

Nehemiah's prayer reaction reflection and then action.

How many here today know much about Nehemiah? Where did he come from and where in the Old Testament does he fit?

Can anyone tell me something about Nehemiah?

That's alright then, anything that I get wrong today Martin can correct in the coming weeks.

1 The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah.

In the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, 2 one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem. 3

The people of Judah and Israel are in exile, some have been allowed to return to the land and to Jerusalem, with Ezra, who has begun to rebuild the temple. There has been and continues to be opposition to what is taking place in Jerusalem and surrounding areas, the other governors and people don't like that this city is being rebuilt and do everything in their power to stop its progress and hinder the success.

They replied, “The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire.” 1

When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven. 2

Why was Nehemiah so upset about Jerusalem? Why the weeping the fasting the mourning? Why such strong reaction to hearing that Jerusalem was in ruins, that the people were exposed that the city was in a bad state and that trouble surrounded them?

What was it about the city of Jerusalem that held such a place in his heart that on hearing of its ruin and of its bad state caused such a reaction?

Largely because he along with many of his fellow Jews (by the way it was during this exile they first began to be called by that designation due to their being taken from Judah) held that it was Jerusalem where God had declared He was to put His name, it was in the temple at Jerusalem that God's presence would be seen and His glory displayed. It was Jerusalem that was to be the shining city set on a hill a beacon to all nations that here in this place the Holy One of Israel would dwell. Nowhere else in the world would the presence of God be more real more visible than the city of Jerusalem and the temple of God's name.

Here it was the city exposed, in ruin! Its people exposed and harassed, its worship stilted and its growth stunted. Hardly a place reflecting the glory of God, hardly a visible demonstration of the power

1 *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Ne 1:1–3). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

2 *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Ne 1:4). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

of God and the promise of God. It was instead a ruin of faded past glory still hounded, still despised, still being opposed and threatened. Nehemiah wept, he wept for his fellow Jews, he wept for the city of God, he wept and he prayed. He prayed and fasted for days, mourning for a place he up till then he had not seen, up till then he had not known but still he wept and interceded. His sorrow cannot stay shut up his anguish cannot be just and end in itself like some hashtag or tweet, it was not a feeling only. It caused him to do something. First he prayed, he fasted, then he acted. But note he prayed and fasted before he did anything else, but he did not stop with the just praying! It lead him to action, his prayer informed his actions, through his prayers, he gained wisdom and guidance strength and courage, words and direction.

More than that he became willing to risk everything he had and was so that he could carry out the call of God. The time had come and perhaps a little like that of Esther he understood that he was born for such a time as this. Being in the inner circle of the royal household and in close contact with the King on a regular basis, at the right time, fearful though he was when he began to act, as you can read in subsequent chapters, nonetheless, fearing loving and desiring to obey God more, he was able to act. He mourned, he prayed, he fasted and then he acted in obedience and faith. A covenant people was reborn. He had a surrendered life.

5 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; **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 your servants, the people of Israel, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned. **7** We have offended you deeply, failing to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded your servant Moses. **8** Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, ‘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 your outcasts are under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place at which I have chosen to establish my name.’ **10** They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great power and 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 in revering your name. Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man!”

At the time, I was cupbearer to the king. ³

“Every great movement of God can be traced to a kneeling figure.”

— D.L. Moody

Prayer, a topic hard to discuss, in some ways but at time even harder to practice.

Yet it forms the backbone the underpinning and the surrounding of every move of God bar none! From the book of Acts down to the present time prayer has formed the basis and the impetus for every move of God, every growth in the church has come from this foundation. Anytime people have consecrated themselves to pray things have happened lives have been changed the church has grown. Even in the times before Christ the pattern has been the same, with the people of God. We see it in the lives of the great names of the bible, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, Jonathan, Daniel, the prophets, Elijah,

3 *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Ne 1:5–11). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

Elisha, Ezra-Nehemiah, Isaiah, Jeremiah (I know these are not in chronological order). All characterised by their pursuit of God, their lives illuminated by their devotion to God and obedience to Him. Moses had to wear a veil over his face after being in the presence of God as it shone so brightly, Joshua we are told remained even longer not desiring to even leave the tabernacle such was his desire to be in God's presence. Is it any wonder these men were able to do what they did?

Abraham, Paul tells us his faith was credited to him as righteousness

David, a man after God's own heart.

Daniel faithful to God with a wisdom that helped guide a pagan empire.

Jeremiah, sustained though greatly persecuted and harassed.

Isaiah, in prayer glimpses the very throne room of God and is forever changed.

Esther, fearful, yet obedient instrumental in securing the safety of the people of God in this very same kingdom that Nehemiah that Ezra are working in and from.

Each one of these Old Testament saints, people of prayer that enabled them to do outstanding things.

“When God calls a man”, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “he bids him come and die”

To surrender our lives even to death. This Nehemiah does for he knows that if the king was displeased or upset with his request death could very likely be the outcome of it all. But request he must.

There have been many great moves of God revivals big and small that have come not through human effort but in response to God's move, and every one of them has begun in prayer. From the first martyr of the church, in fact before the first move of the church at all to do anything prayer was at the center. After the Jesus' resurrection and at his ascension Jesus tells his disciples to remain in Jerusalem until they have received power from on high.

And they do, giving themselves to prayer until the Holy Spirit comes upon them, even then they devote themselves to the apostles teaching and to prayer. Is it any wonder that the church grew!

Among some of the most powerful moves of God have had prayer at the center, the Moravian prayer meeting that lasted more than 100 years, with the subsequent revivals of the Great Awakening and so on come out of times of prayer, and an awareness of the presence of God, of the sin of the people, marked by repentance and renewal of faith and fervour.

I remember being part of one, not a revival, but a renewal, during my time spent with OM's ship Doulos. In the first six months after joining during a 10 day voyage, there was a prayer night as was the practice of ship life, during which we experienced a renewal of life and a unity of spirit. It began after the time of praise, and it was in the form of confession, confessing sin of pride, of rebellion and of hardness of heart. It broke barriers between people there it softened hard hearts and brought unity the likes of which would be hard if not impossible to replicate in any other manner. It was not the only time but it was the first time I had been part of anything like it.

Prayer is not just reciting words and phrases, neither is it magical incantations it is communication but more than that it is a deliberate and conscious submitting to God, recognising who God is in praise and thanksgiving, it is recognising who we are and hence confession, and the submitting to God's will in obedience and faith that is the action, prayer rarely is just the prayer itself it so often leads to action, to doing to being and witnessing.

Prayer of this kind does not come out of a vacuum, it is not something that is dreamt up if you like, it

comes often in response to a need seen or perceived. Nehemiah, enquires and receives word from Jerusalem about the state of the people and the city. In response he mourns, he prays he fast and then he acts.

Nearing the time of his crucifixion and on the outskirts of Jerusalem we read in Matthew 9,

When Jesus gazed upon the harassed and helpless multitudes 'He was moved with compassion on them' (Matt. 9.36).

In response to a call to a crisis, to an awakening of insight, people down the ages have prayed, calling on God to move, to act, to lead and to guide.

World Vision and Tear Fund two relief organizations that have made a difference in many places around the world began in response to a need a crises and out of prayer came action.

Moved with compassion, mourned and weighed down with sorrow, or anger at the injustice, or spiritual darkness that so many live in day to day driven to their knees and raised up to act to do, is the lesson of Nehemiah.

We have seen people from this congregation move out in mission overseas in response to need driven to prayer and then action.

Last week we heard of the need for a leaders for Activate here and the call to prayer. Have we been praying interceding for that?

Behind every great move of God is someone kneeling,

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

4 *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Ne 1:4). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.