

Daring to Draw Near, 3

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Bible Text: Nehemiah 1:1-2:5
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I was in Orlando this last week to be at a meeting of the Florida Church Planters Network or something like that. I know it really well. And on the way up I was listening to some recordings from one of my favorite preachers, Tim Keller, and Dr. Keller was preaching and he was using that illustration out of C. S. Lewis' "The Last Battle," is the name of that particular volume, and those children are running towards heaven and this is all in the fantasy of C. S. Lewis, and they cross a river and then they are ushered into heaven but they are entreated to go higher up and further in and higher up and further in. He was saying and I thought, with good justification, "That's really the call to prayer." The call to prayer is the call to go higher up and further in and so as we consider this topic of prayer, we are thinking of a way to go higher up and further in. And we've talked about a variety of types of prayer and we see this modeled here in Nehemiah.

As we saw last week, Nehemiah was in a position of power and influence and he was the cupbearer to the king which meant that he was responsible for making sure that the king drank wine and not strychnine, and as such, the cupbearer was deeply trusted by the king. In fact, the cupbearer was the most trusted man on the staff and there was no one closer to the king, no one more trusted by the king, no one sought for counsel more than the cupbearer, and in such a position we find Nehemiah.

Last week we saw that the suffering of his people came to Nehemiah's attention and Nehemiah was driven to his knees and we see the character of Nehemiah come out in his time on his knees. Nehemiah beyond and probably because of his private life before God, enjoyed success and favor with the people. Nehemiah was a man who was given to prayer and we're talking about prayer and last week I gave you a quote from George McDonald, the Scottish preacher and author who mentored Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland, and by his writings mentored by his own admission, C. S. Lewis, who said that George McDonald was indeed his master. And I'm going to repeat George McDonald's quote because it is a magnificent quote and he is, I think, hitting the nail on the head when it comes to the purpose and intent of prayer. It's in your outlines that I gave you and you can follow along if you care to and this is what McDonald said. He said, "What if the main object in God's idea of prayer be the supplying of our great, and our endless need - the need of Himself? Hunger may drive the runaway child home, and he may or may not be fed at once, but he needs his mother more than his dinner.

Communion with God is the one need of the soul beyond all other need; prayer is the beginning of that communion, and some need is the motive of that prayer. So begins a communion, talking with God, a coming-to-one with Him, which is the sole end of prayer."

Now, McDonald is saying that whatever it is that we think we need or want in that moment that drives us to pray, while that particular issue is not unimportant, nevertheless it pales by comparison to a greater need, the need to be connected with and to Almighty God and prayer, McDonald is saying, is the vehicle that accomplishes both. But don't miss the greater need when the lesser is achieved. If I want my ankle to be all better because it's been bothering me and I go to prayer for my ankle, there is a greater good that comes out of that prayer than just whatever happens to my ankle and that is I have come into the presence of Almighty God and that's what my true need is. The ankle is fading away. One day I'll walk on the streets of gold without ankles or at least not the kind of ankles I have today. But McDonald's point is there is a greater good. Every time we go to our knees in prayer for whatever it is that we pray for, there is a greater good that's accomplished in that.

Nehemiah seems to have discovered that because from last week we learned some lessons on prayer with which I teased you last week because I never really got to the takeaway. Now, normally I start with a text and I spend some time talking about that text, explaining that text, and then I go to the takeaway. This week, I'm going to do it backwards. This week, I'm going to start with the takeaway and work back into the text and it is backwards simply because I explained the text and I did a great job of it last week and I want you to keep on believing that even when I give you evidence to the contrary.

Okay, what exactly is prayer? This is the takeaway. What exactly is prayer? Prayer is quite simply talking to God. Now, I spoke about that several weeks ago when I was preaching out of the Psalms, how I sought to develop a running conversation with God approaching the point, not quite to it, but approaching the point when people would apologize when addressing me because they had interrupted my dialog with God. I think that's a worthy objective for any of us during down times. You see, I'm not suggesting that you ignore your spouse or your friends or that you give short shrift to your job responsibilities but during idle times, how do you occupy your mind? Might I suggest that you try to train your mind to dialog with the one who spoke the cosmos into existence? When you think of the power of God and who it is that commends prayer to us, it's amazing we pray so little.

There is no higher endeavor than the pursuit of God through prayer and the word itself, "prayer," comes from the Latin word "precarius." Isn't that interesting? And the Latin word means literally "to obtain by entreaty." And, yes, precarius is exactly what you're thinking: dangerous. And here's how the etymology went with that: it was a navigation term and when a ship would be traveling through a rocky shoal of some sort, the helmsman would entreat the navigator for assistance and that's exactly what prayer

means, to obtain by entreaty, and so we come to God seeking to obtain by entreating God with whatever it is that we're asking.

In the Nehemiah Scripture which is our text for the day, we see that Nehemiah is given to prayer and we see Nehemiah employing two types of prayer. The first is an involved prayer. Nehemiah engaged a lengthy prayer and we see that in part in verses 5 through 11, but more importantly we see it in verse 4. The passage will be up on the screen, it's in your bulletin. Nehemiah 1:4 says,

4 As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

"I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying." This is a prayer time by Nehemiah that went on for days and days. A great length of time. We don't know how many days it went on for but quite literally days, plural. How can Nehemiah find that much to talk about to God? Presumably for days he talked. How is it that he found more and more material that he wanted to bring before God? Well, I think if we break down the prayer we'll see how it was that Nehemiah had enough to pray about for days and days.

The first part of his prayer is a prayer of praise and adoration. Nehemiah 1:5,

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."

When you think about it, this is the way that Jesus prayed too and he commanded prayer to us in the same way. He said, "Pray like this, Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." "And I said, 'O LORD God of heaven,'" in Nehemiah's prayer, "the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments." It's a page out of Jesus' prayer, the Lord's prayer. And if we are to engage in serious and thoughtful praise and adoration of our God, we would be wrapped up for hours.

You say, "Well, I don't have enough material." You need material for praise and adoration? Flip to the Psalms. Turn the Psalms around. For instance, the other day I was just flipping around the Bible and I just opened it up and there was Psalm 42, "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for God, the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?" To pray that back to God you just turn it around, "O God, I praise and adore you because you are the source of living water. If we drink of you we'll have flowing from us living water welling up to eternal life." Now, you see, that's a wonderful statement of praise and adoration and I love it when I hear people praying Scripture back to God. There is a lot of material because there are 150 Psalms. In my Bible, that's 78 pages. That can keep you wrapped up for at least 20 minutes.

Or how about Job? There is some serious prayer material in here. Job 38:4, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements - surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk." Do you know what? I have started buying Bibles now based on the size of the print rather than the translation. One of these days I'm going to get to a Bible that has like one word on each page. "On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" You know, that goes on for four pages in my Bible. You can find some serious praise and adoration material in there. Turn it around. "O God, I praise and adore you because on you the foundations of the world rest. You're the one who stretched the line. You're the one who sunk the bases for the foundation."

Nehemiah begins with praise and adoration which could have gone on for days by itself and then Nehemiah also prayed with passion day and night. Nehemiah 1:6,

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.

You see, this is an encouragement from God to pray at length for things about which we are passionate. Now, I don't know about you but in matters of passion, very often I start in prayer and I start fervently and then I abandon prayer and move to complaining and grouching. "God, why did you do this to me? God, how come I'm in this situation all over again?" And my passion turns to pouting and it's just not a good thing; it's something that you have to train yourself in. But if you're praying with passion, check to make sure that you're still praying and not just complaining.

Larry Crabb wrote a book called "The Papa Prayer," and this was how "The Papa Prayer" goes. First of all, P – present yourself to God without pretense. What he's saying there is be a real person in the relationship you now have with God. Tell him what is going on inside of you that you can identify. If you're angry, tell God. If you're anxious, tell God. If you don't believe in him, tell him and ask him to reveal himself to you. He knows these things about you anyway and it's not like you can try to hide these things from him. You know, back in Genesis, Adam and Eve, they tried to hide those things from God and they started out with fig leaves and the fig leaves were insufficient and they knew it so then they ran from tree to tree trying to find sufficient cover for themselves. I think we do that sometimes in prayer. We try to pretend that we're feeling something that we're not feeling. Present yourself to God without pretense.

A – attend to how you are thinking about God. Once again, no pretending. Ask yourself, "How am I experiencing God right now? Is God a vending machine? Is God a frowning father? Is he a distant and an impersonal force? Or is he the glorious strong but intimate Papa in your life?"

The second P – purge yourself of anything blocking your relationship with God. Put into words whatever makes you uncomfortable or embarrassed. When you're real in your

relationship with God. How are you thinking more about yourself and your own personal satisfaction rather than about God and his pleasure. You know, prayer can be such an avenue where we are me-centered instead of being God-centered.

The final A – approach God as the first thing in your life. Think of God as your most valuable treasure. Jesus told the parable about the pearl of great price. Think of God as the person you most want to know. Admit that other people and things do matter more to you right now but you long to want God so much that everything in your life becomes nothing but a second desire.

I think when you look at that "Papa Prayer," as Larry Crabb calls it, and you distill it to its essence, you come down with three points. First of all, be honest with yourself and with God in your prayer. Be transparent with God. And finally, repent. Tomorrow start it all over again because no one of us is where we should be, where we want to be, when it comes to spending time with God. Remember as you approach the idea of prayer, remember that the chief purpose in prayer regardless of the type of prayer is to know God, to deepen our relationship with him, to nourish the life of God he has already placed within us and to do it all to satisfy his desire for a relationship with us.

Well, the third thing I think that we find that Nehemiah did in his prayer was he confessed his sin. Nehemiah 1:7,

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.

It is appropriate to confess our sin before God to him. I was speaking to an agnostic a few weeks ago and I was trying to communicate the concept of sin. This person was struggling with some issues in life and was a self-confessed agnostic. As a matter of face, they called themselves an atheist but as they unpacked what they meant by atheism, I call it agnosticism, but I'm splitting hairs. But I was talking about the concept of sin and the way I described it to this person was I said, "Something inside of us is bent." Something inside of us is bent. You know, my son and his wife, they had a car accident a couple of weeks ago and everybody was fine and it really doesn't take much of an accident anymore to total out your car, but indeed their car was totaled in the accident and the reason why they totaled the car was because the frame was bent. Now, when you bend the frame, the tires will never work right and you'll tear up your tires every time and you'll go through tire after tire. It's unsafe when the frame is bent. It's costly when the frame is bent but when it's bent, it never works right. Something inside of us when we're born is bent. It's appropriate to confess our sins before God, to admit that something inside of us is bent. Essentially what Nehemiah was saying was, "God, we all have a problem. We all have something in us that needs to get fixed. There is something inside of us that's bent and we can't straighten it out."

Now, some people when we talk about this idea, they find it objectionable to be classified as someone who sins and so what happens is people tend to diminish the sin. They'll say,

"You know, really, it's not as bad as all that. I'm not as bad as Bernie Madoff or I'm not as bad as Charlie Sheen," or maybe even, "I'm not as bad as the preacher is." Well, that's flawed thinking because if you have a nice white shirt and you have a little two inch spot of ink, remember those Bic pens and they would leak on your shirt and you'd get a little spot like about this, but you could never get that ink out? What do you do with the shirt? You throw it out. Even though 99% of the shirt is in good shape, you still throw the shirt out because the shirt is flawed, it's damaged beyond fixing. If it were for one sin and that least little sin that you committed, we would still need a Savior. It was that sin that drove the spikes into Jesus' hand and the Bible says there is none righteous and Jesus said to be perfect, a standard that none of us can measure up to.

You will meet God and you will need a defense because you are guilty and something inside is bent. You may think that if you do enough good things that will cancel our your sin but God doesn't even work on that system. God says in his book, "By good deeds shall no man be made right with God," and that creates a problem. Our sinning creates a yawning chasm separating us from Almighty God and we can't traverse that chasm by ourselves. But there is good news and that is that God did for us what we could not do for ourselves. Before the first human being drew breath on this planet, God had a plan that he was putting in motion and that would be that some day, at the right time, Jesus would be born into this world in a miraculous way and that he would live a perfect life, never once sinning, always pleasing the Father, and that at a time and a place of his own choosing, he would surrender himself to the authorities, he would be tried, convicted, condemned and ultimately crucified and on the cross God the Father would take all of my sin and put it on Jesus. He would take the sin of all of his people and put it on Jesus and then he would pour out his full wrath and fury on Jesus and Jesus would die, not just a physical death but he would die a spiritual death. He would quite literally experience the hell that otherwise would be intended for us. But God doesn't forgive capriciously or randomly, only to those who respond to him in faith and repentance, believing the bad news that we have something inside that's bent, believing that there's nothing we could do about our sin and problem with death, and believing the good news that God sent Jesus into the world to take our place, to take the rap for us. When that happens, the Bible says we are born again into a living hope.

So Nehemiah's long prayer was a prayer of adoration and praise, a prayer of passion, a confession of sin and, finally, Nehemiah's was a God-centered prayer. I want you to look at verses 10 and 11 that you have there for you. This is an extraordinary couple of sentences here.

10 They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. 11 O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.

Ten times, ten times he uses "you" and "your." Why did Nehemiah remind God of his words? To assure himself that he was praying after God's will. In the Lord's prayer, Jesus

said, "Thy will be done." John writes in 1 John, "And this is the confidence that we have before him that if we ask anything according to his will, we know that he hears us and we know that if he hears us, we know that we have the things for which we ask." The condition is that we pray according to his will. Jesus said in John 15, "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will and it will be done for you." The condition, again, that we're praying according to the will of God. Nehemiah was reminding God and himself that he was not about his own will, that he was in God's will. He wanted God's will done.

Now, that's the first type of prayer, it was an involved prayer, but there is a second type of prayer and we'll finish with this and that second type of prayer springs from Nehemiah's soul. I call this a prayer blast and that comes in Nehemiah 2:4 and I think every one of us has prayed this same way before. Nehemiah 2:4 says,

4 Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" So I prayed to the God of heaven.

Right in the moment, boom! There goes a prayer. Nehemiah didn't want to talk to the king until he first had talked to the King of kings. It was a five second prayer burst in the heat of battle but Nehemiah's heart conditioned by prayer turned to God before he turned to the king. A prayer blast that involved prayer. These were the ways in which the prayers of Nehemiah expressed themselves.

And we can't leave this Scripture until first we've found Christ. You know, whenever you read the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, you want to make sure, "Where is Christ in this?" And we see Christ in Nehemiah. Nehemiah was acting as a priest, praying with and for a people in distress and suffering, ultimately pleading with the king for his people to have worship and to be in the presence of God. Some years later, Jesus Christ would be a more perfect priest and he would sit before Almighty God pleading for his people to be able to worship in eternity and to be in the presence of Almighty God. In that sense, Nehemiah was foreshadowing Jesus Christ.

And Jesus reminds us as much by use of sensible signs. He uses the bread, what was bread in the day, we call it matzah today but this was their bread, the bread they used at Passover, unleavened, without yeast. Leaven was a symbol in the Bible of sin and so they made their bread at Passover time unleavened, untouched by sin. The Lord Jesus took that bread and he broke it and he said to his disciples who were there with him, "This is my body. It is broken for you. It is sacrificed for you. Do this in remembrance of me." You see, Nehemiah when he presented himself before the king was accepting the threat of death. Jesus Christ embraced death. He knew that he body was going to be broken for the intercession that he would make for his people and so when we come to this table around which the disciples themselves sat, we are remembering what Jesus did in embracing death. We don't have pictures, nothing from Jesus himself that would tell us about the type of sacrifice he made. No, we don't have that but what we do have is the bread and the cup that he gave us and he said, "This is what you do in remembrance of me." The bread is such that we can smell it and we can hear it and we can taste it and we

can feel it. It appeals to our senses and then it becomes a part of us as much as it is food and so our Lord Jesus becomes a part of us for Jesus said, "I am the bread of life."

May elders come forward at this time. We will distribute the elements. Let me say that some of you are from different...