. Do I really want to be taught? Do I really think it's important, like the disciples who said 'teach us to pray'? Is that really a priority in my life, revival prayer or is it an add-on if I can squeeze in some time to talk to God and to learn about how to talk to Him? I believe with all of my heart until we as God's people go to our knees, we will be irrelevant. You're not irrelevant because we are not up to date, we're irrelevant because we're not up to speed in our walk with God on our knees in prayer.

Thirdly and finally we need to repent of our worldliness, being conformed to the world and return to God and Godliness. That is where we need to go. The two non-negotiables are prioritized prevailing intercessory prayer and then repentance and a return to Godliness by returning to the Lord Himself. We love God and keep His commandments, not to be saved. God's steadfast love in Jesus Christ saves us but

because He has loved us we love Him and if we love Him we desire to keep His commandments. God calls us to that.

I sat down and ask myself on this “Harry why are you living your life and what are you doing with your life?” Ultimately why you are living your life and what you think is important in your life is determined by who you are living your life for. Is it me or Him? Do I love Him who has loved me? If I am looking for a god who revolves around me and the orbit of my life or do I ask God to bring me to Himself and use me. Then prayer and the Word will be important. That’s ultimately why repentance to Godliness is a must, confession of sin to repent of ungodliness is a must but the first thing is to surrender to Him. You are Jesus. You are the love of my life. For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Nehemiah the son of Judah is pointing you to Christ. Nehemiah leaves this position of privilege to come to the shame of his people. Jesus left the glories of heaven to come for you. What do we know about Jesus when He came? He prayed in the wilderness, in the Garden of Gethsemane, He went to a cross, rose again, and there He sits praying for you. Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is it that condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes rather who is raised who is at the right hand of God the Father who now intercedes for us. Nehemiah is pointing you to Him. Come and call upon Him. He loves to hear and move through the prayers of His people. Let’s pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the time we have been able to spend together. Thank You for the Lord Jesus. Father, would You take us through those steps right now? Speak with the Lord in prayer. Here it is – surrender, confess, repent. Lord, I am Yours and You are mine. Father, may we leave here certainly walking on feet but may we live on our knees at the mercy seat for Christ’s sake and for Your glory where You have chosen to place Your Name, Amen.