

## **The Most Important Thing We Can Do**

### **Nehemiah 1**

Dr. Sandy Willson

Sandy Willson speaking of the beautiful piano piece that Daniel Cason played during the offertory...They said that on one occasion when David was playing the harp, he was prophesying. You just prophesied. Jesus. What a wonderful name. It is indeed.

It's a great privilege to be with you again tonight. It always is to come to Briarwood. It's just a home away from home. I'm sorry that Alison's not with me this weekend. She would have loved to be with you. She has some difficulty in traveling as much as I do. And by the way, if you're wondering why Randy Pope (who has a full-time job) is very interested in helping with Dr. Doriani, and I, who have a very active full-time job and interested in helping Briarwood through these next months as you search for a Sr. Pastor...it is because we love you and have such great respect for Briarwood Church and all that you stand for and have stood for all these years. And our prayerful desire, along with Dr. Doriani, is that this will be a very, very profitable season for you. It has its pain in it. It has anxieties in it, but it's profitable. God has us in this place. It's intentional. He's not shocked. Harry Reeder did not surprise the Lord back in May, and we are here because of his sovereignty in his plan for us. And we're just very honored to be part of it with you. And, you know, in Randy's case, he is virtually a child of this church, as you nurtured him in his early years. And I'll tell you about my first experience with Briarwood. I was 30 years old. I was a brand-new pastor out of seminary. I didn't know what in the world I was doing. Our session allowed Alison and me to go to the Pensacola Institute for study leave. So I was in East Tennessee, driving through Birmingham and I just thought, I'll just pick up the phone and call Frank Barker to see if I could drop in to Briarwood and say hello. We had never met but I'll just see if he'll help me out a little bit. Frank said, Sure, just come on down here. So I did and we met on 280, you know, where the old church was. And you must have been very crowded over there because I don't think Frank even had an office. We met in some little supply room, as I remember it, and he told me about "covered dish dinners" and how to evangelize and disciple people. It was a profitable meeting for me to say the least.

Five years later, Frank was preaching in Chattanooga in a little church, and I heard about it. I decided to go hear him preach on Sunday. I went and I just sat in the back, listened to him preach, and there was an ice cream social down the basement afterwards. I just went down to get my ice cream and walked behind Frank, and he grabbed my arm. He said, how you doing, Sandy? I thought, how does he remember my name? But I was reminded of that when John (Haines) was talking about your interns. And you've got interns everywhere, and you always have. And the reason is Briarwood is a giving church. You not only give money to missions, which you do a lot of, but you give of your time and your effort, and you give people away. And the rest of us in the Presbyterian/Reformed world have always been very appreciative of that. And of course, as you know, Harry Reeder and I were best friends. And so my relationship to you has been first of all, and great appreciation for your senior pastors. You only had two of them over all these years. Surely you could have fired somebody between now and then 😊 and they've been people whom I've had great respect for. But as I've been here on a number of occasions, this is a warm receiving church. And my own family who moved out of Birmingham this past year, one of our sources of sadness, experienced such warmth here, which was no surprise to me at all.

Well, let's turn to the book of Nehemiah, and I'll tell you why.

As I mentioned this morning, we live in a generation, which brings us great concern. There have been some things happening even in the USA over these past five years that have caused great concern -- I mean, I know I sound like an old person concerned about my grandchildren. I remember my grandparents were concerned about the culture I was growing up in. I suppose it's true for all of us, but it does seem to me as though things have intensified. And as I mentioned this morning in the second service anyway, we've seen the greatest exodus from the American evangelical church in our 200 plus year history. We had 40 million people leave the church over the past 25 years. The number of people who say they have no religious affiliation whatsoever, who are around the age of 30, has doubled over the past 20 years.

So, we're seeing some trends that deeply concern us and we wonder what should we do? And I want to turn to Nehemiah, because having read the story, I'm sure most of you have you know that Nehemiah was no contemplative. He was not a monk. He was a government leader. He was a governor in Israel. He was an activist. He was a very active man. And when you read Nehemiah, one of the things that holds your attention is the vibrancy of Nehemiah. And many of us preachers will teach series on leadership lessons for Nehemiah because you can get a bunch of them. But what I want us to notice in Nehemiah is that in the tragic period in which he lived, he also had a strategy. He knew what he was doing and he was an activist. He didn't lay back and wait for everybody else to go to the front in his place. He went to the front. He suffered. He paid the price. You remember when he was governor in Jerusalem, he paid his own way for 12 years. And the reason was he was a wealthy man, but he spent his own expenses. Rather than taxing the people he supplied the governor's mansion and all of its servants out of his own account for 12 years. It's the kind of heart he had for his own people. So he was an activist, a political leader, a Christian political leader. However, what you're going to discover in this first chapter of Nehemiah that he was, first of all, a man of prayer.

And that's my main point with us tonight. If we want to know what to do, not only in this season at Briarwood, but you want to know what we do when we're concerned about our nation or about our culture is, first of all, to go to prayer. And once again, let me tell you about my experience of Briarwood. You know, Frank, not only remember the names of younger men, but he would use younger men and he would put us up in front of people and he would promote us. And so often at your officers' retreats, you know, Frank would bring in a younger man. He did that to me one time, and I was his roommate. Well, if you don't want to get on your knees and pray, you don't want to be Frank's roommate, because that's exactly what we did. And then and, you know, Harry and I have been friends for over 40 years and been on our knees together many, many hours. And I remember one time we were talking about the elder ship and I think I said something like, you know, Acts 6 shows us that, you know, we're to have deacons because the elders devote themselves to the ministry, the word and prayer. And Harry said, no, the ministry of Prayer and the word is right. Literally in the text, a prayer comes first. And so you've had two pastors who believed deeply in prayer. And I'm praying that your next one will be the same so that your ministry is fueled by a devoted relationship to God that's expressed in prayer. That's what I want us to notice in this first chapter of Nehemiah.

Let me remind you a little bit of the background. Then we'll read the text. And I want to make some observations about prayer that we can learn from the text. Nehemiah was basically a cup bearer to the Persian king. Now that may not sound like a very impressive job unless you understand ancient history and how important cup bearers are. People would poison Kings. So that was one of the ways you assassinate a king is to poison him. So a king would have his most trusted executive to be his cup there

because the cup bear would drink the wine before he handed it to the king. So obviously this person was a trusted confidant of the king of Persia. And this was Nehemiah. A Jewish man had risen in the ranks to be at the highest level. That's the reason he was a wealthy man. He had a very high post in one of the most powerful national military groups in history, the Persians. The Persians defeated the Babylonians in the sixth century B.C. and you'll remember that after they did so, Cyrus was the king of Persia. He had a view of pluralism which suggested rather than he melt down all the gods of the other nations, he send the people back to build their temples and have their own worship. That was his strategy for creating a multi-religious empire known as Persia. So therefore, he sent the Jews back to Jerusalem, which had been destroyed in 586 by the Babylonians. So in 539 they go back and it takes them about a year to get there. It's a long trip from where they were in Babylon to get to Israel, and they get there and they immediately start building the temple. You can read about it in Ezra. They were interrupted because of the locals, but generally they worked from 536 or so to 516 to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. So once again, you remember the promise given to us through Jeremiah. God said, I'll restore you in 70 years. And that's precisely what he did, and that's precisely what he always does with his promises. He fulfills them. 586 they are in exile. 516 The temple is complete. So they had a temple and that was in 516. Now, Nehemiah is about 70 years later, 445 B.C. So that's a whole generation later.

And we're going to see that he is in Persia and he's curious to know about what's going on in Jerusalem. And what's going on is that there are no walls. Now, even in a medieval period, you don't have a city without walls. That's like having no police, no security, so you don't have a city without walls. And Nehemiah knew that.

So Jerusalem had rebuilt its temple, but it hadn't rebuilt its walls. That's the situation. The other part of the situation is, as you know from reading the rest of Nehemiah, that there was great moral corruption. Nehemiah was shocked at what he saw in Jerusalem. What he saw was that the Jews had intermarried with the pagans at a high level. And the reason was the Ammonites and others in the area -the Arabs had the political power in the local region. So if you're a Jew and you want your family to have political power and economic power, you want to get intermarried. That's what they did. So it's just crass materialism and political avarice and they intermarried with unbelievers. Not only that, they had stopped tithing. They had not tried to populate Jerusalem at all. They just let it be in complete ruins. And they no longer kept the Sabbath, and they were divorcing freely whenever they wanted to. And, you know, some of these men had married a cute little Jewish girl's name by the time they get back to Babylon, well, they're a little old and wrinkled, so they're going to go out and get a new little pagan version. And that's what they were doing. It was really pitiful. So you see some great reforms in Nehemiah. Now, Nehemiah, the book you can cut in half. The first six chapters have to do with God, restoring his kingdom structures through his people. And so what you find in the first six chapters that Nehemiah is rebuilding structures, that is the wall. And then he recruits people to live into the city, and then he establishes leadership structures and governance and organizations. The latter half of Nehemiah is God restoring his people through his leaders. To the end of Chapter 13 What you see Nehemiah doing is spiritual. Now, Nehemiah is not an ordained priest or prophet. He's a governor, he's a politician, but he's a good one. He's a godly one. Now, he does do things preachers don't do. You know, on one occasion, when the grandson of a high priest had married a daughter of one of the pagan leaders, Nehemiah got so mad he beat him up and pulled his hair out. Malachi, didn't do that. He was a preacher. He was a prophet, so he didn't beat people up. But Nehemiah would get so angry at the people. He would he would discipline them physically at times. So he was a governor. But you see, then what

Nehemiah was doing was both building the structures and he was renewing the people. Is that now what we do in church now, the reason we want to talk about the church is because when you look at an Old Testament text like this one, you have to ask yourself the question, how does it apply today and how do you do that?

Well, let me give you some suggestions for how you apply a book about Jerusalem that's in the fifth century B.C. to people who live in Birmingham in the 21st century A.D.. Here's how you do it. You look for common particulars that are in the modern era and in the ancient text. So, for example, Jerusalem. What does Jerusalem mean to us? Now, there are some evangelicals in the USA who think that it's physical Jerusalem and that we all ought to be devoted to the protection and the reestablishment of physical Jerusalem on the other side of the Mediterranean, that that's God's city. If you'll look into the New Testament, you'll see that's not what it teaches. Paul, in Galatians 4 says that the old Jerusalem, the Jewish Jerusalem, was of the tribe of Ishmael. He says that's Ishmaelitism to want the old Jerusalem. He says the new Jerusalem is coming down out of heaven. So all the longing that you see for the peace of Jerusalem in the Old Testament, the way we apply that in New Covenant understanding, is that we pray for the peace of the church. We're the Jerusalem, we're the people of God. That city is ours, but it's not the one on the other side of the Mediterranean. It's the one coming down out of heaven. The New Jerusalem. That's the Jerusalem we're committed to. That's the Jerusalem of which we are citizens. So when you're reading a book like Nehemiah, you first of all understand historically what it meant to me and Nehemiah and to the fifth century Jewish folks. But then you say, what does it mean to us? It means God cares about his church. And he raises up leaders who will renew its structures and who will seek for the renewal of its people. So the champion of Nehemiah is not Nehemiah. He's the servant of the champion. The champion is Almighty God who shows his love for his people who live on Zion, his Holy hills, and that is the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are the fulfillment of the community in the Old Testament. You say you learn this from Romans 11. The Jews who did not believe in Jesus Christ were cut off of the olive stop, and the Gentiles who did believe were grafted in notice, were grafted in to the Israelites, Stop. There's one tree of Jew and Gentile. We are the Israel of God and the Jerusalem is His church.

So, when you look at the unity that's in among the people and the beauty of Jerusalem in Psalm 133 or Psalm 137, we're talking about the church, which is the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. So, with that in mind, when we come to Nehemiah, we do learn a history lesson, but we're also looking at God. Who is he? What does he raise up people to do? What will he do at Briarwood in raising up a new generation? What will they do? They'll renew the structures. Everything about the church institution. But they will then also primarily renew the hearts of the people in the church. There we go. That's the background, the historical background and the theological context in which you understand an Old Testament book.

Would you stand with me? We're going to read through Nehemiah one, I'll make my comments and get us home in time before you complain. And by the way, at Briarwood, I know I've preached over time on occasion, and you've not complained. You're clearly quite remarkable, but I'm assuming that some of you would if you didn't have good manners.

Let's pray together. Father, we are thankful for this great book and this wonderful man from whom we can learn so much. But, Lord, we're especially grateful that you reveal your heart in this book, and we pray that we may latch on to you, that we may learn from you, that we may be the people you want us to be.

Speak o Lord, may your servant's listen. Through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen. Hear the Word of God.

*The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah.*

*Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel, <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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."*

*<sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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, <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. <sup>8</sup> Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, <sup>9</sup> 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.' <sup>10</sup> They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. <sup>11</sup> 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."*

*Now I was cupbearer to the king.*

All flesh is like grass and all its glory is like the flower of the field, the grass withers and the flower fades. But the word of our God stands forever. Amen. Please be seated.

You know the famous words of E.M. Bounds in his little book, *Power through Prayer*. You can't read that book all at one time. You have to read a chapter and then stop, weep, pray and repent. But at one point Bounds says what the church needs today is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more and novel methods, but men whom the Holy Ghost can use, men of prayer, men mighty in prayer, and of course, by men. You know, he means both genders.

The church needs people of prayer, but it has a history of prayer. Power would need a future and a present of prayer, especially during these days, because what really needs to be done can only be done by God and if you look at the magnificent achievements of Nehemiah, you will come to realize he did not do that on his own.

He was empowered by God and God empowered his leadership. So, whatever we do, if it's good, if it glorifies God, it will be as a result of his working among us. The most important thing we can do is pray. Those of you who are elders, Harry had reminded us from Acts 6, your number one duty to be devoted to the Ministry of Prayer.

Can you say that you're a prayerful group, that this church is held up by men joining their hearts together before the Lord on your knees, praying to God how desperately important it is? Bounds also said talking to men for God is a great thing, but talking to God for men is greater still. How true it is that the greatest tragedy of life is not *unanswered* prayer, but *unoffered* prayer.

What we see with Nehemiah is a prayer life. And not only do you get it in chapter one with this prayer in chapter nine, with the Great Prayer of Confession, it's very similar to the prayer of Daniel nine. It's a wonderful prayer of confession. Here you have a prayer of intercession and of adoration. It's a powerful prayer. But, you know, reading through Nehemiah, if you remember on multiple occasions, he stops and prays when he's telling his problems to his boss, the king of Persia. Believe me, we are told that he offers these intercessory prayers very quickly, even while the king is talking to him. He prays all the time. He's not a monk, he's an activist, and he prays all the time. And we must do the same.

I would like for us to notice as we look at this just really quickly, we'll look at six important elements of our prayer life and how we are to carry it out.

First of all, in verses one through four, please note that the impulse for prayer is our passion for the kingdom. That's the impulse where just prayer comes from. It comes from our regenerate heart that loves the Lord and seeks His kingdom in His righteousness. You're not going to be able to sustain a prayer life without having your passions aroused. This is the reason that regeneration is absolutely necessary. You can't just adopt the discipline of prayer. Prayer has to flow out of your deepest desires and passions. That's the reason we've got to cultivate the heart. Now, why do I say that? Well, we'll look at the text. It happened in the month of Kislev in the 20th year as I was in SUSAN, the capital that Hannah and I, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah, and I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, Nehemiah asked a wealthy man who had no problems, wants to know about the poor people a month travel away. How are they doing? Why did he want to know? They're God's people. He wants to know how they're doing. He carries their burdens. And Harry's funeral. I remember one of the main things we discussed was simply the model that we had of someone who carries the burdens of the church. That's what elders do. Deacons do it and women leaders do it, too. We carry the burdens of one another. That's what the man was doing. He was curious. He was interested, deeply interested. He wanted a report because he loved God and God's institution, which is the church. And he cared about what's going on in the church. And believe me, in the Empire of Persia, he had many cares.

There were many concerns about his role at the executive level, with the King ruling over Persia, but it doesn't record that he wept about Persia. It does record that he wept about the church when he heard that things were broken down. Things were not right, that the people were living in sin and the institutions were in disarray. He just sat down and wept.

Now he was a wealthy man. He was a powerful man. It would have been very easy for him to say, you know, everybody doesn't have the opportunity I have to lead at this level, this international political level. God has put one of his own people here. That's me. And I know I'm living a comfortable life, but, you know, it's in God's providence. He could have even spiritualized said, you know, the spirit of God did this, and it is providence. I'm where I'm supposed to be. I have to let somebody else worry about that and go do something about it. You can do that if you don't have the heart of Nehemiah. But if you have the heart of Nehemiah and you know the talent and skill sets that you have and you know what the kingdom needs from you, you have his heart. You can't do that. You're going to weep.

You know, George Whitfield is one of my heroes. After I graduated from seminary over 40 years ago, I had a few weeks before I started pastoral work, and one of the books I read was a two volume history of George Whitfield and his life is that those two volumes has lived with me for these 40 years.

And I remember reading that he had preached in Scotland, among other places. One of the places was Cambuslang, which is a region just outside of Glasgow, and there were 40,000 people there. And Whitfield. You know, he died at 57. He preached his lungs out, had been preaching. He had a huge capacity, but he preached without amplification to 40,000 people. And thousands of them came to Christ. And someone after the Cambuslang ministry asked the question, they said, why are so many people drawn to this man? And the response they got was this -- It is hard to dismiss someone who thus weeps over the state of our souls. It's hard to dismiss someone who weeps over our soul. It was hard for Augustine to dismiss his mother when she constantly prayed and wept over him. And they say it was the tears of Monica that led one of our greatest theologians ever to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Do you weep for the church? Do you carry the burdens that it really demands your emotional engagement that then leads not only to tears, but it leads to prayer? So, you notice the secret in these first verses? He asks. He really wants to know the unvarnished truth. Give me the brute facts about how the kingdom is going wherever I have my investment in it. Give me the brute facts. Let me carry that burden. Let me weep for it and let me pray.

Now the phenomenal story of Nehemiah is that Nehemiah and the people rebuilt that wall, two miles of it in 52 days -- tell me there is no God, 52 days.

And they had to defend themselves. They had a sword in one hand, you know, their brick working equipment in the other hand, the sword in this and the trowel at the same time, 52 days. Nehemiah was a tremendous motivator, an activist. But he prayed twice that long before he ever got started with his activism. He prayed for four months because he didn't know what to do.

He didn't know if he was the one to go. He had to consult with the Lord. He had to seek his faith. And I'm concerned that in a day when we get instant information and want instant results and instant activate, we've forgotten how to pray and how to deliberate, how to pray together, to seek his faith together, I just encourage you whatever Sunday school class or small group that you're in, make it a praying group where you seek the Lord together. That's what Nehemiah did. And the reason was God raised up a man like Nehemiah who knew how to pray. That was God's answer.

Secondly, when you come to verse five, you notice this the object of prayer is clearly the one true and living God. He said, Lord God of Heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments. Do you see that he defines precisely whom he's talking to? He doesn't just say, ground of all being the God of Islam and Judaism and Christianity and all the other religions that God. Folks, there is no such God as that God. He doesn't exist. The only God who is -- is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When I'm in Rotary Club giving a little talk and they all want generic prayers, I say, I'm not a generic minister and there is no generic God. So, if you want me to pray, I'm a Christian man. I know the truth. I know who God is. And this is his name. He's the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And he's the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. That's who he is. That's the one I'm talking to. If I am not talking to him, I'm not doing you any good at all. It's just gibberish. So now there's a way for us to be polite. And so, I

just say when I'm in a mixed crowd, I've been asked to pray in public. I say, look, I know there are all different religions in this area, in this room. Fine. I'm a Christian man. They ask me to pray. So, I'm going to pray to the God that I know, the one that I believe is the god and father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Some of you believe other things. You can just stand respectfully if you are praying to the same God I am, join in prayer with me. If a Muslim is leading prayer, I do the same thing. I just stand respectfully. I don't shout out, interrupt his prayer. I just stand there. But I don't pray because he's not praying to God. We don't pray to the same God as Judaism. We don't pray to the same God as Islam. We don't pray to the same God as the Unitarians.

You understand this, and Nehemiah is really clear about it. There are all kinds of gods in the Kingdom of Persia. Lord, let me be sure you understand that I know who I'm praying to. The one true covenant keeping God. The object of prayer is the one true in living God.

And when you're praying, let's pray to Him. Let me just make a small little comment here. I'm not sure this is called for, but I'm going to do it anyway. When you're praying, could I suggest that a little habit I've been hearing in the past 20 years, you think about reversing it, we evangelicals, even reformed evangelicals. Sometimes we'll end our prayer by saying in your name, Amen. Whose name will, if you'll check your shorter catechism and based on the Bible, check the Bible, you'll see the name we pray in is actually Christ's name and the reason is he's the mediator and he's the one upon whose merits we dare enter the throne of God. So could I suggest that when you conclude your prayer, you say, in the name of Jesus or in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen. Don't just say, *in your name*. That's a nice generic Rotary Club way to finish your prayer, but I'm not quite sure it's a Briarwood way to, you know, conclude your prayer.

Thirdly, look at verse six A the prerequisite of prayer is his hearing us. What good does it do to pray if God doesn't hear us? Well, let me tell you about the other so-called gods and what the prophets and the psalmist said about them. Here's what they said. Psalm 135 The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have no mouths, but do not speak. They have eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear. Nor is there any breath in their mouths. Those who make them become like them. So do all who trust in them. The gods of this world, including the ones I've already named, other than the Godfather of our Lord Jesus Christ, have no ears. They have no mouths. They have absolutely no power because they don't exist. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ we saw again this morning, has for us, opened the heavens and said to his dear people, I'm allowing you to speak to the deity to me. I'm granting you court access. Speak to me. I hear you. And he does. He hears your prayer. You said, well, you know what? I've been praying for a few things, and you know, you really hadn't answered. Oh yeah, he has. He's answered you. You just don't like the answer. Well, you say, Yeah, but he hasn't answered in the way that that I was hoping. That's true. But let me give you point B; Point A is he has answered you and we're to submit to his answer. Number two, the answer you're eventually going to get is far beyond anything you've ever asked for or ever could imagine asking for. Your time frame is way too narrow. You're demanding answers NOW. He is an eternal God. He's given you everlasting life. He is going to fulfill his promises one day when the new Jerusalem comes down out of heaven and there's no need for light or sun or moon, because God Almighty will be its light and there will be golden paths for us to walk upon. And pearly gates. And you'll say, I never thought to pray for such a thing. I know you didn't. You complained because you wanted something now and he gave you something far better. He answered every prayer. You cannot out-pray his generosity. Just remember that you can be confused about his time schedule. And that's the problem with most of us.

Now. Fourthly, the need of prayer is our inexcusable. What can the omnipotent confessing the sins of the people of Israel? That's a great start, Lord. These people that I'm getting ready to go help. Boy, they are really bad sinners. Well, keep reading. Even I, in my father's house, have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes and the rules that you commanded your servant, Moses. God, I want to confess my sins and relinquish any claim I have on you by right of justice. If I'm asking for your justice and your fairness, I turn to toast. I'm fried. I have no claim upon you because I've seen I've broken your commandments; I've broken the covenant. So now I'm obviously asking for forgiveness of sins, but I'm also clearly praying for his mercy, not for his justice. When we come into his presence. I know that he's your father and he loves you. So, he's very permissive with you. And when you get rough with him and say things you shouldn't say, he loves you and he forgives you. But when we're in our right minds, we realize He wants us to ask for whatever's on our heart, but we are then to relinquish the demand and wait for his answer.

Fifthly, the hope of prayer is his promise. Look at *word* in verse eight. He says, Remember, you know, Nehemiah is telling the Lord to remember. So does the Lord. Is the Lord like me? You know, it's getting a little old, you know, forget stuff, you know. But Nehemiah is recounting the great and wondrous promises of God, and God has made wonderful promises to us. Maybe not the ones that you wish he made to you, but he made even more wonderful promises to you. And you can call upon him. One of his promises is if you open the door when you hear the knock, he'll come in. Is there anybody here feeling like your spiritual life is kind of flat, that you're sort of drifting? Would you just open the door and here's this promise. I'm coming in. Will you let him in? Will you realize that the problem of your spiritual life is not that God is a bad God? Is that you've been disobedient, your heart's not been right. Would you take responsibility for it? And then he doesn't give up on you. He's knocking on the door of your heart. Just open it up. Because you know the promise. Behold, I stand, knock. Anyone will open the door. I'll come in and sup with him and he with me. All kinds of wonderful promises that we have in this day and promises that will meet us in the future. And we need to be sure we know how to call upon these.

Then lastly, the urgency of prayer is our helplessness. He says in verse 11 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. The sight of what man? The King of Persia. If you're familiar with chapter two, Nehemiah gets caught off guard with sadness on his face, and the King notices it. Ladies and gentlemen, you don't ever do that with a king. And the reason is the king is so great--The king of Persia is so great. How could you be anything but happy in the presence of the king? I've given you one of the finest jobs anybody could ever have. Cup bearer to the king. And you're sad today. People in any of the ancient empires would normally have their heads taken off for being sad in the presence of the king. So Nehemiah gets caught. That's when he immediately prays and asks for God's help, and he comes out with his burden before the King not knowing what's going to happen to him. He's been praying for four months. The Lord is with him and is going before him, and He makes the King act in a way kings don't normally act. And the king says to Nehemiah, You may go to help your people. Do you need any help? Now? When Ezra travels to Jerusalem, he insists on not taking any guards. He's going to depend upon the Lord. Nehemiah is a secular man. He's taking guards and he takes them at the king's pleasure. The Lord goes before him and answers his prayer and gives his mercy in dealing with the King. He's been bathing this situation in prayer. You can expect the Lord to be involved intimately in what you're doing but engage with Him. It's his church. The future is his future. He's in charge. He's on the throne. Let's talk to him. Let's engage him. Let's be his people. Let's wait upon him.

Let's trust him, just as you have for a long, long time here at Briarwood. So the most important contribution any of us makes this year will clearly be our prayers. Everything begins here, ends here, stays here.

It's emphasized not only in chapter one, but throughout this book. Here's how Charles SPURGEON put it. He said a prayer. This soul is a priceless soul. Prayer is the lisping of the believing infant. The shout of the Fighting believer, The Requiem of the Dying Saint Falling Asleep in Jesus. It is the breath, the watchword, the comfort, the strength, the honor of a Christian. If thou wilt be a child of God, Thou wilt seek that Father's face and live in our father's love. Pray that this year, as he preached at the beginning of the year over 100 years ago, pray this year thou mayest be wholly humble, zealous and patient, have closer communion with Christ and enter oftener into the banqueting house of his love.

I close with this.

Do you think his prayers were effective? Why do you say? Yeah, I'd say so. I mean, I've read the book of Nehemiah, and he made all kinds of really good changes in Jerusalem. He got the wall built up and got some leadership in place and knocked a few heads together and got rid of a few pagans out of the temple and other things. I mean, yeah, I'd say the prayers were answered. But let me ask you this.

What do you think happened shortly after Nehemiah? More decay, more decline, more difficulty. Some other leaders would have to pick up the banner. So, was this prayer effective? Will really be answered? Ladies and gentlemen, just simply go home and read Revelation chapter 21 and 22 and you'll see about Jerusalem and all the prayers that Nehemiah prayed and all the prayers that we pray for his church. You are going to see the answers to your prayers and your labors when you see the people of God assembled in the New Jerusalem with no evil in it, no sorrow, no tears in his Jerusalem, the answer to our prayers.

Let us pray, Father. There are many things that distract us and keep us from prayer. We confess this. We desperately need your help that we may be the real warriors you want us to be, who do not surrender our physical engagements, who do not fail to be active in evangelism and discipleship and construction projects and missional efforts, and giving of our tithes and offerings, who do not fail to do those things, but who, first of all, bow before your throne and seek your kingdom and your righteousness and ask for your guidance and help? Lord, may we always be a humble, praying people because you are a great and generous God. We thank you for your promises to us and we latch ourselves on to them today. And as that we may be a people of the covenant who trust you day after day, year after year, for your glory and for the good of your people, your church, your Jerusalem, both now and throughout eternity.

This is our prayer. We make it in Jesus name. Amen. Amen.