

How Do You Respond to a Crisis?

Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

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Good morning, Providence Church. It is a blessing to be able to worship together via technology. I was thinking about that this week, that even five years ago I don't think we could have done this or done what we're able to be doing now. If this had happened certainly more than 10 years ago, there's no way and how good the Lord is to enable us to still gather together for worship services, for Bible studies, for small groups, and that should be a source of continual thanksgiving to him. His timing is perfect.

I want to ask you to turn with me in your Bibles to the first chapter of Nehemiah, Nehemiah 1. We're continuing our exposition of the books of Ezra/Nehemiah which we believe originally was one book, not two books as it is in the English Bible. It was this way in the Hebrew Bible and also in the Septuagint, both books were joined together so that you read right out of Ezra into Nehemiah realizing the original author compiled them together, edited them together as one book. And so we finished the exposition of Ezra a couple of weeks ago, three or four weeks ago, and now we are in the book of Nehemiah.

So Nehemiah 1. The title of the message this morning is "How Do You Respond To Crisis?" How do you respond to crisis? How should we respond when the Lord allows his hard providences to come our way? Last week, we talked about the hard providences of God and how we're to bear up under these circumstances, and we want to look as Nehemiah is like Ezra in these books, the book of Ezra/Nehemiah, Ezra and Nehemiah are both models. They're presented to us as exemplary men of faith. They show us how to live for God in the midst of difficult times. Ezra is that way and Nehemiah as well, and we're gonna see that as we continue through the book of Nehemiah to see what kind of extraordinary man he was, and this morning we're gonna look at how he responded to crisis, and then asking the question how do you respond to crisis. You know, how do we when things begin to fall apart in our lives, what's our natural instinct? What is our determined, the things that we spend our times doing?

Well, we see for the man Nehemiah was he, his instinct was to pray and to pray fervently and to pray intentionally and to pray persistently. You think about how have you responded to this crisis. I ask myself the same question, how as this crisis has kind of unfolded, it's been a slow revelation of what's really going on, you know? We first hear about it and then it seems like people are over-reacting, that was my take on it, you know,

people die from the flu every year, but there's no hype about it. So I was kind of skeptical just thinking that the media was probably hyping it, and then you see that, you know, in certain, the areas where the hotspots in America are beginning to look like northern Italy and other places where this is apparently a very infectious bug, virus, easily transferred and for many people, 15-20% of the people who get it will be hospitalized. And so if it's a tremendous strain on the medical system, and so we see that there really is a crisis, the question is how have you been responding?

You know, I sent out a video this week, if you didn't get to see it, I encourage you to go back and look for it or if you'll send us a link at admin@providenceduluth, we can resend the email to you, where I shared how we should respond to even the idea of there being some kind of conspiracy behind this. You know, what is the Christian response in that circumstance? And there are people who are speculating and you may have seen some things. Several people had reached out or I had heard about that were struggling with this issue, and so how do you deal with that? What's the godly way to deal with that? You know, when you consider the circumstances, you're wondering if what's being done by the county authorities or the governor or the President are the right things, your employer dealing possibly with being laid-off. Many of you have experienced that probably already or worried that it's going to happen soon, or perhaps your income is being reduced dramatically because of the lack of business activity. And many of us are afraid of getting sick. It's a concern. It's a legitimate concern, especially if you have underlying health issues. But how do you respond and how have you responded?

I know I was talking to someone this week who was sharing that they had had to turn off the news a lot more than they normally do; that early on watching the latest, you know, update on how many people have died so you could see the numbers, the news conferences, and it's not that we should avoid all these things but how much time should we devote to that, and this brother was saying he felt like the Lord was showing him he was spending too much time in front of the television or on the internet, and he could see it was affecting his soul.

How do you respond when crisis happens? You know, I think there's basically three kind of ways we typically respond. I mean, well, maybe there's more than that but let share these three. One is that we can, in a sense, in our own thoughts, our minds begin to race, we begin to what the Bible calls fretting. We burn within, that's the idea of the word "fret," it means "to burn with concern, anxiety, frustration, anger." And we look around us and we see what's happening and we can become angry and burn inside, and some of the media will encourage you to do that. You know, the failures, the perceived failures of people in power or whatever. So you can fret, that's talk within yourself.

The second way we can respond is we can talk to others, and we want to have a conversation about it, we want to get on twitter or Facebook or some other means of communicating with other people and have them share with us in our misery. You know, they'll say misery loves company and so that's a way of coping with crisis. And talking to others isn't all bad. I mean, the Lord encourages us to encourage one another, to share with one another our burdens, and so we can do that in a very godly way but it's very

easy for that godly intention to turn sour and we can end up sharing our own fretful hearts with others and pouring out upon them words which are not edifying, which tear down. An application of Ephesians 4:29, "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear." Unwholesome speech is that which does not build up but which destroys. It's that which corrupts and pollutes and we as Christians can easily fall into that. In talking to others, we can bring them down.

So we can talk to ourselves about our problems or the crisis, we can talk to others about the crisis, but Nehemiah's instinct was to talk to God, to go to the Lord, just as we were singing about, to take it to the Lord in prayer. This was the driving motivation of his heart. He went to the one who could do something about the crisis, either fix the crisis or enable you to bear up in the crisis which is really the primary thing anyway, to walk with God and to be made able to walk faithfully with the Lord through whatever circumstance he brings.

So the question: how do you respond to crisis? Let's look at the example of Nehemiah. We're gonna read the entire first chapter, verse 1 to 11.

1 The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachabiah. Now it happened in the month Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, 2 that Hanani, one of my brothers, and some men from Judah came; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped and had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem. 3 They said to me, "The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire." 4 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. 5 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, 6 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. 7 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. 8 Remember the word which 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 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.' 10 They are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand. 11 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.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, as we come to You this morning, we are reminded of how great is our need of grace. Lord, we come to You with minds that are so easily distracted, hearts that are so easily preoccupied with other things, the concerns of this world. We ask You by Your Spirit and by Your word to bring forth repentance and deeper faith and more fervent love for You and Your truth. Make us a people who pray. Lord, teach us to pray. We pray this for Your glory and in Your name. Amen.

How do you respond to crisis? Nehemiah responded in a way that when you really consider his character, is even more striking. As we saw at the end of that chapter, it's interesting how he unfolds this first chapter. Remember if you try to think as though you don't know what's coming, you've not read this before, imagine you're reading it for the first time and so you start out and you're just looking as the chapter unfolds who, this is the words of Nehemiah, the son of Hacaliah. Who is Nehemiah? We don't really know yet. What we do know from the name is he's a Jew. That's a Jewish name and it means "Yahweh comforts." And he's writing in the month of Chislev, in the 20th year, that is November/December 446 BC. There's been an 11 ½ year gap between chapter 10 of Ezra and Nehemiah 1. So as this book is all together, there's an 11 ½ year gap between 10:44 and chapter 1, verse 1 of Nehemiah, Ezra 10:44 and Nehemiah 1:1.

He tells us where he is, he's in Susa, the capital. This is one of the capital cities of the Persian Empire. It's about 250 miles east of Babylon. Today it would be in western Iran, and it was the winter capital, the winter residence of the Persian kings, more comfortable for them in the winter months than the other cities. And so that's where he is. He happens to be in the capital but we don't know who he is yet, we just know he happens to be in the capital.

Then he tells us he gets word from Judah concerning the captives and he tells us what message he received, that the people of the captivity, the Jews that had gone back, and he's thinking in his mind about the Jews that had gone back previously under Zerubbabel, more than 90 years before he writes these things, and he's also thinking about the more recent return from exile that happened 12 ½ years before this moment when Ezra had left with the people to go back in April of 457, to take them back to the land. And he's thinking about the captives, he wanted to know about the captives so he asked about them, "How are they doing?" And he hears a message, "They're in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, its gates are burned with fire." And then he hears about this, this drives him immediately, he sits down and weeps and mourns for days and he was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. His instinct is to pray and to add intensity to his prayers with fasting.

And we find out at the end of the chapter, "Now I was cupbearer of the king." I love the way he does that. You don't even know, if you imagine you don't know what's happening,

you hear his prayer and it's a wonderful prayer and we're gonna look at it in the rest of the time that we have this morning. It's a beautiful model prayer. He comes to the end of his prayer and he says in verse 11, "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." So something today, it's happening today. "And grant him compassion before this man." What man? "Now I was the cupbearer to the king." Here you finally understand Nehemiah is the cupbearer to the king of Persia and he's asking God for prayer to go in to talk to the king. That is no small matter.

The original audience would have understood immediately the severity and the danger of such an action, even for one as influential as Nehemiah. You remember that the story of Esther which comes, Esther follows in the English Bible after Nehemiah, but it actually happens about 40 years before Nehemiah temporally in time. So remember when Esther goes to the Persian king to plead for the Jews who have been maliciously attacked in the sense of Haman has this plot to destroy all the Jews and she goes to the king and pleads, is gonna plead with him, and she asks her uncle Mordecai to arrange for the Jews to fast and pray for three days before she goes in. And then she says, because she knows if she goes to request with the king and he doesn't like the request, even though she's queen, it can be the death penalty for her. It's no light thing to approach the Persian king with a request and that's when she says, "If I perish, I perish." So the people reading this, they immediately see that. He's cupbearer to the king, he's talking about, he's praying to go talk to the king. He needs to pray.

Well, I want us to think about his prayer and he is presented to us as a model of how to respond to crisis, and essentially the way we should respond is we ought to pray, and as Jesus said in Luke 18:1, we ought always to pray and not to faint. That is, we are always to pray and not to lose heart. When crisis comes, it means you pray more and more and more. One the great opportunities that the Lord has given to us as a body is to live through these days so that we might even now say with the disciples, "Lord, teach us to pray and, God, open wide our mouths," so that he might give us the fullness of becoming people of prayer. This is a tremendous opportunity and Nehemiah is a great model for us on how we should pray.

So and the fact that he prays first is extraordinary, especially as we're gonna read through the book, we're gonna see that he was a man of extraordinary ability. You know, one of the ways that you can respond to crisis, I said there are more than three ways, I said you can talk to yourself, you can talk to others, or you can talk to God, but there's actually more things you can do. One of the things that you can respond to crisis is you can immediately try to fix it. That's what a lot of us guys would try to do, I mean, would try to figure out a way to fix it, soften it, make it better, "What can we do?" That's one of the things we have to learn as husbands is that everything's not a problem to be solved or a need to be fixed. Our wives want us to be able to come alongside them and feel what they're feeling rather than just immediately rush in and fix it.

Well, Nehemiah was a man, he was like this incredibly skilled person, there's a problem, and the temptation would have had to have been to immediately try to fix it. I mean, he is

an extraordinary leader. He lays careful plans, we're gonna see in the book. He is a marvelous planner. He is an excellent leader. He's able to think about practical solutions to complex problems. We will see as we read through the book, he's a determined motivator. His determination is infectious. He's a hard worker. In short, this is a man who can get things done. That's just his character. We will see that unfolded as we read through Nehemiah and it's tempting, he was a man of action, if you think about it. That's probably one of the best ways to describe him. He's a man of action. He's not one who wants to sit around and talk about things, he wants to get things done.

So this man of action when confronted with a crisis, the first thing he does to get things done is to go to God which is actually the most shrewd and wise thing that any of us can ever do in any moment, pray. I love what Charles Spurgeon says, "Prayer," listen to this image, "Prayer is the slender nerve, prayer is the slender nerve that moves the muscle of omnipotence." That's what prayer is, seemingly small, insignificant. We need to get going, we need to fix something, we've gotta figure out a plan, we've gotta make... No, pray. The slender nerve that moves the muscle of omnipotence and God delights to put us in circumstances where we have nowhere else to go but to pray and he wants to cultivate in us the instinct that in reality that's always the only place we have to go. We should always go first to him in prayer. We should live in communion with him, continually praying. Pray without ceasing, as Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5. We should pray always, or as Jesus said, "Men ought always to pray and not to faint."

So Nehemiah's first instinct is to pray. Now what I want us to do is look at his prayer and see how we can pattern our prayer lives and seek to pattern our prayer lives after this model prayer for us, and I want to suggest to you that this is a summary of the way he was praying. It wasn't that he just prayed this one time, this is a summary of how he was praying. As he mentioned at the very beginning, "I sat down and wept and mourned for days and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. I was praying." He's praying continually and here he gives us a distilled summary of the essence of his prayer life. This is a great outline of basically what he continued saying to the Lord day after day, hour after hour.

But I want us to note three points this morning that help us to examine our prayer lives in light of the example of Nehemiah's. How do you respond to crisis? How should you respond to crisis? Prayer, by prayer, and first of all, let's look at the intensity of his prayer. The intensity of Nehemiah's prayer and consider the intensity of our own. Verses 4 and 5, "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. I said, 'I beseech You, O LORD,'" entreat you. There's a fervency in his heart as he prays. In fact, he exhorts the Lord twice, "I beseech You, O God of heaven, to let your ear now be attentive," verse 6, "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." Do you see that intensity? He's praying day and night and he's pleading with God to hear him. He's not just going through the motions and, you know, rattling off just request after request after request. He's longing for God to hear him and know God is hearing him, and this is the way we should approach the Lord, with a fervency.

And that request that he says in verse 6, "let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open," he says the same thing in verse 11. He ends his prayer on the same note. Verse 11, "O Lord, I beseech You," again, you see, "I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants. Beseeching You, Lord, to listen to me." He was not merely just talking to himself or just reciting prayers, he was praying fervently to God. He was laying hold of God's throne, he was laboring to press into the throne room of grace, to the throne of grace to receive mercy and grace and help in his time of need.

You see the intense emotion too. He wept and he mourned for days. So his weeping and his mourning, what does he do with his sorrow? It drives him to prayer. We talked about this a little bit last time in verse 3 when he hears that the captives are in great distress and reproach, great distress and reproach. We saw that the stress means related to the word for evil. It means to experience injury and the resulting emotional turmoil from that sense of receiving injury. It's misery. And then the word "reproach" is really another way of saying humiliated. You're being taunted. You're being scorned, derided. And so the idea is he hears the people are in a state of misery and humiliation. They're being taken advantage of and they're being mocked and the natural response in these circumstances, indignation in our flesh.

I mean, think about it, if you're a Jew and you hear that the Jews are being mocked and scorned and ridiculed and taken advantage of and you know what happened in 457 when Nehemiah, or 458 when Nehemiah was given the instruction, I mean, not Nehemiah, Ezra was given remember in 458 the letter from Artaxerxes to go back and rebuild the city, to restore the temple, and you know as a person of God as Nehemiah clearly is, a follower of Yahweh that the Lord has made his people to be a kingdom of priests, to be a city set on a hill, to be the place where his glory dwells and the beauty of Jerusalem is to be a light to the whole world, and he hears that this is the state of affairs in Jerusalem? That there is no one looking to Jerusalem with favor. They're all mocking and scorning, ridiculing, and he understands that in ridiculing God's people, they're also blaspheming God. How do you respond when you see people doing incredibly unjust and evil things? What's your first instinct? Is it not sometimes just to sit and think about that, to hate those who do that? To just rehearse in your mind how ridiculous and appalling the circumstances are? To want to read a news report about it and just to stew in your heart and enjoy in some odd way that we would find enjoyment in even imagining the demise of our enemies?

You don't hear Nehemiah talking to Hanani and his brothers about the evil of the people who are doing this and they are evil people doing it. We're going to encounter them very shortly. They're people who want to tear down everything that God loves, but Nehemiah is not fretting in his heart, he's not sharing these thoughts, he's not talking to others in an idle way trying to find comfort in company, misery loving company. No, he talks to God. He sets his heart on the Lord.

And the interesting thing here too, think about this, Nehemiah as a man of influence, the cupbearer to the king, in Persian society, all ancient civilizations, the cupbearer was one of the most important positions of any position in the government. The cupbearer was basically, in a sense, kind of like Secret Service in a way. They were to test, they were to taste the wine before it was given to the king. They were to make sure that the king's food and his provisions were watched over so no one was able to poison him because there were constantly plots to assassinate kings and often through poison. And so cupbearer was one of the most trusted positions in the government.

It's an extraordinary thing that a Jew would be in this position, so the king recognized the kind of character that Nehemiah had and this means that he, even though I said earlier he understands that his life is at risk when he's going to go and do what he's gonna do in chapter 2 and talk to the king, because even though he's a trusted person in the king's court, it's real easy to go from trusted to out of favor instantly. But I want you to think about the fact, when he hears the report, he hears about how bad things are, he understands the injustice that's happening. His trust is in the Lord and as a man of influence and power, he also would have been a wealthy man as a cupbearer. He would have been compensated well. You kind of see this as well through the chapter. He has resources.

But Nehemiah, think about this, Nehemiah as a Jew living under Persian rule, he is not trying to organize a militia group to overthrow the government. He's not secretly wishing that they could find a way to protect them from whatever evils the government is doing. He is actually in a position of submission to the authority and actually blessing and seeking the welfare of the Persian king, even as this Persian king has done some harm to his people, because basically we've seen Artaxerxes sort of flaps in the wind a little bit. He gives Ezra just this incredibly wonderful endorsement to his work in Ezra 7, but we see that shortly after that, after he hears reports from Jerusalem, he goes back on his word. Ironically, interestingly, this is recorded in Ezra 4, it looks like it happens before but it doesn't, and that's where he receives word, remember, from Jerusalem that the walls are being rebuilt and if the walls are rebuilt, they're gonna rebel against you. Hey, you need to look in the archives, find out this city's rebellious. And so he orders that based on this report he's received from these wicked men, we know wicked men who hate God and hate his people, but he doesn't know that. He receives the report that says if I let Jerusalem be rebuilt, it's going to revolt against me, and so then he basically sends word, "Halt the work on the walls. Temple, yes. Walls, no." And then those people who hate God and hate his people are apparently encouraged in their hatred of God, feel like they have a divine authorization, a wicked authorization to then come against God's people and they apparently start ridiculing, scorning them, burning the gates. Not just stopping the building but burning the gates and tearing down the walls and mocking and scorning the people. But in that circumstance, Nehemiah is not so indignant about what's being done by the people and the human agents, he's not so concerned about how can he work through this system, how can he undermine things. No, he is a man of prayer. He knows the one person who holds all things in his hand is Yahweh, the Lord God. As he says, the God of heaven. And so his instinct is to pray.

Now the intensity of his prayer is seen in the ways we've already mentioned, the words "beseeching," his mourning, his emotion, his earnest request for the ear being attentive, ear of God being attentive, but also in fasting. "I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven." He added intensity to his prayers by fasting. This is something we see again and again and again in the Scriptures. Men of God, the people of God, when crisis comes, fasting is the order of the day because fasting adds intensity to prayer. It is an expression of humility before the Lord and I think one of the things that it does, actually, I mean, well, it gives you a lot more time. You know, how much of our time do we think about what we're gonna be eating? Or we preparing what we're gonna be eating? Or we're cleaning up what we just ate? It seems like it takes a lot more time to prepare and clean up than it does to eat. Think about that. I'd like to see somebody do a study on that. It seems like, you know, if you prepare a really nice meal, you can really work a long time, maybe the family's all together, you're working, you're working, you're working, you sit down and you eat and suddenly it's all gone and now all that's left is the dishes and the pans. Well, think about how much time you just saved if you don't eat. You saved a lot of time. So you have more time to pray. Not only that, you're hungry and the hunger is a reminder that you're fasting. It's a continual reminder of the fact that, "I'm fasting to seek the Lord."

I like what John Piper talks about in his book "Hunger For God," a book he wrote on fasting. He says that there's a sense in which our hunger for God is what should be growing during fasting; that we are hungry for the Lord; we're hungry to know him, we're hungry for his kingdom to go forth, we're hungry to fellowship with him. And I think when you add to that what Moses says in Deuteronomy 8:3, that the Lord had fed them with manna from heaven so that you might know that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Fasting's a unique time to remember that and even to testify that in faith as you are trying to fast. "Lord, I am doing this, I need Your grace. I'm not trying to impress You." Fasting doesn't earn anything. No. It's actually about the Lord using it to shape our hearts, and so as we do it, we're asking him to do the work in us, and it's just a step of faith to do it. There's no merit in it. He's not impressed by it, but it helps us, it shapes us the same way that praying actually changes us. Prayer does change things, it does move the hand of God. Absolutely, the Bible is clear on that. "You have not because you ask not," James 4:2. "If you had prayed, you would have," he's saying. "You didn't pray. You don't." Therefore prayer makes a difference and we see it again and again and again through the Scriptures including here.

Prayer is going to be answered in this circumstance and so, but fasting doesn't make it happen but fasting does change us. Prayer changes things but what the real beauty of prayer is that it changes us. God uses it to change the heart of the person praying and so fasting does the same thing. It can change us. One of the ways it changes you from my experience in fasting, often the fasting, I find myself being a little more irritable. I mean, you can be irritable on any day but especially if I'm hungry I can be irritable and that means I'm a sinful man. I'm too concerned with myself. And so it's an opportunity to repent and to say, "Lord, I should want Your word more than I want my food. I should want Your word more every day than I want food. I should long for it. Help me long for it."

So that's why we have asked you to fast with us tomorrow. Some of you, you need to think about your medical situation and some of you should not fast food. You may want to check with your doctor or be wise about it. There are different ways to fast. Daniel in chapter 10 of Daniel fasts differently than he does in chapter 9. Chapter 9 is more of a food fast, and fast from anything, food at all. And then in chapter 10, he fasts with he doesn't eat tasty food. So he puts himself kind of like on a bread and water diet for an extended period of time and that's how he fasts.

I had someone say the other day, one of the elders said, it was tongue-in-cheek, of course, he said, "I'm gonna fast lives sports on Monday. I'm not gonna watch any live sports on Monday." I thought that was a really noble sacrifice. [laughter] No, we're not talking about that, we're talking about really you're denying yourself for the purpose of seeking God. That's all it is, deny yourself for the purpose of seeking the Lord; to put other things aside and to make him our focus, and in the moment of crisis, or in a moment of perplexity, this is exactly what God's people should do. So please join us in that. The intensity of our prayers, and it will help our prayers become more intense. God willing and if we're relying upon him, he will help us become, he will teach us to pray even as we do this and we may need to do this more than once but we certainly are asking you to join us tomorrow.

The intensity of prayer is a key part of prayer that Nehemiah had and then we need to long for. "Lord, help me seek You fervently." Secondly, the content of his prayer. The content of his prayer. Let's look at Nehemiah's prayer and what he prays. He starts with the character of God. There's three subpoints under number 2, the content of prayer. Three subpoints on the content. What did he pray? First of all, he started with God and his character, verses 4 and 5. That's where God-honoring prayer begins, with God and his character.

Look at verse 4, "I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. 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.'" The first thing we need to do in prayer is put our eyes upon the Lord. We need to turn from the things of this world to heaven. What did Jesus teach us when the disciples asked him to pray? Teach us to pray. He said, "Our Father which art in heaven." We need to talk to heaven. We need the God of heaven.

He says the great and awesome God. He's looking at the majesty of God, the sovereignty of God here is before Nehemiah's eyes. Great and awesome God. He's thinking about in relation to his problems, this is one of the key things, this is why prayer is so essential and why it changes us. When you take your eyes off of your circumstance, your crisis no matter how bad it is, and you set your eyes upon the God of heaven and his greatness, suddenly your problem which seemed like a mountain, an overwhelming burden, is very small against the greatness of the glory of God.

The great and awesome God. Now the word "awesome" unfortunately in our day has been weakened. I use it cavalierly too. The original meaning of awesome is fearsome; to be feared; to be revered. It implies some dread even; the sense of the awareness of the greatness of God, his majesty, his holiness; that we fear. So he's looking at the greatness of God as he thinks about the mountain before him, this problem. The magnitude of the problem is it is a big problem. I mean, how can he possibly get the king to reverse his edict which is what he's gonna try to do. He's gonna ask the king to reverse his edict.

Now this is, I'm gonna just try to summarize this. We'll talk about this probably a little more next week, but in Daniel 6, three times you'll find in Daniel 6 these guys are conspiring against Daniel. There's a conspiracy against Daniel and they want to get Daniel, and so they go to the king and they say, "King, we want you to make a decree that anybody who prays to another god besides you for 30 days is gonna be cast in the lions' den." Because they knew Daniel prayed every day. And so the king makes the decree and they say, three times it says this, "A law of the Medes and Persians that is voiced by the king. A law of the Medes and Persians voiced by the king cannot be rescinded." And it says it three times in the passage. The law of the Medes and Persians which cannot be revoked. The law of the Medes and Persians which cannot be revoked. The law of the Medes and Persians which you cannot change.

This is why the king, if you remember, he loved Daniel and so when he realizes that Daniel is now under condemnation, he spends all day trying to figure out how he can save Daniel, that's what it says in that chapter. This is Daniel is an old man before he's cast into the lions' den. The king thinks all day how can, is there some legal way he can change it. And then those same conspiring evil men come to him at night and say, "King, we remind you, you cannot change your decree." And so the king has to throw him in the lions' den but he stays up fasting and praying all night for Daniel, and of course, Daniel's delivered.

Now I say this to say this, Nehemiah is asking something almost like that but he's not asking quite that. That couldn't be done. Back in chapter 4 when Artaxerxes got the letter from those rabble-rousers after Ezra had gone back, he gets the letter saying they're building the wall. If you let them build the wall, they're gonna rebel against you, and he sends a letter and says, "Stop the work." And in chapter 4, verse 21, there is a loophole. He says, "So now issue a decree," Ezra 4:21, "So now issue a decree to make these men stop work, that this city may not be rebuilt until a decree is issued by me." He goes on to say, "Beware of being negligent about this matter. Carry it out immediately. I can't let, we can't wait, you've got to stop the work." And so they go and they stop the work by force of arms, but there is that loophole, "until a decree is issued by me." Nehemiah knows that that is there and he's gonna pray, he's praying that God will give him favor in that the king will reverse course allowing for that loophole there and now issue a decree to rebuild the walls.

Now that is an awesome work but he's talking to a great and awesome God who is more than able, and so when your eyes are on the greatness of God, the problem in your life come into proper focus. Interesting, the word "awesome" here in the passage is the same

word, I mentioned a passage, I mentioned that I sent a video out this week about conspiracies and stuff and how we should view that and Isaiah 8 was the passage that I was sharing from, Isaiah 8:12-13. There was a legitimate conspiracy going on to overthrow the king of Judah and to attack him and the northern kingdom was gonna come against the southern kingdom of Judah along with the kingdom of Syria. There was an alliance and so this evil alliance, this conspiracy is against him and God tells Isaiah, "Isaiah, you're not to be like the people who were talking about this conspiracy." And they were all torn up about the conspiracy. He says, verse 12, "You are not to say," Well, verse 11, "For thus the LORD spoke to me with mighty power and instructed me not to walk in the way of this people." The Lord spoke to Isaiah with mighty power and instructed him not to walk in the way of the people around him who were all excited and stirred up about the conspiracy and the danger. It's not that there's not a real conspiracy, there's not a real threat, we don't know. In our day, we don't know what's gonna happen but look how the Lord tells us to deal with it even if you do know, as Isaiah did. There was a conspiracy. He says, "You are not to say, 'It is a conspiracy!'" In regard to all that this people call a conspiracy, And you are not to fear what they fear or be in dread of it." The word "fear" is the same root word as "awesome." The same root, Hebrew root and it occurs three times in two verses. "You are not to fear what they fear or be in dread of it. It is the LORD of hosts whom you should regard as holy. And He shall be your fear, And He shall be your dread." Three times, "Don't fear what they fear. You fear the LORD of hosts, the LORD of the heavenly armies, the God who is our refuge and strength, Lord Sabaoth his name." Lord Sabaoth in that hymn we sang earlier, "Mighty fortress is the Lord of hosts." It's the same word used here. "The LORD of hosts whom you should regard as holy and He shall be your fear."

So when you start with God, then everything else comes into focus, and until you look at God, everything is out of focus. But he not only looked at the greatness of God, Nehemiah also looks at the compassion and the goodness of God. He says, "the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments." He preserves the covenant. "You are a God who preserves the covenant, that is, the relationship that You've established with Your people, the eternal saving relationship that You've been working out through Your people, that it's gonna come to its fullness in Christ."

The idea of covenant is a really important concept in the Scriptures. It's really, it's like the binding of the Bible. It's one of the organizing principles of Scripture. God forms a covenant with Abraham and this covenant is the covenant of grace that then sets down the parameters and the directions for how salvation is going to unfold. So Nehemiah is remembering this covenant that God made with Abraham. He's a God who keeps his covenant to Abraham's descendants, to his seed. "You preserve the covenant. You're a promise-keeping God." A covenant is basically a relationship, it's a binding relationship where two parties are bound together and there are promises made on both parties make promises to one another, and the covenant is based and rooted on those promises. It's not a contract, it's a binding together in complete oneness where whatever happens to one, happens to the other, and so God unites himself to people. How do sinners come back to

God? Through covenant. We must have, enter into covenant with God. Jesus said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood."

So he says, Nehemiah remembers, "You're a God who keeps Your promises. You keep Your covenant promises. Even when we fail, You keep Your promises." He preserves the covenant and he preserves lovingkindness. This is that wonderful word "chesed," one of the most important words in the Old Testament, the word "chesed." Some translations have it "steadfast love." I really think lovingkindness is a superior translation of this word. It pictures love and kindness together. It's the movement of the heart from someone who is greater and has means to someone who is in abject need, and it's the movement of the heart. It's often used with faithfulness and this is one of the reasons I think it's translated steadfast love is the idea that God's faithful to his promises, yes, but the reason I like lovingkindness is because I think lovingkindness is why God is faithful to his promises too. He can't not be faithful but his heart is love and kindness, and so Nehemiah in this great time of need remembers who God is. God is a God who keeps his promises. He's a covenant-keeping God and he is a God who looks at people in misery, like the Jews are, looks at people who are being scorned, humiliation, and his heart is naturally moved to alleviate suffering.

This word "chesed," it occurs twice in one of the most important passages in the Old Testament. I mean, all of Scripture is important. Every word. Every jot, every tittle has value but there's some high marks where the Lord shows his glory and one of them is in Exodus 34 where Moses asked to see the Lord's glory. He asked in Exodus 33:18, "show me Your glory." And then chapter 34, verses 6 and 7, he sees the Lord pass by in front of him, he's in the cleft of the rock, and he hears the Lord say his name. It wasn't that Moses saw his glory as much as he heard his glory. "The LORD, the LORD, compassionate and gracious." He said, "This is who I am." "The LORD, the LORD, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness." Abounding in chesed. Overflowing in chesed. And it's the only word repeated twice. So, "The LORD, the LORD, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin, but who will by no means leave the guilty unpunished."

Do you see how in that moment the Lord leads with his incredible, compassionate, loving, gracious heart that is filled with lovingkindness and so Nehemiah remembers that. As we pray, we need to look at God and who he is. That's the most important thing that you can know no matter what the circumstance you're in, to know who God is. That's the most relevant fact at every moment of your life as long as you live. So that's, the content starts with God and his character. Second subpoint, this is number 2, the content of prayer starts with God and his character, then, B., moves to confession of sin. Moves to confession of sin.

Verses 6 and 7, he says, "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." Three times in verse 6, sin. We

have sinned. I have sinned. They have sinned. Verse 7, "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." We have sinned, he says that three times. We have acted corruptly, that is, to twist, to destroy, to ruin. We have acted very corruptly against you, the revelation of your glory that you have given to us, we have, in a sense, tried to ruin it and destroy it by our wicked behavior. And we have not kept, and he uses threefold, we've not kept three things: the commandments, the statutes and the ordinances. There again, raising it to the, you know, three times raise it to the superlative. We have rejected everything that you said, is what he's trying to say. We have not kept everything that you said. We have ignored it. We have turned away from it.

It sounds a lot like Ezra in Ezra 9. He confessed the sins of the people. He confessed his own sins, and so prayer that's going to move the heart of God must start with his character but move on to confession and confession is to call sin, sin, and to search our hearts and to let God really show us how ugly our sin is and agree with him about it, that is, to stand alongside him and condemn as if it were possible, to stand on God's side and join in condemning us. He's basically saying, "We deserve everything that we've gotten. We have sinned."

A great example of this same kind of thing is in Daniel 9:3-11. Daniel fasts and prays and when he's praying for the end of the exile, verses 3-11, he just confesses the sins of the people and his sin over and over. He pulls out various terms to confess sin. So the men of God when they pray, confession is a key part of it. Start with God and his character and then move to confession of sin. Daniel does exactly the same thing as Nehemiah and I encourage you to look at that this week. It would be a good thing to look at even tomorrow during the time of prayer and fasting, Daniel 9:3-11. Read that whole chapter.

So it's not just, it starts with God and his character, the content in prayer starts with God and his character, moves to confession of sin, and finally focuses on specific petitions. He prays specifically. He asks the Lord specific things. In a sense, there's three petitions here. You could say five, but two of them are repeated. I said earlier one of the petitions is, "Let Your ear be attentive," and he says it twice, verse 6 and verse 11. "Let Your ear be attentive to my prayer."

The second petition is remember in verse 8. These are things he's asking the Lord to do. First, listen, which he said twice, 6 and 11. Then he says, "Remember the word which You commanded Your servant Moses," and basically says, "Remember when You commanded Moses that if we sinned and You sent us away, that if we repented You would bring us back. Remember that." He's asking God to remember his word, already remembering in his own heart that God is a God who keeps his promises, and this is how God loves to have his people pray. He loves for his people to pray back to him his promises, trusting in his character, calling and begging and pleading with him to fulfill his promise and knowing that he will in his time, in his way.

So remember. When you find the promises of God that really apply biblically and you're not making them up like so many people do today, you're actually seeing what God has

promised. God has not promised to make things easy for us. No, so don't be thinking that you can pray that. And there are people who will tell you that no weapon formed against you shall stand, no disease, or whatever's gonna happen to you, you're gonna be free. No, that's not true. That's not the promises of God correctly interpreted for today. What are some promises that are correctly interpreted for today? Jesus will never leave you nor forsake you. You can know that. Jesus will use this for your good to make you more like him. You can know that. And he will give you the grace you need to be made more like him. He will give you the grace you need to stand up under temptation. He will give you the grace you need to endure suffering. And you plead with him even as you feel like you don't have the resources, "Remember Your promise." You plead with him and this is the kind of prayer that lays hold of the blessing of God.

I was so encouraged by Ted's remarks about Martin Luther's hymn and it's setting the context of it in the sense of comfort. That was so encouraging and what it reminded me of was Luther's life, Luther's life was filled, I mean, not every day but so many seasons of tremendous adversity, and as he shared in that letter that you read from, he shared with a friend how he was torn up with temptation. He was confessing, "I'm tempted to doubt the Lord. I'm tempted. I feel the onslaught of Satan upon me." And he's sharing that with another brother, asking him to pray for him and also saying, "We're in this together." Sometimes you may feel like you're the only person who struggles like that. You're not. This is the normal experience of the people of faith throughout history, but you don't just sit there and think about it, and fret about it, you don't talk to other people about it all the time, pray. That's how we bear up.

So he says, "Remember." And then he gets very specific and he says, "Lord, I ask You," and I think there's really two ways of saying the same thing, his fourth and fifth petition which I make in three, he basically says, "Listen, remember, and bless me as I go talk to this man." Those are the three petitions. "Listen to my prayer. Remember Your promises and bless me and give me favor before the king." That's when he hits us with, "Now I was cupbearer to the king." And the last point I'm gonna give you in just a minute or two, we'll talk about it more next time, the third point it's not just the content of prayer, point 2, the intensity of prayer was number 1, the content of prayer number 2, thirdly, the duration of his prayer, how long he prayed.

You have to really read carefully to get this. The prayer that he's given us when he says, "Now give me, make Your servant successful today," verse 11, "make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man." It's as if he's praying his prayer right outside the door as he's getting ready to go in to the king. You turn to chapter 2, verse 1, read on into chapter 2, "Now it came about in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, that wine was before him, and I took up the wine and gave it to the king." And then he talks to the king. From the time Nehemiah started praying until this moment has been four months. The duration of his prayer, he's been praying this prayer, this is describing the prayer he's been praying for four months. Chislew is November/December. The Jewish month kind of overlaps generally about midway through our months. So like mid-November to mid-December is Chislew. Nisan is mid-March to mid-April, four months, 120 days he has been probably intermittent

periods of fasting and he's been praying fervently for four months. You can see this man of action knew what needed to be done. The king needs to give a decree. I don't know if he knew that the first day, he probably came to that somewhere along as he's praying. It may have taken him a month to figure that out, but once he figured it out, he kept praying, "Lord, You've got to move the heart of the king." Rather than rebelling against the king, trying to incite rebellion against the government, he's asking God to move the heart of the king.

Exactly the same way Ezra did. They are models for us how to live in a world which becomes increasingly hostile to our faith. How do we live? Do we get angry? Do we try to incite rebellion? Not as Christians. There may be moments where we have to, you know, consider different options but basically this is the thing: trust that God is on the throne and pray. That's how we are to respond. Not to fear man, not to fear the conspiracy, not to fear the powers of the world, but when we see God is the great and awesome God and we understand who he is, then we understand that we fear him, the nations are a drop in the bucket, he says in Isaiah. Think about that, a drop in the bucket. How significant is one drop in a bucket? That's what all that's going on in the world, that's what China, that's whatever's happening in America, that's what's happening all over the world, the World Health Organization whether it's good or not or how it's doing, any of this stuff, it's a drop in the bucket. Fear the Lord of hosts. Dread him, worship him, and keep praying.

I mentioned earlier Luke 18:1, Jesus said, he taught this, Luke says he taught this parable to teach that men ought always to pray and not to faint. In that parable, it's an amazing parable, he talks about a woman who needs justice, a widow, and she's being unjustly treated by a businessman who's taken advantage of her, and she goes to a judge to get a judgment against this businessman and the judge doesn't want to hear the case but she keeps coming day after day, and he keeps saying, "No, I don't want to hear your case. I'm not interested. Send her away. Send her away. Send her away." She keeps coming. She keeps coming. She keeps coming. She keeps coming. And finally Jesus says, "Because the judge, though he's an ungodly man and he doesn't really care about righteousness, just because, he finally says, 'I've gotta get her to leave me alone.' And he grants her request." Then Jesus says, "Pray like that." Isn't that astounding? Why would we need to pray like that? Our God is not an unjust judge who doesn't care about our concerns. No, he's a loving Father who knows how many hairs are on our head. He knows our burdens. He knows what we need before we even know what we need. But he says, "Pray like that," because the Lord delights sometimes to hold his blessing until we have prayed long and hard and fervently for it. Why? Because he enjoys it? No, he is changing the person and the person praying more than anything else. He's helping us know that everything is in who he is and who we are in him. That's all that matters.

So Nehemiah prays for four months because that's the way God tends to work, and so one day of prayer and fasting isn't it. It's where we're gonna start but we encourage you to ask the Lord to teach you to pray and that through this time of uncertainty, it may turn in two weeks, a month, three months, I don't know what's gonna happen, and we've got to have wisdom all the along the way. Pray for us as elders. Pray for one another. Pray that the

Lord will help us love one another more and serve one another more faithfully. Pray that no matter what happens and comes, if we have illness strike our church and some of us go home to be with the Lord, we will bear up under it well, but pray that we will come to know the Lord more deeply and more wonderfully, and that we will treasure him more, that Christ will be more precious to us, and our life in this world will be less precious to us; the things of this world will lose their hold and eternity will be our heart's desire. If we pray for that, the Lord will give us that if we don't lose heart. We will reap a harvest if we don't lose heart, Galatians 6. So don't grow weary in well-doing. Keep praying.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, we thank You that You are a God who hears prayers and that You have chosen to work through something that seems, Lord, it seems at times unproductive, we seem to think we can get to dealing with things quicker. Help us understand that there's nothing more productive than praying. It doesn't mean we just only pray. No, we're gonna see in Nehemiah, he prayed and then he took action. He prayed and then he took bold action. He took risky action, but he first prayed. Make us a people of prayer. Teach us to pray.

Lord, thank You for giving Jesus to show that Your love is perfect, to make a covenant with us through the blood of Christ, that those who repent and place their faith in Jesus Christ enter into a relationship and You never go back on Your promise. You treat us as if we had lived His perfect life and therefore we can come into Your throne room at any moment to receive grace and mercy in our time of need, so the door of prayer is open. At the moment Jesus died, the veil in the temple was torn from top to bottom. The way is open. Lord, help us not to think lightly of such amazingly wonderful things like that. May we marvel that You invite us into Your throne room, and may we make diligent use of the means of grace You've given us in prayer. Help us, Lord. Teach us to pray. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.