

Message for April 10, 2016, title, “Praying as One Called to Pray,” text, Nehemiah 1:4-11

We have already met with Nehemiah as a man of prayer along with such men as Ezra and Daniel. By almost any criteria these were remarkable men and especially as men of prayer. But God calls for those who would lead the church to be like such men, for all enduring and spiritually effective ministry, service or leadership can only be a manifestation of the love of God and can only be accomplished through prayer. We might say to ourselves that those were remarkable men, but we are just ordinary folk; it is not reasonable to look for or expect the same kind of performance from us. This, however, neglects the most fundamental of all differences between life as part of the Old Covenant people of God and life as part of the New Covenant people of God. Everyone who is a believer in Jesus Christ as the Son of God who died for their sin has not only received the gift forgiveness and of eternal life but also the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit Who enables us to do what God wants to have done. So our first prayer might be, “Spirit of the Living God, please enable me to become a man or a woman of prayer.” And then we might pray, “Lord, what do you want me to do for You and Your people?”

God wants leaders who pray, but how does such a person pray? Last week we looked at some of the common or shared characteristics of such people in prayer. Today let’s examine Nehemiah’s prayer in detail (1:4-11).

(1:4) “As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. (1:5) And I said, ‘O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, (1:6) let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father’s house have sinned. (1:7) We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. (1:8) Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, “If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, (1:9) but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen to make my name dwell there.” (1:10) They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. (1:11) O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”

Last week we already took note of the emotional quality of Nehemiah’s reaction to the news about the ruined condition of Jerusalem. Nehemiah grieved for the ruined condition of God’s people. It is highly unlikely anyone will long sustain the disciplines of effective service either for God or for God’s people or for anyone or anything else if there is no emotional involvement. Quite simply it is hard to say that we love God and His people but are able to remain unmoved emotionally either by the joys or the sorrows, the triumphs or the defeats, the blessings or the adversities of God’s name and people in the world. This is the

difficulty we have at the present time with our president. He claims to be a Christian, but his policies, his actions in office, his response to the crises and horrific attacks on Christians abroad and the increasing difficulties of Christians in the United States demonstrate such an indifference that we find it hard to believe what he says. In the case of Nehemiah, Daniel and Ezra, the three men who prayed, we saw that the deeply felt emotional reaction to the sorry state of Israel led them to – or perhaps we could say that it sprang from – their personal identification with the people: each of these men accepted personal responsibility for the failures or the sins of God’s people.

Going further, what do we learn from the specifics of Nehemiah’s prayer?

- I. He prayed with fasting. Fasting is not often or widely practiced in our day, but it has been a significant part of the prayer life of both the Old Covenant believers and the New for most of their history. What is the purpose of fasting and how are we to understand its relative absence in our day?
 - a. The purpose of fasting is debated. The most common understanding is that fasting helps the believer with self-discipline and personal focus in prayer. By denying the satisfaction of some normal pleasure, appetite or even, in rather extreme cases, a need, the believer tacitly affirms that God is the true source of pleasure, satisfaction for appetites and supply for all that is needed in life. Fasting helps us to pay attention to God, to focus our concerns and hopes on Him, to emphasize to ourselves our dependence on Him and so to spur our prayers to Him. The practice of fasting is an admission that amongst the greatest obstacles to effective prayer are worldly distractions and the illusion of human self-sufficiency. At the same time, it is an affirmation that God hears and responds to our prayers, that God is attentive to your needs, that God cares for us as His children. The most extreme instance of a fast in the Old Testament, excluding Moses – was that of Esther, which took place almost at the same time as Nehemiah was in Israel. By way of reminder, Esther was part of the exiled Jewish community living in Babylon. She was being raised by her cousin Mordecai. Through a series of events Esther ends up being the queen. But at that time a vengeful man orchestrates the destruction of the entire Jewish people. To prevent this, Mordecai instructs Esther to personally appeal to the king. Esther then responds by telling Mordecai that the King has not called for her for a month, and that to go unbidden to the king was to hazard death if he was not pleased or interested. Upon Mordecai’s insistence Esther calls for a fast of both food and drink, a total fast, for three days, and then she prepares herself to go to the king. What she says is highly instructive, for she does not ask everyone to pray that God will do for her what she asks. Rather she asks for strength to accept what God decides to do in light of the need she puts before Him. “If I die, I die.” She is asking for the strength for the obedience of faith.
 - b. I believe the relative neglect of fasting in our day results from its clash with, its running up against one of the most powerful idolatries of our age: the idol of self-sufficiency which masquerades as hurried busyness. Being fast and being busy are both sources of pride for us. Consequently, we find it difficult to realize we actually must wait for God, let alone actually waiting for Him to either speak to us or to act in any decisive way, and we find it

irritating to think that we are actually dependent on Him. We suspect people who wait are perceived as either uncommitted or lazy. It is irritating because it seems almost perversely contrary to the constant aspiration of our hearts and our nearly universally held definition of maturity as “self-reliant”. People who are openly dependent on others are easily seen as relatively ignorant, unskilled, or more generally, as weak.

2. Nehemiah prayed to God as “...the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments.”
 - a. Ultimately faith is a function of its object; it is not the intensity of our believing but the character or quality of what we believe in that determines faith’s fruitfulness. As **Psalm II5** says of idol makers, “*Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them.*” I believe this is demonstrated in American culture. Being raised in the 50’s and 60’s and the emergence of the television culture – those were the decades in which the television became virtually omnipresent in American life – I was exposed to the 24/7 marketing by American corporations who not only filled the screen with advertisements, but also made sure that every television show set and scene featured all kinds of products which they wanted the public to buy. At least a partial consequence of this indoctrination has been the transformation of American culture into a culture of acquisitiveness. We tend to measure our well-being according to the kind and quantity of our possessions, whether these be houses and neighborhoods or cars and vacations to say nothing of the clothes and shoes we wear, the restaurants we frequent or sports we play or follow.
 - b. The stature of these three men of prayer is a reflection of the God they believed in. This in turn was a reflection of their knowledge of God. Despite the terrible adversities which had beset Israel, and the severe disappointments which had surely troubled their lives as they each dealt with the faithless and disobedient people of Israel – this was less the case with Daniel than with Ezra and Nehemiah – they knew God was great and awesome and that He was completely trustworthy. Israel’s troubles were not a sign of God’s weakness nor of His untrustworthiness, but exactly the opposite: They knew that God had said from the beginning that if the people turned away from the provisions of the covenant, if they neglected the rules and statutes and broke the laws, then He would scatter the people out to the nations and strip them of the land, the temple and all the good He had done for them. And that was just what He had done. But they also knew that God had said that if the scattered people repented and sought His face again and were truly sorry, then He would gather them together once again and restore the blessings of His people. This was the faithfulness and love of their great and awesome God!
 - c. Having a great God, these men were greatly occupied with God rather than being distracted and preoccupied with the endless stream of the incidental and trivial which tends to predominate in the minds of most. It may seem like an odd application of this point, but we should ask ourselves what it is we love and what this says about the “size” of our God. It is a simple fact that the great majority of church attendees do not also attend the church business meetings. Why is this? In a Bible Study I raised this question and illustrated the point by asking what happens when we feature young children in a worship

service or program. They all responded at once that all kinds of people attend. Why do they attend: it is because they love children. And that raises the question, doesn't it, as to whether we love the ministries of our churches and the people, the hard working servants who man those ministries. Apparently many other things are more important to us; apparently we love many other things more than these. Possibly when I say things like this people think that I am personally offended by the behavior I criticize. To some extent I am, but the issue is not that I am offended. God is the One who is offended by our lack of involvement and commitment. As with Israel, if we repent, God will bless.

3. We are told the men prayed night and day. An equivalent in the New Testament would be Paul's instruction to the Thessalonians (**I Thess. 5:17**) to pray without ceasing. It is a truism that we get out of things what we put into them. Rightly applied the truism tell us that if we expect great things from God, we need to put a great deal of faith and expectation in Him. Greatness has many aspects. If our God is truly great, His greatness will awaken humility in us so that we seek from Him not simply or so much the satisfaction of our wants and desires, but both instruction in and attainment of what He wants and desires for as well as from us. There is a world of difference between expecting God to enter and render bright and meaningful our small worlds of thought and imagination, experience and pursuits or challenges, or expecting/anticipating God will draw us to enter His world of thought and imagination, experiences and pursuits and challenges.
4. We are called by the body of Scripture to view this world as the handiwork of God. It is the world of the Son's rule and kingdom. This creation displays the glory of God. These men were well acquainted with God's glory seen even through the "shadow forms" of human arrogance in the pagan empires of their day. Consider such monuments of human creativity as the pyramids and temples of Egypt, the palaces of the Babylonian and Assyrian empires, the architecture of the Greek Acropolis and the City of Rome: all but the last of these were pagan to the core, but their works are magnificent, even awe inspiring. One aspect of the true evil of ISIS is their deliberate and wonton destruction of these ancient works. We know that Satan is the "prince of the power of the air"; however, he is so only at God's sufferance. Jesus is the exalted and glorified Lord of heaven and earth.
5. Today much of modern art seems preoccupied if not actually obsessed with the sickness, sadness and meaninglessness of human experience. This leaves a wide open door for artists of faith, Christians, to explore and capture the glory of God both in the world around us and the life of the one creature made in the image and likeness of God. To discern and then to capture that glory in artistic form, whether we think of the painter's canvass or the architect's drawings or the city planner's concepts for housing, parks, the transportation system and so on, something more than momentary inspiration is needed. As already mentioned, Paul tells us that Satan is the prince of the power of the air. This is more than a simple metaphor. The world system creates a lot of static in the realms of thought, perception, imagination and feeling which is effective in blinding us all to the truth, but seeing God's glory is inseparable from seeing His truth. This lies at the heart of our need to pray night and day. Doing so is an essential means for bringing all things under the

lordship of Christ. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians (**2 Cor. 10:7**), we must strive to “take every thought captive to Christ.” Whether we think of art, architecture or leadership in the local church, we are engaged in spiritual warfare.

I think we have gone a bit astray in our understanding of spiritual warfare under the vivid imagery of men such as Peretti and his novels in the “This Present Darkness” series. We think in terms of demons and territorial battles. We might consider the rather more mundane challenge of having a faith that is too narrow for the human soul. If our religious life and spiritual nurture is nothing more than Sunday morning worship and praying at meals, we are likely to become bored, for there is insufficient challenge or food for the heart. And if we are bored, we will look and go elsewhere for things of interest. If we have a great and awesome God, then we need to seek His face and study His Word as well as talk and pray with others to know His will specifically to be challenged to use all the capacities of our mind and imagination and the skills we can master to serve Him.

6. The fourth quality which defines Nehemiah’s prayer as well as that of the other men is that he prayed as a confessing sinner. This connects directly with the need to pray night and day. As we well know, it is not the case that spiritual opposition only comes at us from the outside, as it were; we are ourselves significantly compromised by sin’s persuasions. This is perhaps the core teaching regarding the depravity of humanity. It does not teach that people are always as evil or destructive or small minded or cruel and so on as they can be, only that no part of our thinking or feeling is free of the effects of sin. We warp reality to suit our desires, our fears, our dislikes and preferences and to whatever seems to be to our advantage. We do this subconsciously; our calculations are practically instinctive and consequently we seem to be “innocent” in the matter and experience no guilt or personal complicity in error or the assertion of personal advantage over others. To affirm the scriptural teaching that we are all sinners is not saying that people feel guilty all the time, or that we are aware of our shortcomings in knowledge, truth, character and so on. The truth of the matter is that much if not most of the time we don’t feel guilty at all: on the contrary. A major consequence of this is that because we feel not guilty, we see no need for grace, and then we feel no need to pray. And without prayer we soon drift away from God. (Note: this drift can occur even if we continue to attend church and Bible Studies!)
7. So we need the reminder that we are not in fact innocent. We need the reminder that in practically everything we do we not only fall short of grasping the objective reality of the situation but are also self-serving in the disposition of our hearts. Put positively, we need the constant reminder that we need the corrective discipline of the Lord and the resources of the Spirit for humility, confession, repentance and forgiveness extended to others and received from them as well. This is a truth about the Christian life which makes the “therapeutic gospel” so tragic. This is the idea that the gospel is really about how God’s love for you is to make you feel good about yourself. As a way of seeming to present the Gospel it can be traced to the “Positive Mental Attitude” movement and more specifically to Robert Schuler and his idea of the gospel as realized in positive self-esteem. The end result of these heretical departures from the truth is the withering away of faith.

Meanwhile, the dynamics of repentance and forgiveness both extended and received are the dynamics of interpersonal relationship which enable the body of Christ, the local congregation, to live in harmony or one accord (**Philippians 2:1-4**): *“So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”*

8. Beyond the sober recognition that he was a sinner, Nehemiah prayed with a clear remembrance of God’s negative warnings as well as positive promises. In verses 8 and 9 of his prayer Nehemiah reminds God both of His judgment against sin and His promise of restoration to favor if and when the people repent and return to obedient faith. I think it is important that Nehemiah doesn’t simply state these as a general description of how God is, but actually cites what Moses wrote, for this grounds his understanding of God in God’s word to us and will then lead him to the more extended teaching of the Word. In this way we are reminded that God’s favor is not just a heavenly smile which removes obstacles and heals diseases and makes life good, but is God’s favoring us as His servants for the extension of the kingdom of His righteousness in the world and the furthering of the gospel for the salvation of the lost. In other words, God’s favor and blessings, His grace to us, draws us into the fulfillment of His purposes, and not simply our own.

9. Not surprisingly, therefore, as we read Nehemiah’s prayer we see that he prayed as a servant who delighted to fear the name of God (v. II), *“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. . .”* It may strike us as strange to associate fear and delight. To delight is to take great pleasure in something, to find joy in it, to see something as a source of gladness. Apparently Nehemiah was gladdened by what he feared! And indeed he was, for Nehemiah lived in a rich and powerful pagan empire and was the personal servant of the emperor of that empire. How easy it would have been for Nehemiah to unconsciously shift his hopes and fears to that emperor, for it was the emperor’s word which would open or close the doors to all that Nehemiah desired on behalf of his people. It was the greatness of the God he feared which gave Nehemiah the strength to serve the emperor with integrity, not selling his soul to the emperor while giving excellent service, and it was the greatness of the God he feared which gave Nehemiah the strength to risk the emperor’s displeasure when he asked for permission to leave the emperor’s presence and rebuild a city which the empire some 100 years ago had destroyed. This was why Nehemiah delighted to fear the Lord: that fear was essential for Nehemiah’s ability to remain a man of God in a hard and dangerous place. He had strength against the temptations and fears coming at him from the culture and people of the empire, and he had strength against the weaknesses of his own soul.

10. Lastly and flowing directly from his fear of the Lord, Nehemiah prayed, asking for **God’s mercy (v. II)**: *“...give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”* “Mercy” is defined as compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one’s power to punish or harm.” Just how dangerous it was for Nehemiah is brought out in chapter 2:1-

2, *“In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. And the king said to me, ‘Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart.’ Then I was very much afraid.”* Being sad in the king’s presence broke the convention that as the king was the center and source for all that was good and desirable, there could be no greater joy than to serve him, especially to be in his presence. If you were not joyful and content, then you were disaffected and in turn dangerous. You might be willing to participate in some evil plot to do the king in. You were liable to having your head removed. (If you want a modern equivalent just look to North Korea where the enlightened leader not too long ago had his own uncle, a very high ranking military officer executed. I do not doubt at all that when Nehemiah prays for mercy in the sight of “this man” he is simultaneously thinking of both the emperor as the immediate source of danger, and the Lord as his ultimate source of safety. The Lord God holds the heart of the king in his hands and turns him in whichever way He wishes. But notice that Nehemiah’s fear of God does not become a kind of cocky self-assurance or arrogance in Nehemiah. He is a sensible man. His grasp of reality is central to his constancy in prayer: Nehemiah does not live in a fantasy world, turning God into a kind of superhero who swoops in to give His favored people privileges and success in moments of harrowing danger. Rather, God seeks the faithfulness of His servants, training them in courage and humility so as to truly serve fallen men as they fulfill the purposes of God.

Nehemiah, like Ezra and Daniel, was a man of prayer. We have seen 7 characteristics or qualities in his prayer:

1. He prayed with fasting to ensure focus in his prayers, disciplined to resist distractions and temptations.
2. He prayed to a great and awesome God, a God large enough to direct and fill his life.
3. He prayed night and day, recognizing that he was engaged in a spiritual war for the wellbeing of his soul and his effectiveness in countering evil in the world.
4. He prayed as a confessing sinner, recognizing that he continued as a fallible man subject to errors and the deceit of pride within and therefore needing to live with humility toward others.
5. He prayed with knowledge of God’s warnings against sin and promised blessings for faith and obedience.
6. He prayed as one who delighted to fear God, knowing his strength to resist evil and the powerful in the world came from God alone.
7. He prayed as one who needed mercy, God’s kindness for his wellbeing in the world and in fulfilling God’s purposes.

Jesus taught His disciples to pray, *“Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from all evil.”* Whether or not those words bear the spiritual fruit Jesus intended depends on the faith, character and purpose of the one who prays them.

Questions for Understanding and Application: “Paying as One Called to Pray”, Nehemiah I:4-II, April 10, 2016

1. Are you distressed at the lack of respect for God’s name in our culture and, more particularly, in many churches? Do you think it right or normal or healthy to feel and express distress in prayer?
2. What are your thoughts/practices regarding fasting? Do you agree that fasting runs against the grain of modern culture, especially the idea that maturity assumes self-sufficiency?
3. What is the “size” of your God? What do you think might be the “size” of most of the idols operative in modern culture?
4. Do you think it possible many people, including Christians, are actually bored with God and that they are so because they have limited God to small purposes in their lives?
5. Is prayer best thought of as the means for having God be involved in our lives or for us becoming involved in God’s purposes?
6. Should “Christian art” regardless of its medium be more alive to and expressive of the glory of God in creation, including humanity, or should it deal more with the “sickness, sadness and meaninglessness of human experience” apart from God?
7. What are the greatest challenges you face to “taking every thought captive to Christ”?
8. Do you agree that sin has adversely affected every human capability, especially our ability to live and work well together?
9. Is it possible that the timidity of many Christians is a reflection of their “small thoughts” about God, and that if they studied the Word more carefully they might have both a larger God and a more courageous faith?
10. “God seeks the faithfulness of His servants, training them in courage and humility so as to truly serve fallen men as they fulfill the purposes of God.” Are you willing to be this kind of servant?