

Lori Lower - Sermon 4-28-2024

Learning from Nehemiah: Building Walls

I Thessalonians 1:2-3

Nehemiah 1:3 – 2:6

TOD: Prayer is locking our shields and making our appeals with other warriors on someone else's behalf. Sharon Jaynes

Today's Message is Learning from Nehemiah: Building Walls

I want to start by asking "How many of you are familiar with the story of Nehemiah? (show of hands)

He's definitely not one of the most recognized "iah" guys (i.a.h.) of the Bible. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zechariah, Zephaniah to name a few... well maybe not Zephaniah . . .

I'll start by giving you some of the background and context of Nehemiah and where this fits into the biblical narrative.

(Notes about Nehemiah)

Did You Know?

- The book of Nehemiah is known as the last of the historical books of the story of the nation of Israel

It records the history of the third return to Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity, telling how the walls were rebuilt and how the people were renewed in their faith.

- The book of Nehemiah shows the fulfillment of the prophecies

Of Zechariah and Daniel concerning the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.

- Nehemiah was a servant/slave of the king of Persia

He was the cup bearer, which was a highly trusted position. They would actually taste the drinks that were being served to the king – to make sure they weren't going to be poisoned. As you can imagine, the cup bearer and the king were very close.

- Nehemiah led the 3rd wave of exiles returning to Jerusalem

Zerubbabel led the first group in about 538 BC, Ezra came in 458 BC, and Nehemiah in about 445-444 BC

- Ezra and Nehemiah worked together

Both in the building of the walls and in the rebuilding of the spiritual lives of the people in Jerusalem.

- Nehemiah spent 12 years in Jerusalem as a temporary governor

Before returning to Persia.

- When the wall was completed, even their enemies and the surrounding nations realized that this had been done with the help of God (6:15-16)

I threw that tidbit in there to hopefully whet your appetite to read the rest of the story.

Our main scripture for today is Nehemiah 1:3-2:6. I'm reading from the New Living Translation. These are Nehemiah's words, as most of the book is written in the first person.

3 They said to me, [they being Hanani, one of Nehemiah's brothers and some other men], "Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been destroyed by fire."

4 When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven. 5 Then I said,

"O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of unfailing love with those who love him and obey his commands, 6 listen to my prayer! Look down and see me praying night and day for your people Israel. I confess that we have sinned against you. Yes, even my own family and I have sinned! 7 We have sinned terribly by not obeying the commands, decrees, and regulations that you gave us through your servant Moses.

8 "Please remember what you told your servant Moses: 'If you are unfaithful to me, I will scatter you among the nations. 9 But if you return to me and obey my commands and live by them, then even if you are exiled to the ends of the earth, I will bring you back to the place I have chosen for my name to be honored.'

10 "The people you rescued by your great power and strong hand are your servants. 11 O Lord, please hear my prayer! Listen to the prayers of those of us who delight in honoring you. Please grant me success today by making the king favorable to me. Put it into his heart to be kind to me."

In those days I was the king's cup-bearer.

2 Early the following spring, in the month of Nisan, during the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes' reign, I was serving the king his wine. I had never before appeared sad in his presence. 2 So the king asked me, "Why are you looking so sad? You don't look sick to me. You must be deeply troubled."

Then I was terrified, 3 but I replied, "Long live the king! How can I not be sad? For the city where my ancestors are buried is in ruins, and the gates have been destroyed by fire."

4 The king asked, "Well, how can I help you?"

With a prayer to the God of heaven, 5 I replied, “If it please the king, and if you are pleased with me, your servant, send me to Judah to rebuild the city where my ancestors are buried.”

6 The king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked, “How long will you be gone? When will you return?” After I told him how long I would be gone, the king agreed to my request.

Before we go any further, I want to take a moment here to point out the purpose of the walls of a walled city. In ancient times, walls around cities gave a sense of protection, security and also belonging, as in community. The remnant of Jews living in Jerusalem at that time didn’t have any of that – protection, security or belonging. The walls had been destroyed and the gates of the walls burned - although not completely destroyed, by the Babylonians who then deported many of their captives to various parts of the Babylonian Empire. Thus destroying the Israelites’ identity as a nation. We’ll come back to the topic of walls later.

How to Pray Like Nehemiah

As I was studying the verses for today, it occurred to me that Nehemiah’s prayer almost sounds like it follows the acrostic for PRAY that many of us know and perhaps use during our own prayer time.

Praise
Repent
Ask
Yield

In verses 3 and 4, Nehemiah hears about the status of the Jews who have returned to Jerusalem and is saddened to the point of turning to God in prayer. It says that for many days he mourned, fasted, and prayed. The narrative doesn’t tell us what he prayed during that time. And this is Nehemiah telling his own story. But when he does record his prayer, it starts out by acknowledging who God is and what He does. Because of who God is, Nehemiah asks that he listen to his prayer.

Notice that he doesn’t spend a lot of time here in praise. Perhaps he did more of that during his time of prayer and fasting, so he has already built upon that and goes almost immediately into repentance in verses 6 and 7. The confession starts out with a corporate confession – Nehemiah is saying that the entire nation has sinned against God. Then he narrows it down to his own family and then to himself. Because Nehemiah was about to take a position of authority over the remnant of Israelites in the city, he felt the weight of their disobedience in his own soul. He recounts what had happened to the nation, according to what God had told them. Sometimes we want to skip over this part, repentance, but it is very important not to.

Yes, God knew what they had done, yet He wanted that acknowledgment of their sin. I often think of this in terms of what happens when children disobey their parents. The parent knows what the child has done, the child knows what they have done is wrong and knows that the parent already knows what they have done. But the parent wants the child to own up to what they have done. Then reconciliation can happen between the parent and the child. There may be consequences that must be dealt with because of their disobedience, but the air has been cleared, so to speak.

Next, Nehemiah puts his petition – Ask – into words. He reminds himself and God of the promises that have been made between God and His people. While he doesn’t specify here what exactly he has in

mind (going to Jerusalem to oversee the rebuilding of the walls), he asks for success for when the opportunity comes up to speak to the king, Artaxerxes. God has apparently laid this burden upon his heart during his time of mourning, praying, and fasting. God knew what he wanted before he asked, but he wanted to hear it in Nehemiah's words.

If you noticed, there isn't exactly an expressed *Yield* in this prayer. The yielding is implied. There was a period of months between the time that Nehemiah's concern for Jerusalem began before God opened the opportunity for him to speak to the king about being released from service for the period of time required for this undertaking. It was from late autumn until the following spring, early spring.

The yielding was in the period of waiting. That's where most of us struggle – in the waiting. There are many examples in the Bible where even the most obedient people give up and take matters into their own hands. It wasn't until after they have botched things up, that they realize that God's plan was worth waiting for. (Jeremiah 29:11)

Another thing about yielding – it's found in the example of prayer that Jesus gave to his disciples and to us – the Lord's prayer. Thy kingdom come, **Thy will be done**. We pray for God's will to be done, yet when we perceive nothing is happening, it becomes **my will be done**. We try to force things to happen, try to bargain with and to manipulate God. If we really mean **Thy will be done**, then will we take Jeremiah 29:13 seriously? If you look for me wholeheartedly [with all your heart], you will find me. I have to constantly remind myself that God's timing is nothing like my timing. God's ways are higher than our ways (Isaiah 55). It's in the waiting – the praying – that we learn to seek the heart of God. And then His ways can become our ways.

So what can we learn from Nehemiah? He is listed in the Bible as being a man of prayer. He was persistent in prayer. But he also had to ask. And he asked because of his relationship with God. He knew he had to wait. When the time came to put his plan into action, to ask the King who had previously shut down the rebuilding of the wall during the 2nd wave of returnees, God had opened the way. I love the end of verse 4, after the conversation where the king asks Nehemiah why he “looked depressed.” **With a prayer to the God of heaven**. I can just imagine Nehemiah glancing upward – hoping that the king doesn't see his eye roll towards heaven. Because of his being on speaking terms with God, that quick prayer or glance, was enough to help him recognize that now was the time to lay everything on the line.

We don't have time today, but I would urge you to read through the remainder of the book of Nehemiah. You'll see how, time after time, obstacles came up, Nehemiah prayed and God answered. The king allowed him to leave and even gave him provisions for the journey and for the construction project. The walls were rebuilt in record time and more importantly, Nehemiah and Ezra lead the people through a spiritual reformation.

I'd like to offer a word of caution at this point. Praying by using a formula is not a guarantee that your prayer will be answered. God is not a genie in a bottle. Having what you might call an “active prayer life” is not a guarantee that your prayer will be answered. Having a relationship with God is not a guarantee that your prayer will be answered. By answered, I mean most likely not in the way that you want.

What I can guarantee is that your prayer will be heard. What I can guarantee that God wants to hear what is on your heart. What I can guarantee is that the more you pray, the more your heart and desires will align with God's heart and desires.

And I'm almost certain that God hears prayers that come to him from anyone – whether that person is a Christian or not. I remember a prominent preacher once saying that God will not listen to the prayers of someone who is not “saved.” Now think about the logic of that – if that's the case, then how does a non-believer become a believer if God doesn't hear their prayer asking to come to Him?

Now that's an interesting dilemma. But here's another interesting thought – most unbelievers know that it takes a relationship of some sort when asking God for help.

I found a song that expresses just that. Of course, those of you who know me and how my love of music affects my soul – you'd probably find it strange if I didn't make a reference to a song or two in this sermon. But this one might surprise you. Our son steered me in the direction of a country rock artist by the name of - Jelly Roll (not his real name). If you listen to country radio, you may have heard of him. I've discovered a few of his songs have a religious/spiritual bent. He's a former drug dealer who's gone from prison to the Grammy's. I'm not sure if he calls himself a Christian, but it seems like he's searching.

This song is “Need a Favor.” I've not shared this in the Weds Worship emails, because, well, the language is a bit “colorful.” I was going to read some of the lyrics for you, but here's the gist of the song “I only talk to God when I need a favor, but God I need a favor. I know Amazing Grace, my Bible is only saving dust, and I don't know what to say.”

Perhaps some of you feel this way – that you don't pray until you need help. I'm often been in conversation with people who feel helpless and hopeless about their situation. When I ask if they've prayed about it, they usually say – “I don't know how, where to start, or what to say.” And that's exactly where you start – you say that directly to God. You need to ask, even Nehemiah had to ask.

We've looked at Nehemiah's prayer life, but now you're wondering “what does this have to do with us? Are we going to be building walls?” Lori, didn't you say something about learning to build walls?

Well, yes in a sense. Remember the purpose of walls in ancient times? They were for protection – to keep good things in and bad things out. This is what prayer does – it builds up walls of protection - through and by God's power.

God has laid it upon my heart that there are some walls in our Jerusalem – in Ashland County - that need building up. But before I go into that, I'd like to give you some of the background – the context – that has brought me to this point.

I have been involved in a couple of different arenas of conversation about being missional – being on mission for God – over the last 9 months or so. Being missional is slightly different from *focusing* on missions – where we learn about the missions and ministries of others, perhaps to the point of supporting and praying for “missions.” Our Great Commission team is doing an excellent job of highlighting “missions” for us. But being missional involves much more than that – it is what we are doing personally or corporately as a church to carry out God's mission.

In one of these ongoing forums, which happens every six weeks or so, a pastor or ministry leader presents how God has been working through their church in connecting them to the community around them. They describe the discernment process and detail the highs and lows in getting to where they are now. Then there is a time for discussion for the participants which gives us an opportunity to ask questions and to “think out loud.”

At our November meeting, I expressed that I had been wondering what the mission of ABC might involve. The churches we were hearing about had started food pantries, clothing closets, homeless shelters, after-school programs, etc. I said that in our small town many of these needs are being met by para-church ministries and other service organizations. The only thing I could think about would be a prayer ministry – we're known as being a praying church. We should hope that every church could be called that! But we hear it all the time when people ask our church to pray for them.

It wasn't but 10 minutes later that an older and much wiser pastor mentioned, "Lori, you said something about a prayer ministry, right? What about starting a prayer ministry that prays for those other ministries?" Ding, ding, ding – the bells and lights went off in my mind. Little did he know what had happened at the previous month's Ashland County ministerial meeting.

We always close these meetings with prayer time – requests are announced that everyone needs to be made aware of and then we break out into groups and share what's going on in our own lives and ministries and pray for each other. I happened to be at a table where the director of one of these organizations shared that she and her staff were completely overwhelmed with the amount of cases that were coming through their door. Another person at the table asked if she had prayer support, to which she replied, "No." So that is where the seed was sown. Just so you know we didn't leave her hanging – we gathered around her, laid hands on her and prayed for God's provision and protection for this vital ministry.

Therefore, I am announcing the start of a new prayer initiative or prayer ministry that will be called Ashland Ministry Prayer Partners or AMPP'd Up for Prayer. This is a play on words, as most of us know what a sound amplifier does – more power, more volume. And I am asking for you to partner with me, strictly on a voluntary basis, of course. So don't worry that you'll all be getting more emails from me each week. But I just might send out a recruitment email or two.

I am in the process of putting together a list of ministries in the county. They will have the option of giving me standing requests – the same every month or sending new ones each month. If they have urgent requests, they can send them to me to be sent out for immediate prayer. I also envision putting together a team of people willing to go on-site to pray with and over the staff and over their buildings or office space; a mobile prayer team.

As pray-ers, you will have the opportunity to pray for just the ministries that God lays on your hearts, or for the entire list. I want to make sure that every ministry is prayed for on a regular basis. I am still working out the details as to what this might look like on the pray-ers end – it could be an online app or program that allows us to checkmark what is being prayed for.

What I am asking is that you prayerfully consider if you would like to become a part of AMPP'd. There is a sign-up sheet in the lobby or you can speak to me directly or even send me an email. You don't have to decide today.

So like Nehemiah, I see the need for the walls of the ministry that takes place outside of our churches, which I see as the gates – these walls need to be fortified and built up with God's strength and power – through joining our hearts to God in prayer. The thought of the day on the front of the worship folder sums it up for me – and it's reminiscent of the message I gave on the armor of God last year. Where the soldiers join their shields in the turtle formation – to protect each other. "Prayer is locking our shields and making our appeals with other warriors on someone else's behalf."

Maybe you don't know how to pray for ministries (and for that matter pastors, churches, missionaries), I suggest simply praying I Thessalonians 1:2-3 over them:

2 We always thank God for all of you and pray for you constantly. 3 As we pray to our God and Father about you, we think of your faithful work, your loving deeds, and the enduring hope you have because of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's "Be faithful in prayer." As local pastor John Bouquet stated recently, "Our faithfulness brings God's fruitfulness."

At this point I went off script. To hear what else was said, you'll need to listen to the recording which will be uploaded the ABC website.

CLOSING PRAYER:

BENEDICTION:

From Paul's letter to the Ephesians (6:18)

18 And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.

Let's remember that "Prayer bathes our efforts for God's kingdom with Holy Spirit power." (Lori Lower)