

Knowing How to Pray

Nehemiah 1

Rev. Brian Bill

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Transition from Song: **My Strength**

Those words come right from Psalm 18...

*I love you Lord my strength
My rock and fortress forever
I'll sing for all my days
Highest praises
To You (my) God*

Our mission as a church is to give glory to God by gathering in praise and worship, by growing in our faith, by giving what we've been given and by going with the gospel. We spent last month emphasizing the importance of going by living intentional lives. We learned that *not all Christians witness in the same way but all Christians can witness in some way.*

This fall our focus is on our second value as we celebrate *Grow Time!*

Play Grow Time Video

It's Grow Time! If you're sitting on the end of a row, you'll find a stack of booklets. Can you take one and pass the rest to those you're sitting next to? If you're in one of the overflows, you'll find one in the slot under your chair.

[Encourage people to page through the booklet...point out highlights, commitment card, and discussion questions...and then ask them to put it aside until later]

I read an article last month by Jeremiah Johnston with a troubling title: "*My daughter prayed to Alexa.*" Alexa is artificial intelligence (AI) developed by Amazon that answers questions and performs tasks in the home. Along with Apple's *Siri* and Google's *Home*, this technology is always on, always available, and ready with answers.

This dad of five was celebrating his birthday with his family at a restaurant when he asked his nine-year-old daughter to pray for the meal. She bowed her head and

prayed: “*Dear Alexa, please bless our meal today, and Daddy...*” The entire family exploded with laughter while Lily began crying and refused to eat because she was embarrassed.

The dad was later convicted by this whole experience, wondering what kind of pressures Artificial Intelligence (AI) is putting on a new generation of children surrounded by 24/7 connectivity. Here are some lessons he learned:

- AI will answer your kids’ questions, even if you won’t.
- AI data can be misused, abused, and misrepresented.
- AI is always listening, and I need to start listening, too.
- AI is here to stay. Nearly 50 million Americans already speak to a smart device in their homes – and this happened in just 24 months. Incidentally, it took television 13 years to hit the 50 million mark.

As we begin our new series from the Book of Nehemiah, we’ll see that the Almighty is not artificial – He’s all-knowing, awesome and always listening! Here’s the main point: *When we go to God in prayer, things get put in their proper perspective.*

Nehemiah is the shortest man in the Bible – *knee-high-miah* – and the book that bears his name is a bit hard to find. The easiest way is to find the Book of Psalms, which is about in the middle, and go left three books. Or you could ask Alexa.

In order to get the most out of our series, I encourage you to go back and read the brief book of Haggai, which we studied a few months ago. Then read a tantalizing trilogy – begin with the book of Esther, where you’ll discover how God moved in the midst of Israel’s captivity by raising up a young Jewish woman to the throne in Persia. It was her husband who is Artaxerxes in the opening chapters of Nehemiah. Then, read the book of Ezra, which in the Hebrew Bible is linked with Nehemiah as the same book. When you’re finished with Ezra, then jump into Nehemiah and read it carefully.

I’m excited about what God is going to teach us this fall. We’re going to learn things that will help us personally, we’ll discover principles that will guide us as we move into a time of expansion and renovation, and we’ll end up understanding a critical part of Old Testament history.

A History Lesson

Let's set the historical context. In Genesis 12, God called Abram to leave his country and to follow Him to another land. As Abraham obeyed, his descendents multiplied. The Israelites were later enslaved in Egypt for over 400 years until God called them out under the leadership of Moses.

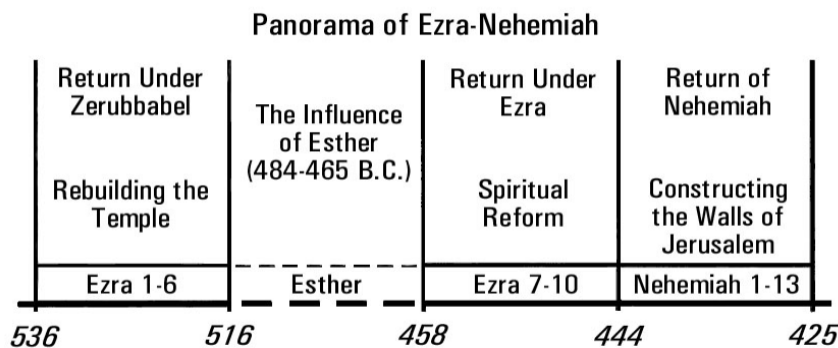
Eventually they were allowed to enter Wisconsin (the Promised Land). The high point of Israel's history came when David was called to be king. For forty years David expanded the nation in both breadth of influence and knowledge of God.

But things went downhill from there. After his son, King Solomon died; Israel was split into two kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom was made up of ten tribes and was referred to as Israel. The Southern Kingdom had two tribes and was called Judah. Because of their disobedience, the Assyrians conquered Israel and the ten tribes were scattered and became known as the "ten lost tribes of Israel."

Even though the southern tribes saw all this happen, they, too, continued to rebel against God. In 586 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army captured the Jews, Jerusalem was destroyed, the walls were wiped out, and the temple was burned. The people were deported and were forced into slavery again. Their history had come full circle.

Many of God's prophets predicted this captivity would not destroy the nation; it would eventually end and the people would be allowed to go back home.

God did not forsake His people. He allowed the Persians to take over the Babylonians and he moved King Cyrus to make a decree to let some of the Jews return. And in three stages, over about a hundred years, they were allowed to migrate back to Jerusalem, only to discover the city was still demolished and desolate.



After the decree of Cyrus, 50,000 Israelites returned to Judah with Zerubbabel and began rebuilding the temple. Unfortunately, they got discouraged and quit. God then sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to encourage them to finish the project. Ezra helped restore their spiritual fervor.

Finally Nehemiah comes on the scene in the twentieth year of the reign of Artaxerxes. The book falls into several divisions. The first six chapters cover the *rebuilding* of the wall, while chapters 7 through 10 deal with the *renewing* of Jerusalem's worship with the final chapters addressing the *repopulation* and *revival* of God's people.

Are you ready to dive in? I can hardly wait! What time is it? It's *grow time!* We're going to begin exactly where we should always begin – with an emphasis upon prayer.

Let's Pray

When we go to God in prayer, things get put in their proper perspective.

It's noteworthy that there are 12 different prayers recorded in 13 chapters. These prayers are filled with *adoration* in chapters 8 and 9; *thanksgiving* in chapter 12; *confession* in chapters 1 and 9; and *petition* in chapters 1 and 2.

The Process of Prayer

Nehemiah went through a process of prayer that has great application and relevance to us today. Follow along as I read chapter one.

The first place Nehemiah started was with a *concern about the problem* in verses 1-4.

1. CONCERN about the problem. Nehemiah's name means, "*whom Jehovah comforts.*" We know from verse 11 that Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the king. His job was to taste the king's wine to make sure it was not poisoned. Most cupbearers had short careers!

As cupbearer, Nehemiah had a great job in Susa, which was the winter capital of the Persian empire. Interestingly, Nehemiah worked in the same palace in which

Esther lived years earlier. Here's a thought. If Esther had not seen her position as part of God's purpose, Nehemiah would not have been alive to accomplish all that he was called to do.

He had unlimited access to royalty, political standing, and a place to live in the palace. It was a cushy job that provided everything he needed. And yet, when one of his brothers returned from a road trip to Jerusalem, verse 2 says that Nehemiah ***"asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem."*** The word, ***"asked"*** means *"to inquire or demand"* an answer. Nehemiah was greatly concerned about what was happening a thousand miles away in Jerusalem.

This is an important starting point. It's so easy for us to stay uninvolved and unaware. Some of us don't want to even think about stuff that's going on in our own lives, much less care what is happening in the lives of others. Even though Nehemiah had never been to Jerusalem, he had heard stories about it, and knew that his ancestors had been led away in chains when Babylon destroyed it. He was doing what Jeremiah 51:50 instructed the exiles to do: ***"Remember the LORD from far away, and let Jerusalem come into your mind."*** Psalms 122:6 instructs us to ***"pray for the peace of Jerusalem."***

As his mind was on Jerusalem, he listened to the report in verse 3: ***"The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire."*** As he tried to imagine the desolation in the city of David, he could barely stand it. The phrase, ***"great trouble"*** meant that the people themselves had *"broken down and were falling to pieces"* and ***"shame"*** refers to *"scorn and reproach."* Three words summarize the bad news: *remnant*, *ruin*, and *reproach*.

Nebuchednezzar had destroyed these walls 142 years earlier and Artaxerxes had stopped an earlier renovation project. Walls provided protection and security so Jerusalem was unprotected and insecure against their enemies.

Nehemiah was broken over the complacency of the people of Jerusalem. They were living in ruins and they accepted it. They were willing to walk around the devastation instead of being concerned enough to do something about their situation. Friends, nothing is ever going to change in your life, in the life of this church, our community, our country, or the world, until we become *concerned about the problem*.

When Nehemiah heard this report, he cried out to God in verse 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.”*** The phrase ***“wept and mourned”*** means that he ***“bemoaned and lamented,”*** much like Jesus did when he cried out in painful tears when he observed the hard hearts of those in Jerusalem (Luke 19:41).

He also fasted. I read this week that Jonathan Edwards fasted for three days before preaching, ***“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”*** and 500 were saved! In the Old Testament, fasting was only required once a year, but here we see Nehemiah refraining from food for several days. In fact, we know from comparing the different dates in this book that he wept, fasted, and prayed for ***four months!***

Do you need some rebuilding today? Are your defenses broken down such that you are allowing some practices and sins to control your life?

2. CONVICTION about God’s character. After Nehemiah becomes concerned, he next expresses his conviction about God’s character in verse 5: ***“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.”***

To begin a prayer with ***“O”*** means that he prayed with intense urgency. In other verses it’s translated as, ***“I beg you”*** like the prayer of Moses in Numbers 12:13: ***“O God, please heal her – please.”*** God wants us to ask earnestly and implore desperately. Nehemiah addressed God as ***“Lord.”*** He recognized the Lord as his sovereign – and in verse 6, he refers to himself as God’s servant. He then refers to His Lord as the ***“God of Heaven.”*** He acknowledged that God was beyond the earthly realm and above all other gods.

Nehemiah next refers to Him as ***“great and awesome.”*** God is huge and holy! We overuse the word awesome today as a synonym for cool to describe the weather, food or sports teams. Let’s reserve this word for God alone because awesome literally means ***“to tremble in awe.”*** The idea is to stagger in fear and wonder. Instead of saying, ***“wow,”*** when we think of God, we should be saying, ***“woe.”*** God deserves to be honored, revered and feared because of who He is. Unfortunately, our culture and our churches are more like what Paul described in Romans 3:18: ***“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”***

Nehemiah also describes God as the one who ***“keeps covenant and steadfast love.”*** He begins his prayer with praise for God’s greatness *and* for His loyal love. He is great *and* good. God is to be feared and *yet* we can call Him friend. He is

majestic *and* merciful. He is both powerful *and* personal. God preserves His promises because He's the ultimate promise-keeper. His "***steadfast love***" is also translated as lovingkindness and mercy. Amazingly, this attribute is used 26 times in Psalm 136!

His boss, the king, was the greatest and mightiest on earth, but compared to God, Artaxerxes was Arta-nothing! Brothers and sisters, *when we go to God in prayer, things get put into their proper perspective.*

Because of his conviction about God's character, Nehemiah knew that God was not only able, but also willing to respond to his prayer. But he also knew that he did not deserve to have God treat him favorably. That's why the next phase of his prayer is a confession of sin. Like Job in 42:5-6, his encounter with an awesome God brings him to the place of repentance and confession: "***I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.***"

3. CONFESSION of sin. After becoming concerned about the problem, and expressing his conviction about God's character, Nehemiah is now moved to contrite confession in verses 6-7: "***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.***" I'm struck by how often Nehemiah uses the words "***your***" and "***you***" to refer to God – I count 9 times in these two verses and 11 more times in the next four verses! Related to this, the word "***servant***" or "***servants***" is used 8 times in verses 6-11. Nehemiah had settled this truth: *God is sovereign and we are but His servants. He is God and we are not.*

Nehemiah boldly asks God to "***be attentive***" to his prayer, which literally means, "*to hear intelligently with great attention.*" There are at least three key ingredients in his confession of sin.

- **Intensity.** Overwhelmed by concern about sin and in awe of God's character, Nehemiah gave himself to prolonged petition. He prayed "***day and night.***" This is very similar to Psalm 88:1 where we read, "***O LORD, God of my salvation, I cry out day and night before you.***"
- **Culpability.** Nehemiah surveyed the grim record of Israel's past and present failure, and he knew that he was not exempt from blame. The one

who is self-righteous goes to God and prays, “*Look at their sin, Lord.*” The humble person says, “*We have sinned.*” Notice that he prays, “***Even I and my father’s house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments.***” It’s so easy for us to rationalize, excuse or blame others, isn’t it?

- **Honesty.** Nehemiah recognized that sin is not merely a stubborn refusal to obey certain rules, but is also a defiant act of aggressive personal rebellion against a holy God. He confesses, “***we have acted very corruptly.***” He didn’t try to candy-coat his sin. He owned it and called it what it was.

Trying to hide our sins from God is impossible. He knows all about them. Numbers 32:23 reminds us, “***...be sure your sin will find you out.***” Friends, we need to recognize that all sin, those things we have blatantly done or carelessly committed, or those things that we have left undone, must be identified and then confessed. Are you trying to hide anything today? It’s better to confess it now than to wait until your sin exposes you!

4. CONFIDENCE in God’s promises. While Nehemiah spends time in broken confession, he doesn’t wallow in a prolonged introspective examination of his failures and those of his brothers and sisters. He owns what he did wrong and then he quickly expresses *confidence in God’s promises* in verses 8-10: “***Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, 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.’ They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.***”

In this part of his prayer, Nehemiah recalls the language of the Exodus when God’s mighty hand conquered the mighty Egyptians. He also references the words of Moses about the danger of Israel’s apostasy and the promise of divine mercy. His words are a skillful mosaic of Old Testament warnings and promises, with quotes coming from Leviticus, Deuteronomy, 1 Kings, 2 Chronicles and Psalm 130.

Don’t miss that Nehemiah is ultimately concerned about the glory of God and the fame of His holy name: “***...I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.***” It’s all about God and His glory!

Are you as confident of God's promises as Nehemiah was? Nehemiah knew God would keep His covenant of love with his people. He also knew that, even though God did not need his help, he was ready to make a *commitment to get involved*.

5. COMMITMENT to get involved. Do you see the progression in Nehemiah's prayer? His *concern* about the problem led him to brokenness. While he was weeping and fasting, he expressed his *conviction* about God's character. As he focused on the greatness and awesomeness of His holy God, he was quickly reminded of his own wickedness and therefore cried out in *confession*. After owning his role in the nation's depravity, he prayed boldly and with *confidence* in God's promises. This then leads him to a *commitment to get involved*.

We see this in verse 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.’ Now I was cupbearer to the king.”*** This reminds me of the prayer found in Psalm 86:6: ***“Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer; listen to my plea for grace.”***

Did you notice that ***“delight”*** and ***“fear”*** are used together? We are to be delightfully devoted to God. It should give us great pleasure to fall on our faces before God. *It has been said that prayer is not getting our will done in heaven but getting God's will done on earth.* However, for God's will to be done on earth, He needs people to be available for Him to use. While Nehemiah was praying, his burden for Jerusalem became greater and his vision of what needed to be done became clearer.

Nehemiah knew that he would have to approach the king so he asked God for ***“success,”*** which means *“to break out or push forward.”* He was claiming yet another promise from Proverbs 21:1: ***“The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.”***

Someone has said that the key word in this book is the word, ***“so,”*** which occurs 32 different times. Again and again, Nehemiah assesses the situation, is moved to concern and ***“so”*** is compelled to action. The true measure of our concern is whether or not we are willing to make a commitment to get involved. Martin Luther said, *“Pray as if everything depends on God, then work as if everything depends on you.”*

Conclusion

A good question to ask after every sermon is this: *so what?*

- Are you *concerned* about your problems?
- Do you have a *conviction* about God's holy character?
- Are you ready to *confess* your sins?
- Do you have *confidence* in God's promises?
- Are you ready to make a *commitment* to get involved in God's kingdom work?

You can do that by committing to be involved in *Grow Time*. Here are a few ideas.

- **Incorporate the elements of Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication (ACTS) into your prayers.** Another helpful acrostic we used in our Laboring in Prayer services is CHAT – Confess, Honor, Ask and Thank.
- **Begin praying daily for our Grow Time Initiative.** Could you hold up the Commitment Card found inside your booklet? I encourage you to put this somewhere where you can see it. This is designed to be a tool for us to use to discern how the Lord is calling each of us to respond. We're praying for 100% involvement because *no one can do everything but everyone can do something*. We'll turn these commitment cards in on November 10-11.
- **Ask God how He would like you to be involved financially.** If you're willing to commit to pray regarding your personal involvement in *Grow Time*, we'd love to give you a *Grow Time* t-shirt will supplies last. Simply stop by the *Grow Time* Info Table in the lobby. We're thankful that an Edgewood couple donated all these shirts and banners and the flags you see outside.
- **Consider joining a Growth Group for six weeks.** If you're not in one, Pastor Tim is leading one on Sunday nights at 5:00 here at Edgewood. They'll be studying the sermons from the Book of Nehemiah and using the questions in the back of the booklet. These questions would be good to use as a family as well.
- **Plan to attend our Praise and Prayer time on November 4 at 4 pm.**

Brothers and sisters, *It's Grow Time!*

Commissioning of India Team