

Praying on the Promises

Nehemiah 1:5-11

Nehemiah 1:5-11 - *“And I said: ‘I pray, Lord God of heaven, O great and awesome God, You who keep Your covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments, ⁶ please let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, that You may hear the prayer of Your servant which I pray before You now, day and night, for the children of Israel Your servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against You. Both my father’s house and I have sinned. ⁷ We have acted very corruptly against You, and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.*

⁸ Remember, I pray, the word that You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations; ⁹ but if you return to Me, and keep My commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I will gather them from there, and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for My name.’

¹⁰ Now these are Your servants and Your people, whom You have redeemed by Your great power, and by Your strong hand. ¹¹ O Lord, I pray, please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name; and let Your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.’ For I was the king’s cupbearer.”

Background Notes

Nehemiah 1:5-11 is Nehemiah’s prayer regarding both the physical condition of the wall around Jerusalem, and the spiritual condition of the Jewish people. Some background will help us understand this prayer. The date was about 445BC. About 100 years have gone by since the Jewish people were permitted to return to Jerusalem from their 70-year exile in Babylon. The Temple had been rebuilt, but the wall around Jerusalem was still in ruins. All attempts at rebuilding the wall had ended in failure.

Nehemiah was a Hebrew cupbearer to the Persian king, Artaxerxes I. He was located in Susa, the Persian capital – at least 1000 miles from Jerusalem. But when Nehemiah heard about the sad condition of the people in Jerusalem - their distress, the disgrace among the surrounding pagans, and the broken down walls – he was greatly concerned. He wept and mourned, he fasted and prayed- and he was willing to act.

In this great prayer of concern and confession, Nehemiah made a specific request. Verse 11: *“O Lord, I pray, please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name; and let Your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”* He was praying that he would

have an opportunity to talk to the king about the situation in Jerusalem, and that the king would grant him permission to go to Jerusalem and lead the rebuilding project.

Why did Nehemiah pray? Why didn't he just go and ask the king? There are two reasons. First - you didn't just burst into the Persian emperor's presence! Even though Nehemiah had a prestigious position in the court, his life would be at risk if he just walked in and made his request without being called into the king's presence. Remember Esther? Even though she was King Xerxes' wife, she didn't go in before the king without praying that he would hold out his golden scepter, and her life would be saved.

This second reason why Nehemiah didn't just hurry in to ask the king for his request was that Nehemiah, as a believer, prayed about everything. Nehemiah would have prayed even if he were taking his request to a minor local official. He prayed about everything – and we should too!

Doctrinal Point

Biblical praying has definite characteristics.

What is prayer? A simple definition of prayer is “talking with God.” When we read the Bible, God is speaking to us. When we pray, we're speaking to God. Prayer is communication with the Lord.

We can talk with God about anything and everything. He's our Father, and He's our Friend. However, we must always remember that He's not just our Friend – He is God Almighty! Therefore, our prayers should have some definite characteristics, if they are going to follow the biblical model.

Our prayers don't have to be long and formal. The Bible has many short and informal prayers - we're going to see some in the book of Nehemiah. But they all have definite characteristics, even the short ones. What are the characteristics of biblical praying?

a. Biblical praying is characterized by worship of God.

Verse 5: *“I pray, Lord God of heaven, O great and awesome God, You who keep your covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments.”* Biblical prayer is characterized by worship of the Lord. Worship is simply acknowledging who God is and what God does. That's exactly what Nehemiah did here.

b. Biblical praying is characterized by confession.

Verses 6-7: *“I pray before You now, day and night, for the children of Israel Your servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against You. Both my father's house and I have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against You, and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded*

Your servant Moses.” Notice, in this great prayer of confession, that Nehemiah linked himself with the sins of the people, even though he wasn’t personally responsible for the problem. After all, he had never been in Jerusalem. He was not part of the “sins of the fathers,” yet he linked himself with the problem. He was part of the nation, and as part of the nation he confessed, “**we** have sinned.” He didn’t place the blame on others.

c. Biblical praying takes God at His word.

Verses 8-10: *“Remember, I pray, the word that You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations; ⁹ but if you return to Me, and keep My commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I will gather them from there, and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for My name.’”*

In these verses, Nehemiah was basically quoting Scripture from Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 30. Nehemiah was taking God at His word – he was quoting God’s Word. Verse 10: *“Now these are Your servants and Your people, whom You have redeemed by Your great power, and by Your strong hand.”* Here Nehemiah was praying on God’s promises. Basically, he was saying, “Here we are, Lord. You said You would gather us and bring us back to Jerusalem. You promised to redeem us by Your great power – and You did!” Nehemiah was taking God at His word. He was praying on the promises.

d. Biblical praying is making requests in line with the word of God.

Verse 11: *“O Lord, I pray, please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name; and let Your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”*

Nehemiah was not praying for a promotion. He wasn’t praying for a vacation. He wasn’t praying for good weather. It’s not wrong to pray for those things, but Nehemiah was very definitely making requests in line with the Word of God. Nehemiah didn’t know God’s exact will for his life, but he did know God’s will for the nation of Israel. God’s will was for them to be a strong people, and for the city of God’s Temple to be a strong city - a city that could be defended. He was praying in line with the Word of God.

Practical Application

Let’s pray more “Nehemiah-type” prayers.

So often our prayers are characterized by selfish requests. “Lord, let me have a great weekend.” “God, may we win the game.” Give me this. Give me that. God may answer these kinds of prayers, but we don’t know what God’s will is in some of these things.

Let’s try to make more of our prayers “Nehemiah-type” prayers – prayers that are characterized by worship, by confession of sin, by taking God at His word, by making requests in line with the word of God.

Are our prayers characterized by worship? Do we start our prayers by worship - or do we just jump in with requests? "Lord, I acknowledge who You are. You are holy. You are eternal. You are all powerful. You are the One who has loved us and redeemed us." That's acknowledging God for who He is, and what He has done.

Our prayers should be characterized by confession of sin as well. "Lord, I have sinned. I've wasted time. I've had sinful thoughts. I've been proud. I've been selfish. I haven't given credit where credit is due. I've been part of the problem of the broken down walls - in my own life, in my family's life, and in the life of our church." So often we blame other things and other people when we're really part of (or most of) the problem. We blame our family, we blame our environment, we blame our culture, we even blame our genetic makeup! Why don't we pray more like Nehemiah, realizing that we are linked with the situation. We need to pray, "Lord, **I** have sinned."

Our prayers also should be characterized by taking God at His word and praying on God's promises. For example, Matthew 6:23 - "*Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things will be added unto you.*" What does "*all these things*" mean? All these things means our basic needs. If we're truly putting the Lord first in our lives, and seeking His kingdom, we can claim the promise that He'll take care of our basic needs.

Think of the promise in 1 Corinthians 15:58, "*Finally my brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.*" We can pray on that promise. "Lord, I'm not going to get upset or discouraged because of the small response in this ministry where I'm involved, because I know You have promised that our labor is not in vain in the Lord."

And in our prayers, we should be making requests in line with God's Word. This flows right out of taking God at His word, but it puts some limits on our prayers. We can pray with confidence about our basic needs or about Christian service because of the promises God gives. It's in line with His Word. But we can't demand that God give us good health or a new job or a victory in sports! God doesn't guarantee these things. It's not wrong to pray about these things, but we should condition our prayers with "if it is Your will." We may feel disappointed in our prayer life because we think God isn't answering our prayers - but that's not because God doesn't hear us, or we lack faith. It's very possible that we're not praying in line with God's Word or God's will.

We've already talked about spiritual wall building. We know God wants us to have strong spiritual walls - for our lives, and for our families and churches. Let's pray in line with God's Word, and ask Him for strength to build strong spiritual walls. He's sure to answer when we show concern about this!

Let's begin to pray more "Nehemiah-type" prayers.