Prayer in the Life of Nehemiah
Nehemiah 1:1-2:5

This is the last in our summer series on prayer. And given it's the last, it's kind of appropriate that we look at Nehemiah because, chronologically, he is the last leader of God's people that we get to meet in the Old Testament. And, when we first meet him, we meet him praying. Which, if you think about it, is surprising.

You see, look how he describes himself. Verse 11, 'Now I was cupbearer to the king.' And you could read that and think, 'great, Nehemiah was a waiter. I was hoping for something more heroic.' But you'd be wrong. Because in the ancient world, the *cupbearer* was the man the king - in this case the ruler of the Medo-Persian empire, *the* world super-power of the time, trusted with his life. Trusted to protect him from poisoning - because as cupbearer, he drank the wine first. A man allowed direct access to and who had the ear of the king.

But Nehemiah only tells you that in passing. You only learn that *after* you've already heard him praying.

Now, if this was you, and you were introducing yourself, what would you highlight? What would you put first? How would you describe yourself? Most likely, it would either be what matters most to you - what impresses you about you, or what you think would impress the person you're talking to. And so for many of us, if we were Nehemiah, we would put our status and our success and how far we've got up the food chain - however you're measuring that - first.

Earlier this week I was added to a WhatsApp group by someone trying to organise a 30 year reunion for my graduating class at medical school. And so for the last week I've been seeing what 70 or so of my peers, the vast majority of whom I've not seen in 30 years, have been doing with their lives. And it's sobering. Because they've done amazing things. They're professors of medicine in world class universities, they're leading retinal surgeons, or chiefs of paediatric cardiac anaesthesia; they're medal winning researchers, or multiple published neurologists, or authors of medical textbooks. And then, there's me. And talk about feeling inadequate.

And going through the feed made me realise just how much my sense of worth is tied up with my status or my success in others' eyes. But with Nehemiah, you only find out the heights he's risen to, the people he's mixing with, in a throw away sentence. Because ultimately, what matters to him is not that he's got the king's ear, it's that he's got God's ear.

And in that he has something to teach us, and not just about prayer.

He's Emotionally Engaged - about things that matter
Now, what gets you emotionally? What gets you riled up, or makes you cry? What do you worry about, that saps your emotional energy? Or what puts a spring in your step, or leaves you punching the air with joy?

Because what does it for you emotionally tells you a lot about what matters to you, doesn't it? Recently we had dinner with some friends who have two daughters, one of whom dished the dirt on the other, and told us how her sister had once cried at dinner because she wasn't allowed ice-cream. Well, clearly, ice-cream mattered to her! But for you it could be politics, or someone cutting you up on the motorway, or a romantic story, or the worrying choices someone you care about is making, or the way someone else treats you.

Whatever it is, our emotional reactions to things tell us, 'this matters to me.'

So look at Nehemiah. Verse 4, 'As soon as I heard these words I sat down *and wept* and *mourned* for days.' What's behind that emotional response? It's that his brother and others are visiting from Jerusalem, and, v2, Nehemiah 'asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem.'

Now, Nehemiah is in Susa, in what's now south-western Iran. And Susa was the winter residence of the emperor. It's what Nehemiah calls, v1, 'Susa the citadel'. Susa, the fortified city.

So Nehemiah's safe, in the fortress of the world's super-power. But Nehemiah's not asking about Susa, he's asking about the state of Jerusalem, and of his Jewish compatriots who had either escaped being sent into exile in Babylon, or had recently returned from exile. And they're anything but safe. Verse 3, 'The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.' They're at the mercy of their enemies.

And yet, despite the strength of his emotional reaction, this probably wasn't news for Nehemiah. At this point people had been returning to Jerusalem for several years, so this is probably not the first Nehemiah has heard of their condition. So why all the emotion?

Is it the lack of progress in rebuilding the city and its walls that gets to him? Is it the ongoing opposition they're facing and their powerlessness to do anything about it? Is it what directly precedes this account, in the book of Ezra, that the exiles have been inter-marrying with the pagans in the area, so they're not just at risk physically but morally and spiritually?

Whatever it is, Nehemiah cares. He cares about the people of God and the city of God.

So… what does do it for you? And what does what you're emotionally invested in say about what you care about? And do the people of God - the church - play a part in that? You see, in his first letter, the apostle John tells us that one of *the* marks that someone is genuinely a Christian is that they love God's people. And you want to meet with God's people and see them built up.

Is there more to being a Christian than that? Sure. But it's not less than that. As Jesus said, by this will all men know that you are my disciples - that you love one another.

But where does that leave those of you who are not yet Christians? I mean, if you don't feel any great love for the church, does that just tell you that you're an outsider? Well, maybe. But the fact is you're here. And *that* tells you that God is on your case, that he's drawing you to himself and to his people. So allow him to continue to do just that.

Ok, but notice how Nehemiah's brother summarises the condition of the survivors. Verse 3, "The remnant… is in great trouble and shame." They're in trouble because they're defenceless, and their shamed because their opponents are mocking them and mocking God. But they're also shamed because they know that, ultimately, their situation is due to their and their forefathers' sin. And everywhere they look, every pile of rubble and every destroyed building, cries out their guilt. And they can't escape it.

But if trouble and shame drive Nehemiah to prayer. What does trouble and shame do for you?

When you're troubled and feeling overwhelmed by life, or when you see your sin, or the consequences of your bad choices, or the defaults in your character, and you feel guilt and shame, what does it do to your desire to pray or to come to church and meet with God's people?

You see, when we're experiencing trouble and shame, the danger is we withdraw. We withdraw from others and we withdraw from God, because we don't feel worthy. We don't want people to see us like this, or think of us like this. And why would God listen to someone like me? And think we have to get our act together and clean up our lives, before we can come.

But it's precisely in times of trouble and shame that we need each other and, above all, we need God. And Nehemiah's an example of just that.

He Prays

Now, if you know the rest of the story, you'll know that Nehemiah goes down in history as the man who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. A man who was a courageous and decisive leader. A man who could plan and strategise and organise and inspire.

But all of that was secondary, relative even, to the fact that he was a man of prayer. Was he a man of action? Absolutely. But it came out of prayer. And as one writer puts it, "His *intimacy with* God came before his *activity for* God". And if you read his story you'll see that repeatedly, before he acts, he prays. Why? Because Nehemiah knows that he and the people need something more than the protection of city walls. They need the impenetrable protection and provision of God.

Think about that. Especially if you're a man, or an engineer, or both. Because we can hear about a problem, at work or at home, and our first instinct is to come up with solutions: 'oh you should do this.'. Nehemiah's first instinct was to pray.

And he prays long. Look at v1: 'Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year…' that's when he starts praying. Then, chapter 2:1, 'In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year…' he goes to the king. That's 4 months of praying before he acts. For some of us, 4 minutes would be a long time!

So it's not just that v5-11 give us a long prayer, it's that he prays over a long time. He was persistent in prayer.

But he also prayed short. After 4 months of prayer, he goes to the king, and when the king asks him what he's requesting, Nehemiah tells us, chapter 2:4-5, 'So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king…'. So standing in the king's presence, he sends up an arrow prayer to God.

Not long after I became a Christian, my mother hosted a dinner party for our extended family. And with my aunts and uncles sat around the table, as the one newly religious person there, they decided I should say grace for the meal. And I prayed something like, 'Heavenly Father, thank you for this food, Amen.' Silence. And then one of my uncles broke the silence and said, 'Is that it? I would have thought you could have given us more than that!'

But Jesus said we're not heard for our many words. And throughout Nehemiah's account we see him firing up short - not-many-words-are-needed - arrow prayers. 'Hear O our God for we are despised…. Remember me, O my God… Now O God, strengthen my hands…' And he's constantly inviting God, and his presence and his power, into the moments of his everyday life.

Think how you can do the same: when you're frustrated in a traffic jam, or struggling with something at work; when someone's irritating you, or your patience with the kids is being tested; when you're feeling sad and you don't know why, or tempted and you want to give in. Pray long, but also pray short, fire up your own prayers: God, I can't do this but you can… I am irritated, so give me the patience of your Spirit… I feel sad, but thank you that you love me… I want to give in, so help me to stand and show me that Christ is better than sin.

But Nehemiah didn't only pray. You see, he could have prayed, 'Lord, send someone, someone else, to help your people.' But he doesn't. He combines prayer *and* action. He prayed *and he fasted*. He prayed *and he planned*. He prayed *and he went to the king*. He prayed *and he spoke*. And in chapter 4, in Jerusalem, when threatened by their enemies, he tells us, v9, 'We prayed to our God *and set a guard*.' For Nehemiah, prayer was no reason for inactivity or presumption. Instead, it was knowing that God was in sovereign control of everything that meant he could pray and press on.

So consider the challenges you're facing at the moment, and bring them before God in prayer; and then do all that you can knowing that your efforts are not in vain, because the One you are praying to is sovereign over everything.

He Prays Reverently

Verse 5, 'And I said, "O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God…"' Compare that to the way he does not big himself up. And compare it to the way he prays about the king whose permission he needs. Verse 11, 'Give success to your servant today, and grant him [me, Nehemiah] mercy in the sight of *this man*.'

In comparison to God, the great and awesome God, *the* most powerful man in the world, the emperor of the greatest kingdom on earth, was just a man.

But God is the God of heaven. And this is at a time when people thought of gods as being territorial. There were the gods of Egypt or Assyria or Babylonia. But Nehemiah knows that the one true God is God over all.

Now think how Jesus picks up that idea. Because when he teaches us to pray he says, 'pray then like this, '*Our Father* in heaven, hallowed be your name.'' The same Lord God of Heaven, the same great and awesome God, who we are to reverence, who sees everything, and rules everything, but who has become our Father. That's the God you are being invited to pray to.

But if Nehemiah knows who God is, he also knows who he, Nehemiah is.

He Prays Humbly

And in v6 he comes to God 'confessing the sins of the people of Israel.' But did you notice how he's *not* doing that? He's not doing it self-righteously.

The American pastor and author, Paul Tripp, defines self-righteousness as 'being more concerned for, and motivated by, the knowledge of the sin of others than your own.'

And Nehemiah could have been emotionally moved by the plight of others, and feel pity for them, and want to pray for them, and serve them, all the time seeing *their* sin as the root of *their* problem. And we can think similarly. In our friendships, or our marriages, in the way we see the problems in

wider society, we can see the sin of others clearly: it's my wife, or my husband's, or my parents', or those people over there's sin that's the problem - but fail to reckon with our own. As Jesus put it, we see the speck in their eye so clearly, but are blind to the log in ours.

Nehemiah doesn't do that. He owns this for himself. And comes, v6-7, 'Confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which *we* have sinned against you. *Even I and my father's house* have sinned. *We have acted* corruptly against you…'

Now, the man who had probably the biggest impact on me as a new Christian said that when you confess your sin to God, be specific. We commit sins one by one, he said, so confess them one by one. And he's right. Be specific in your confession. Yet, look what Nehemiah prays, v7, 'We have acted corruptly against you and have not kept *the commandments, the statutes, and the rules* that you commanded your servant Moses.' He's being clear-eyed about the sheer breadth and depth of his and others' sin. That when it comes to God's word and will, all of us fail to keep it, and not just in a few specifics, but on an all-encompassing, totally comprehensive, guilty on all counts, scale.

Has the totality of that dawned on you? You see, if sin is something *others* do, if it's always *them* who are the problem, then the gospel has not yet penetrated our hearts as deeply as it should. Because before the gospel can lift you up, it must first humble you. And when Jesus teaches us to pray he says "pray, 'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.'" In other words, 'Father, I'm coming acknowledging and confessing *my* sin and *my* need of forgiveness before anyone else's.'

And so, if this morning you are painfully aware of your unworthiness, that's not a sign of you being beyond God's grace, it's the opposite. Because having humbled you, the gospel will lift you up.

He Prays Confidently - and so can you

Now, when you're faced with a problem, your confidence can be in yourself to sort it, or it can be in others who can help you sort it. But as we've seen, Nehemiah's confidence does not lie in his status or his moral record, and it also doesn't lie in the king's good nature or willingness to help. After all he's just a man.

Nehemiah's confidence lies in God's character and God's word.

In v5, he comes to God as the God 'who keeps covenant *and steadfast love* with those who love him and keep his commands.' And God's steadfast love is his *hesed*, never-ending, never-running out, covenant love. And Nehemiah can pray and act because he knows that God loves him and his people more than he ever could.

Then in v8-9, he prays God's word and promises back to God. First, he recalls how God was always clear in his warnings - v8, 'if you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples.' But then, in v9, he reminds God of the 'but', '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.' In other words, God, we have sinned, and borne the consequences, but you have promised that if we repent you'll hear. And we're repenting, so you've got to hear.

Then he prays as one who knows who the ultimate king really is. Verse 10, 'They [the returned exiles] are *your* servants and *your* people.' Yes, humanly speaking, they're at the mercy of the king's decisions, but that's not whose servants they finally are. That's not who ultimately they

belong to. And so, if our ultimate loyalty lies with you, God, so does our protection. Lord, they're *your* responsibility and their welfare and your reputation depends on this.

But finally, his confidence lies in God's proven track record of delivering his people from shame and trouble, because that's what he did when he first called Israel out of slavery in Egypt: v10, 'They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power.'

Where does your confidence lie when *you* pray? Or when *you* act? If it's in your own worthiness, might that explain why there are times when you feel like you *can't* pray? - because you feel unworthy. If it's in your righteousness then that might explain why the sins of others done against you feature more in your prayers than your own. If it's in your status or your success it might explain why you don't pray at all, or why your prayers are like shopping lists, because God is just there to bless your life.

But when your confidence is in the character and the word of God it will first humble you, but then it will lift you up and make you bold in prayer.

I don't know if you have followed the fall-out of the attempted shooting of Donald Trump, if you did you'll have seen that over the last decades there have been a number of Secret Service failures and near misses, and people getting closer to a president than they should have. But why is that a scandal? Because you can't just approach the president.

But if that's true for a president, or as Nehemiah might say, 'this man', how much more true is it of God? I mean, who do you think you are? Whether you pray long or short, you can't simply approach the great and awesome God and expect to be admitted and heard. But because of Jesus, that's exactly what you can do.

You see, if Nehemiah can look back on the Exodus as proof that God will rescue his people, what can you look back on? Well, Nehemiah isn't just a model of someone who prays, he's a signpost pointing you to Christ, to the one true Leader, and ultimate intercessor for God's people. And the Exodus is a signpost pointing you to the far greater rescue that Christ, our Passover Lamb, achieved for us.

You see, if Nehemiah was moved with love and concern for his people, enough to risk the journey to Jerusalem, think how Christ loved and cared for you enough to come to you. And if Nehemiah confesses the breadth and depth of their sin, think how the length and breadth and height and depth of Christ's love answers our sin. Because if Nehemiah humbled himself in prayer, Jesus humbled himself to the cross. And if Nehemiah was cup-bearer to the king, Jesus was the cup-drinker. Because if Nehemiah protected the king from drinking poison, Christ is the king who drinks the poison - the poison of our sin - to protect us. And if trouble and shame drive Nehemiah to prayer, at the cross Jesus takes our trouble and shame - the very things that drive us away from God - upon himself. And in his death and his resurrection, he triumphs over them. And as he does, he becomes our citadel, our fortress, our protective wall against all the attacks of our enemy, and our sin.

And when you know that, you'll know that, like Nehemiah, you have the ear of God. And you will approach him reverently and humbly, because Christ the King had to die for you. But you'll also approach him boldly and with confidence, because Christ the king did die for you, and rose again, and he has removed your shame.