

In Jesus' Name, Amen

Nehemiah . . . Memoirs of an Ordinary Man – Part IV

Nehemiah 1:8-11

Introduction

On November 19, 1863, Edward Everett, one of the most brilliant orators of his generation, stood to speak before a vast audience of American citizens. The press had come from around the nation to hear Edward and one other man speak. Edward Everett spoke first. He delivered a one hour and fifty-seven minute oration, interrupted periodically by cheering and thunderous applause from the audience. A divided nation had come to this moment in history in desperate need of direction and healing following the end of the Civil War. The newspapers the next day praised and printed Edward Everett's speech with front-page prominence.

Then it was time for the second speaker. He stood, adjusted his steel-framed glasses and proceeded to speak for two minutes. Then he sat down. A member of the Philadelphia Press Corp whispered to him, "Is that all?"

He replied, "That's all."

One hundred fifty years later, none of you know one word of Edward Everett's two hour speech, but most of you know something about Abraham Lincoln's two minute speech. It began with the words,

Fourscore and seven years ago our forefathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal . . .

The newspapers gave Lincoln brief, inside coverage. The social elite found his remarks crude

and insufficient. But Lincoln's Gettysburg Address has become a national icon of freedom.

I found it interesting to discover, in the *Microsoft Encarta* encyclopedia account where I did my research, that the following week Abraham Lincoln received a note from Edward Everett that read,

I wish that I could flatter myself to have come as near to the central idea of the occasion in two hours as you did in two minutes.

There was once a man who prayed to the God of heaven on behalf of his divided, hurting, sinful nation. It is recorded for us in Nehemiah, chapter 1. And today, if you were to pray his prayer at conversational speed, you could pray it in less than two minutes. Yet, in just two minutes, Nehemiah gained the maximum attention of God.

How? What is the prayer to which God listens? How do you gain the maximum attention of God?

We have already discovered, in our study of Nehemiah, that the prayer that grasps the greatness of God, that grasps the attention of God, involves several steps.

Priority of Sovereignty

1. We called the first of four steps along the prayer path (P. A. T. H.), the step that involved a clear priority of sovereignty.

Nehemiah prayed, in verse 5 of chapter 1,

. . . I beseech Thee, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God . . .

"You reign over all of creation. You rule over all that is."

There is boldness in coming with fear, awe, and humility.

I can still remember my fifth grade teacher asking me to stay after class and come to his office for an appointment. Now I had been asked to stay after class before, for less pleasant reasons. We called it “detention” in those days. I can still remember in junior high school washing windows outside the classroom building. I had done something undeserving of that kind of punishment, but it was a relief to be in detention on the same afternoon that my soccer team was holding practice. That way, my parents would never know. I can still remember being up on a ladder, washing a second floor window, and glancing over my shoulder to see the family car pull into the school parking lot. My father had come early to watch us practice. What a Dad! He came to spend time with his son. We did spend some time together later, by the way.

This time, however, the teacher wanted, he said, to sit down and discuss something of importance to the fifth grade class. He wanted to talk over an important matter with me. I, and all the fifth grade boys, admired this man. He was a tall, strong, deep voiced but gracious man. I remember he always smelled like coffee. I can remember going into his little office, sitting on that chair, and having that appointment with him like it was yesterday, even though it was, um . . . twelve or thirteen years ago! I came with confidence, because he invited me, but with trembling, because of who he was. And, I said, “Yes, sir,” an awful lot.

Proper praying balances boldness, in that you have been invited there, with trembling, in that you are aware of Who He is Who invited you. You tend to say, “Yes sir,” a lot. You would never say, “Now listen here,” but would say, “Yes, Sir.”

True praying places God on His throne and mankind at His feet.

David wrote in Psalm 145, verses 1 through 12,
I will extol Thee, my God, O King; . . .

Extol comes from the Hebrew word “room,” which means, “to lift high, to raise”.

. . . and I will bless Thy name forever and ever. Every day I will bless Thee, and I will praise Thy name forever and ever. Great is the Lord, and highly to be praised; and His greatness is unsearchable. One generation shall praise Thy works to another, and shall declare Thy mighty acts. On the glorious splendor of Thy majesty, and on Thy

wonderful works, I will meditate. And men shall speak of the power of Thine awesome acts; and I will tell of Thy greatness. They shall eagerly utter the memory of Thine abundant goodness, and shall shout joyfully of Thy righteousness. The Lord is gracious and merciful; slow to anger and great in lovingkindness. The Lord is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works. All Thy works shall give thanks to Thee, O Lord, and Thy godly ones shall bless Thee. They shall speak of the glory of Thy kingdom, and talk of Thy power; to make known to the sons of men Thy mighty acts, and the glory of the majesty of Thy kingdom.

Prayer does not begin with the believer going into the presence of God and saying, “Lord, here I am,” but instead, saying, “O great sovereign Lord, there You are.”

Prayer is not the communication of our will to God, but the surrender of our will to God. And, as we will see in the life of Nehemiah, good praying is not that we have our way with God, but that God has His way with us.

Charles Swindoll, in his book, *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart*, wonderfully illustrated the alignment of our will to God’s will through prayer by quoting a question by E. Stanley Jones. The question is,

If I throw out a line from my boat with a hook on the end and I catch hold of the shore and pull, do I pull the shore to me, or do I pull myself to the shore?

Hebrews, chapter 10, verses 19 and 21 through 22a, answers,

Since, therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, . . . and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near . . .

Prayer is not pulling God closer to your boat, it is pulling your boat up to God. That perspective of His sovereignty shapes the way you pray.

When our Lord Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He said, in John, chapter 14, verse 13a,

And whatever you ask in My name, that will I do.

Most of you, like me, end your prayers by saying, “In Jesus’ name, amen.”

That is a biblical thing to say. We are going to God by the authority of our great High Priest, Jesus

Christ. Just remember that to pray in Jesus' name means that, when you finish praying, you should have prayed something on which Jesus could sign His own name. Jesus taught the disciples that they were to pray in a way that, when they finished, He would not hesitate to lend His name to it.

Everybody likes John, chapter 14, verse 13a, but not so many like John, chapter 14, verse 13b,

And whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

Prayer that Christ signs His name to is prayer that recognizes the glory, majesty, will, and design of the Father.

When our children first began to color, they had the same problem every other child has, and that is choosing the appropriate color. They just do not do it. So, you have green hair and blue lips, the moon is pink, and the sun is brown. The second problem is that they do not yet know how to stay in the lines. It is just all over the place. And you say, "Isn't that really something," and then, they want you to stick it on the refrigerator.

As children of the heavenly Father, we learn how to color our prayers with the appropriate elements. We also learn to stay in the lines – we pray in Jesus' name. That means we pray for the ultimate honor and glory of God.

Acknowledgement of Sin

2. Then, as we observed Nehemiah, the second of the steps along the prayer path involved an acknowledgement of sin.

He prays in the last part of verse 6,

. . . I and my Father's house have sinned.

The prayer God listens to is a prayer that not only confesses His sovereignty, but confesses our sin. And, by the way, if you do not acknowledge your sin, God turns, as it were, a deaf ear to you.

In fact, there are two categories of people whose prayers are not acknowledged by God.

1. First, the prayers of unbelievers are not heard.

In Psalm chapter 34, verses 15 and 17a, David wrote,

The eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous, and His ears are open to their cry. . . . The righteous cry and the Lord hears . . .

The word righteous has to do with one's standing before God, not one's perfection before men. We have the righteousness of Christ, Paul tells us, in I Corinthians, chapter 1, verse 30, having placed our faith in Him alone.

Part of the deception of the heart and, as well, the global deception of Satan is that people can be heard by God yet, at the same time, refuse the truth of the gospel of Christ. Polls reveal that twice as many people pray to God than believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Just ask them for yourself, "Do you pray to God?"

"Sure I pray to God. And God has answered some of my prayers."

"But do you believe in Jesus Christ?"

"Well, now you're getting fanatical."

John, chapter 9, verse 31, says,

We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing, and does His will, He hears him.

The first prayer an unbeliever speaks that God listens to is the prayer of repentance and the request for personal salvation through Jesus Christ alone.

2. The second category of disqualified people are, not only unbelievers, but disobedient believers.

David said, in Psalm 66, verses 18 and 19a,

If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear . . . my prayer.

Does that mean that you cannot pray unless your heart is sinless? No. If that were the case, none of us could ever pray. The word "regard" means to cherish and defend. "If I cherish and defend sin in my heart, God won't hear me."

You can go ahead and pray, but God is not listening.

Peter became even more specific for the New Testament believer when he wrote those startling words, in I Peter, chapter 3, verse 7,

You husbands . . . live with your wives in an understanding way . . . so that your prayers may not be hindered.

For married men, your relationship with your wife is either an obstacle or an aid to your prayer life. In other words, if you are a married man, one of the best ways to get God's attention is to give your wife yours.

It says to,

. . . live with your wives in an understanding way . . . so that your prayers may not be hindered.

Some of you men have not been heard by God for months. And all the wives said, “Amen.”

You men are thinking, “But there are times when my wife is beyond understanding.”

And all the men . . . probably should not say, “Amen.”

It is fascinating to think that your fellowship on earth affects your fellowship with heaven.

David said, in Psalm, chapter 32, verse 5,

I acknowledged my sin to Thee, and my iniquity I did not hide . . . and Thou didst forgive . . . my sin.

Nehemiah said, in chapter 1, verse 6b, in his prayer that gained God’s maximum attention,

. . . I and my father’s house have sinned.

Then, notice in verse 7a,

We have acted very corruptly against Thee . . .

.

Prayer that gains the maximum attention of God is prayer that places a priority on God’s sovereignty. It also acknowledges personal sin.

Trust . . .

3. Third, prayer that God listens to is prayer that has a confident trust in scripture.

Did you know that the Bible is not so much a book of answers as it is a book of promises? And, as Nehemiah prays, in chapter 1 of his memoirs, he repeats, from memory, at least ten different passages from the Law of Moses which record the promises of God to His people Israel.

Let me point out a few. In chapter 1, verse 5, Nehemiah refers his prayer to Yahweh (Lord), which is His covenant-keeping name. It refers back to the time in Exodus, chapter 3, where God told Moses, at that burning bush, that Moses was going to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt to a land flowing with milk and honey. And Moses said, in effect, “Yea, right. And they’re going to ask me just what God I was talking to.”

And God said, in verse 14, “Tell them my name is,”

I AM WHO I AM.

I AM is the Hebrew verb “hayah,” and Yahweh is the name derived from that verb. Yahweh is the

name Nehemiah refers to because Yahweh was the name which signified the promise of God and the promise-keeping nature of God.

So, at the very outset of Nehemiah’s prayer, in effect, he is subtly saying to God, “You are the God who keeps Your covenant promise.”

There is no subtlety in the next phrase. Notice verse 5b,

. . . who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness of those who love Him and keep His commandments.

This is a paraphrased quotation from Exodus, chapter 20, verse 6, where God says to Moses,

[I, the Lord your God, am] showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

Nehemiah is claiming the promise of God made centuries earlier from Mount Sinai.

Look at verse 8, where Nehemiah says,

Remember the word which Thou didst command Thy servant Moses . . .

Then he quotes from Leviticus, chapter 26, verse 33,

If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples

Then he quotes, in verse 9, from Deuteronomy, chapter 30, verses 2 and 4,

but if you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.

In other words, Nehemiah says, “Listen, O covenant-keeping God, You promised if we were unfaithful, we’d be scattered – and You kept that promise. Now, would you please keep Your promise that, if we return to You, then You will restore us in the place where Your name dwells?”

That last phrase, by the way, is a quote from Deuteronomy, chapter 12, verse 5.

Then, in verse 10 of Nehemiah, chapter 1, Nehemiah simply parrots back to God a paraphrase of Exodus, chapter 32, verse 11, where Moses also interceded for the rebellious people of Israel. So, Nehemiah now prays,

And they are Thy servants and Thy people whom Thou didst redeem by Thy great power and by Thy strong hand.

The majority of Nehemiah's prayer is the reciting and paraphrasing of scripture. The prayer of Nehemiah was "Bibling" with the promises of God in His Word. He had a grasp of the Word, and the Word had a grip on him. He has sifted through the Word, and the Word sifts through him.

How important are His promises to you?

The reason you believe in heaven is that we are told in Titus, chapter 1, verse 2, that we have,

. . . eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago

The reason you believe godly living is possible, here and now, is because the I Peter, chapter 1, verse 4, says that we can,

. . . obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you

In other words, everything pertaining to life and godliness is available through His precious and magnificent promises.

Do not ever forget that the reason you believe you can even pray at all is because the Bible, in Hebrews, chapter 10, verse 19, promises you can, saying,

Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus.

Could it be that we do not know what to say to God in prayer, because we do not know what He has already said to us in His Word? Could it be that we live fearful, anxious lives because we have forgotten the promise that Christ intercedes for us and on our behalf?

Charles Swindoll, in *Tale of the Tardy Oxcart*, quoted Robert Murray McChesney saying, over a hundred years ago,

If I could hear Christ praying for me in the next room, I would not fear a million enemies. Yet distance makes no difference, He is praying for me even now.

Nehemiah knew what to say – because he knew what the Word said. And, he had confident trust in the scriptures.

Humility . . .

4. Finally, the prayer that gains the maximum attention of God, is prayer that has a priority of God's sovereignty, an acknowledgement of sin, a trust in scripture, and then, humility in supplication.

Look at chapter 1, verse 11,

O Lord, I beseech Thee, may Thine ear be attentive to the prayer of Thy servant and the prayer of Thy servants who delight to revere Thy name, and . . .

here it is,

. . . make Thy servant successful today, and grant him compassion before this man.

It is interesting that the last thing Nehemiah prayed was a request. Chapter 2 will give us the details of what Nehemiah had in mind. But, did you notice, in this verse, that Nehemiah is personally volunteering to become a part of God's solution to the problem in Jerusalem?

Have you discovered yet, that the greatest thrill in praying is, not necessarily in receiving an answer, but in becoming the answer?

One author, that I have just come to know about through his insightful commentary on Nehemiah, retold a news story that occurred several years ago. A young man had come from Korea to Philadelphia to attend a Christian college in the United States. He graduated and continued on to earn a master's degree from the University of Pennsylvania. One night, he went to mail a letter at the post office. While he was out, he was held up by some teenage boys, who demanded his money. These young thugs became angry because he did not have a lot of money and actually beat him to death. The crime was outrageous.

Later, the Philadelphia police caught and arrested them. Their trial received international attention. The victim's family flew from Korea for it. At the conclusion of the trial, the boys were found guilty of murder.

Prior to the judge passing the sentence, the parents asked if they could say a word. Then, before a packed courtroom, this Korean mom and dad got down on their knees in front of the judge and asked him to give to them the boys who killed their son. They did not understand the system, but they were believers, and they asked the judge to allow them to take these boys back to Korea. They explained that these young men needed the love of parents and the love of Christ that they had never had.

The judge did not have that kind of power. He explained to them that American jurisprudence does not work that way. While they were denied their request, their testimony shone brilliantly in a dark, broken down world.

How many of you have gotten on your knees before our great and holy Judge, the God of heaven and earth, the God of mercy, and the God of justice and plead for a broken world? Prayers that focused on something besides ourselves, our lives, our problems, our aches and pains, and our needs, and volunteered ourselves to make a difference.

Do you want to make a difference? Do you want to become part of the solution in rebuilding a broken

world? Do not go out there just yet. You are going to need the maximum attention of God.

You get that by praying along the prayer path. You start with the priority of the sovereign majesty of God, then you ask Him to break your own heart to acknowledge your own sin, then you lean heavily and entirely in trust upon the promises of His Word, and you end, in humility, with the submission of an available life.

Prayers like that do not have to last for two hours, they can be two minutes or less. And when you pray like this man prayed, you can, with confidence, end your prayer by saying those wonderful words, "In Jesus' name, amen."

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/20/2000 by Stephen Davey.

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