

Should We Pray Like Nehemiah?

Nehemiah 1:1-11

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The year was around 445 B.C. The King of Babylon had defeated Israel and most of the Jews were exiled in Babylon. Back in Jerusalem, the walls and the gates to the Holy City were destroyed.

Many years later, Persia defeated Babylon. When the Persian king allowed the Jews to return to their own land, only some of the Jews returned because the city was unsafe. It was unprotected. The people were vulnerable to attack. It was not the city their ancestors had left.

Nehemiah, an important servant of the king of Persia, heard about the plight of the walls of Jerusalem and the vulnerability of the people when one someone close to his family came from Jerusalem to Persia for a visit. Feeling great empathy for his people, Nehemiah asked the king to send him to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls of the city.

Even with great opposition, with the help of God, they finished the work in 52 incredible days!

Nehemiah was a great leader. His story is filled with inspiration and examples of vision and hard work.

I want you to think about anything that you are a part of that needs repair. Perhaps it's a relationship. Perhaps it's some aspect of your business or job. It could be a ministry or program of the church. You might be part of a team or organization that's falling apart. What can Nehemiah teach us?

Before I tell you, I am going to tell you what we usually do. We usually find someone to blame when things are going wrong.

If we are having trouble in our marriage, we tend to blame our spouse. If we are having trouble at work, we tend to blame our boss or co-workers. If a ball team is falling apart we are going to blame the coach. If a ministry at the church is struggling, the laity will blame the ministers. The ministers will blame the laity. If our business is in trouble, we are going to blame the economy.

In blaming others, we try to free ourselves of any responsibility but blaming rarely solves a problem.

When Nehemiah heard that the walls of Jerusalem were destroyed and the gates were burned, he could have said to his brother, "If the people had not rebelled against God, this would not have happened to them. They are suffering because you reap what you sow."

Would he have been right?

There would have been truth in words like these, but these words would not have been the whole truth. That's often the way it is when we blame others.

Actually, the people in Jerusalem were suffering for the sins of those that lived before them. They were the descendants of those who had created the problems that led to the walls of Jerusalem being destroyed.

Even so, notice how the news affected Nehemiah. Instead of blaming others, Nehemiah did four things. He wept, mourned, fasted, and prayed.

Nehemiah's grieving shows us that he personally felt like he had lost something.

When there is loss of any kind, there is grief and all the emotions that surround grief. Grief doesn't always move us to tears.

Sometimes grief causes sadness, anger, depression, confusion, guilt and anxiety. We can act in all kinds of ways when we grieve and not all of them are healthy. But Nehemiah's grief was healthy because the first thing Nehemiah does is take steps to draw closer to God.

He started by fasting and praying.

Going without food was a way to constantly remind Nehemiah of the plight of his Jerusalem relatives. He knew they were going without food so going without food kept them constantly on his mind.

As his stomach growled and the hunger of his own body cried out for food, this also reminded him to keep his focus on why he was not eating. He wanted to continue to bring this matter before God in prayer.

Notice how Nehemiah prayed.

Nehemiah Affirms God

“He proclaims that God is a just God, a great God, a God who wants to hear prayers and wants to answer prayers. He acknowledges God's worthiness and God's sovereignty.” His prayer is a prayer of affirmation. It is a prayer of praise.

Even though Nehemiah is grieving, even though his heart is broken, he doesn't start out asking for anything. He begins with a prayer of worship.

How many of our prayers begin this way? We need to learn from Nehemiah because God is worthy of our praise.

He Admits His Part of the Problem

Not only is Nehemiah's prayer affirming, but he is willing to acknowledge the part he has played in Jerusalem's plight.

Now you might find this odd. Nehemiah has never been to Jerusalem. He has been the cupbearer to the king. What could he have possibly have done that has contributed to the wall being torn down and the gates being burned?

When I am teaching conflict resolution skills to couples, one of the first steps is to get the man and the woman to each state how he or she has contributed to the problem. I am not looking for an answer like, "I married you. That is how I contributed to the problem." No, no. That is not the idea.

Rarely, if ever, when something goes wrong in a relationship, a program, a team, a business, is it ever totally the fault of one person.

When we acknowledge that we are also part of the problem in some way, it frees the other person to move toward us and it allows us to move toward him or her.

Nehemiah prayed a prayer of admission. He admitted his own inadequacies and the inadequacy of all of God's people. He acknowledged who he was by saying "God, I've blown it. I've made mistakes and I'm imperfect." In doing so, he moved closer to God. He allowed himself to experience God's presence in a way he would not have if he had just blamed others for all the problems.

When we have a prayer life like this, it is life changing. First, we are changed. This is a kind of poverty of spirit that Jesus says we should have when we come to God.

Secondly, there is potential for new life to be breathed into old problems when we come to God in this way. There is hope that grief can morph into celebration and newness of life.

It is true that we cannot force others to change. However, when others see that change has already taken place in our lives, we become leaders by example. Our lives become the example others want to follow and emulate.

You cannot spend your time in deep, earnest prayer on behalf of others without it making an impact on your life, on your attitude, and your demeanor, and that will show in some way as you speak and interact with others.

Prayer changes things. Prayer works like a farmer who uses a disk to turn the ground, preparing it for planting. Prayer works like a cook who spends a great deal of time prepping meat, tenderizing it and marinating it before he or she ever cooks it. Problems that once looked like mountains can be reduced to hills.

He Prayed with Assurance

Nehemiah affirmed God. He admitted his role and the people's role in the failures of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah's prayer was a prayer of assurance.

Why pray at all? We pray because we have the assurance that God hears us, cares about us, and wants to bless us.

Nehemiah recalled one of God's promises he gave to Moses: In Deuteronomy 30:4-5 "Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you and bring you back. He will bring you to the land that belonged to your fathers, and you will take possession of it."

For Nehemiah, these words were words of assurance to him that God would do His part. He needed to be faithful and do his.

Many years ago, a man and a woman that were courting could be seen sitting next to each other as the man drove down the road in a car or truck. That was before people wore shoulder seat belts and the seats in vehicles were just one long seat all the way across. It would not be long, though, after the couple got married that you would see the man driving and his wife would be all the way across the seat sitting beside the door.

Once a woman reminded her husband about how they used to sit close together when they rode down the road and he said, "Well, I haven't moved."

When the walls are on the ground, when the relationship is falling apart, when a ministry is in trouble, when a vision lacks direction, when you are grieving the loss of what once was but is no more, God wants us to know that He has not moved away from us.

His word is filled with promises and with assurances that He is Emmanuel. He is "God is with us." God will not forsake us. God is waiting for us to come and seek his face. God wants us to be grieved enough about a situation that we are willing to spend some time with him, listening to him, so that we can have a change of heart and a change of mind, or that in the midst of grief God can slowly change our grief into a song.

You cannot change anyone around you. You alone cannot change the situation. However, you can draw close to God and others will see that God is changing you. When that happens, the Holy Spirit has a greater opportunity to work. God can use you as the catalyst for change as He'd did Nehemiah and others.

You can become the Nehemiah that God sends to rebuild the walls, the marriage, the ministry, the business, the team, the relationship, or the opportunity.

He Prayed a Prayer of Action

That leads us to the final way that Nehemiah prayed. He prayed a prayer of action.

Nehemiah was like Isaiah who prayed, “Here am I Lord, send me.” Nehemiah was willing to “be a part of the answer. He was willing to do what needed to be done. We must be ready to say, ‘I’m willing to be part of the answer. God, you can use me. I commit myself. I’ll be part of the solution.’”

That’s how the wall of Jerusalem got rebuilt in 52 days. Prayer eventually needs legs, feet, arms and hands. Not someone else’s, but yours and mine.

If we care about our world, our state, our community, our city, our families, our teenagers, our children, our church, then we can’t just complain. Our hearts must be broken like Nehemiah’s.

We must care enough to grieve about what we are losing.

We must care enough to affirm God in our prayers because God cares.

We must care enough to admit where we are part of the problem.

We must care enough to pray with the assurance that God can change things.

We must care enough to pray with the intention of doing what God instructs us to do.

We must care enough to get involved.

Is there anyone here that will commit today to pray like Nehemiah?

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