

Praying

Nehemiah 1–2

Nehemiah as a man of action but also a person of prayer who we can learn much from. His big and little prayers in the first two chapters of the book give us models for speaking to the God who loves to hear and answer our prayers.

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1. Big praying (chapter 1)

Nehemiah's big praying is started by hearing news that provokes a massive emotional reaction (1:4). One of the answers to the question: 'What should I pray about?' is whatever matters to you.

Because there's such a sense of shame for Nehemiah about what is happening, his response includes weeping and mourning and fasting (see resource listed below). This situation requires action as well but before he plans, he prays. We're told that he prays a lot and for a long time, possibly using the three-times-a-day pattern of Daniel (Daniel 6:10), which can create a praying attitude that lasts the whole day (1 Thessalonians 5:17). The emotional connections that can start us praying won't keep us praying but disciplines and rhythms can help.

He starts by focusing on God (1:5) – not the situation or what he should do about it (see also Matthew 6:9, Acts 4:24). Because for all the benefits we get from praying, our relationship with God is the most important one. And if we don't focus on Him first we will panic, or be purely pragmatic, or passive. We can loudly declare truths about God that we've read in His Word, or quietly meditate on them – this will help us see that God is bigger than whatever situation we're facing.

Nehemiah is interceding – putting himself between God and the exiles, and representing their cause to God, asking God to act. He goes further, associating himself fully with what has happened, even though he wasn't directly involved (1:7). He was a sinner who needed to confess his own wrongdoing to God, the same goes for us and we can be confident of receiving forgiveness (1 John 1:9).

Nehemiah goes on to quote God's Word back to Him (1:8-9, which is taken from Deuteronomy). Our prayers don't have to be original and we can apply promises from God's Word because He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Similarly, he reminds himself and God of the things God has done in the past, saying: God, you've done it before, so please do it again (1:10, which echoes Exodus 15:6 and Deuteronomy 7:8 among others).

Finally, he makes a practical request! Only at the end of his prayer does he do this (1:11).

He prays this way from Chislev to Nisan (1:1, 2:1) – that's November/December to March/April in our calendar. It only took 52 days for him and the others to actually physically

rebuilt the wall in Jerusalem because most of the hard work had already been done in prayer.

2. Little praying (chapter 2)

The moment arrives for Nehemiah to put in motion what he has been praying for and planning (2:4), and he has only a second to respond. His prayer lasts as long as it took him to draw breath (2:4-5). The two types of praying are connected: these little prayers may be the ignition which sets light to the pile of dynamite your big prayers have been stacking up.

Let's set aside times of concentrated, focused praying – prayer events and daily rhythms which help us be those who persevere and gain what God wants to give. Let's also be ready to pray in the moment we've been given.

Resources:

Prayer Course tool shed: short guides to different ways of praying.

<https://prayercourse.org/toolshed/>

An explanation of fasting in the Bible, with links to other articles and resources.

<http://www.lukesblog.org/2021/01/fasting.html>

King's Church prayer walk podcasts. <https://www.kingschurchedinburgh.org/series/prayer-walk-podcasts/>

An interview with Terry Virgo on prayer. <http://kings.church/teaching/terry-virgo-interview/>

Suggested books: A Praying Life by Paul E. Miller, How To Pray by Pete Greig, A Simple Way To Pray by Martin Luther, Enjoy Your Prayer Life by Michael Reeves.

Questions for group discussion

- Invite people in the group to share the benefits they've experienced from praying.
- Ask people to share about how/when/what they pray.
- Which of the aspects of "big praying" that Luke mentioned do you find challenging? (Fasting, repetition and perseverance, focusing on God first, confession, praying promises from the Bible, praying God's actions from the Bible, practical requests.)
- What new aspect of praying would you like to start doing in your personal prayer times?
- How can you as a group encourage one another in prayer?