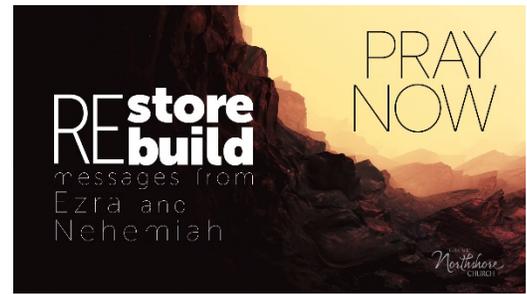


Pray Now

Today we are in the Old Testament Book of Nehemiah. You might remember when we started this series that we are calling *Restore / Rebuild* (a series we started back in July) that the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah were very likely one book, pulled together from a number of sources, including memoirs from the Ezra (the priest) and Nehemiah (the governor).



Today we are in Nehemiah, certainly broken into the book of Nehemiah in our Bibles because this is where Nehemiah enters the narrative.

Here is how the Book of Nehemiah starts:

The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa,¹



In this introductory verse we are told some important things about Nehemiah. While we don't have a precise genealogy, we can be pretty sure that he was from the tribe of Judah. If not a direct descendant of David, very likely from among the people of King David. We also know that Nehemiah was not among the *first wave* of those who returned from exile to Jerusalem (with Zerubbabel around 90 years before). Nehemiah would have been a contemporary of Ezra who likely preceded Nehemiah to Jerusalem by only a relatively short amount of time (could have been a dozen years).

What is perhaps most important is revealed when he said he was in the ***citadel of Susa***; this was the winter palace of the Persian kings. Nehemiah was a member of the Persian king's court, an official with significant responsibilities.

At the end of chapter 1, Nehemiah reveals:

I was cupbearer to the king.²

We might misunderstand a role like *cupbearer*; it isn't the sort of title we might give to a government official these days. We might think *cupbearer* sounds something like *butler* or *waiter*. But in Nehemiah's day it was an important, highly placed role. The cupbearer was charged with the personal safety and

¹ The New International Version. (2011). (Ne 1:1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

² The New International Version. (2011). (Ne 1:11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

wellbeing of the king. The cupbearer was always present, among the most highly trusted confidants. Not so much a *butler* or *waiter*, but more like a *chief of staff*.

In order to have earned such a role, Nehemiah would have had to distinguish himself as trustworthy, loyal and highly competent. This was the kind of role one was *promoted into*, a role for one with a long track record of faithful, exceptional service. Nehemiah had *risen through the ranks* to a high position of influence and responsibility.

In verse 2 Nehemiah continues to report:

² Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. ³

We're pretty sure that Hanani was a *brother* in a broad, general sense... again, likely from the Tribe of Judah, but not necessarily a close relative. Since the time Zerubbabel returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple, a few generations had passed and travel and trade and such commenced between Persia and Palestine. Nehemiah came upon these with up to date news from Jerusalem, and this is what he found.

³ They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire." ⁴

Zerubbabel and his contemporaries rebuilt a Temple, reestablished worship, and occupied Jerusalem, but they were not safe, open to harassment, abuse, and pillaging because the city was not secure; there were no walls and gates.

⁴ When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. ⁵

Nehemiah was a capable leader and administrator with a unique perspective as part of the king's court. He knew what it meant for a city like Jerusalem to be without the security of walls and gates. He knew that those who worshipped at the rebuilt Temple, and lived in the restored land, were terribly vulnerable. So he mourned and fasted and prayed.

³ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ne 1:2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁴ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ne 1:3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁵ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ne 1:4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Some of the content of his prayer is recorded for us here, starting with verse 5.

“LORD, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, ⁶ let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel.⁶



When we pray like this, do we think **we** are reminding God of **his** obligations? Of course not. When we pray like this we are reminding ourselves of God's *track record*. That He is great and awesome... that He is attentive and loves His People.

I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. ⁷ We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses. ⁷

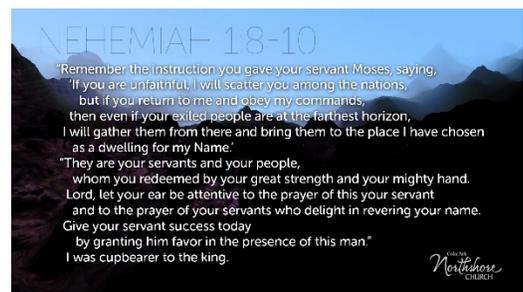
Nehemiah expresses the same kind of leadership in his praying that we saw with Ezra: **repentance**. Did Nehemiah act wickedly toward God? Did he disobey God's commands? Everything we know about Nehemiah leads us to believe that he was a devout and upright servant of Yahweh, even in exile. Nevertheless, Nehemiah, stepping into leadership, repented on behalf of his people.

There are times and places for God's leaders to *speak up*, and *speak on behalf* of God, calling out wickedness. But, honestly, I am growing weary of those Christians who only **scold** people, with little evidence that they have ever **repented** on behalf of their people. I'm not sure what the formula is... but it seems that we ought to repent on behalf of people at least as much as we scold; perhaps it should be twice as much, or 7-times as much.

⁸“Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, ⁹ but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.’

¹⁰“They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand.

¹¹ Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.” ⁸



⁶ The New International Version. (2011). (Ne 1:5–6). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁷ The New International Version. (2011). (Ne 1:6–7). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁸ The New International Version. (2011). (Ne 1:8–11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

At the close of this prayer it is clear that Nehemiah had something in mind. Back in verse 4 it said that Nehemiah wept, mourned, fasted and prayed... but there was clearly **purpose**. Nehemiah did not merely wallow in grief. He did not merely *marinate in God's presence* as some sort of soothing bath. It is clear that Nehemiah prayed with intent to do something. He prayed with the hope that God would use him. When Nehemiah prayer, he joined the prayer of the Prophet Isaiah, saying:

"Here am I. Send me!"

Nehemiah's prayer was not merely despair. It certainly wasn't a complaint. It wasn't a *prayer list* of favors or magic tricks. Nehemiah's prayer included his availability; he was looking for God's direction and provision.

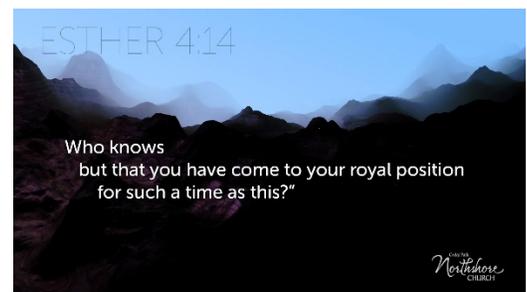


Ezra was "cupbearer to the king." Perhaps Nehemiah could hear Mordecai's words to Queen Esther from mere decades ago, near that same citadel of Susa, when he said:

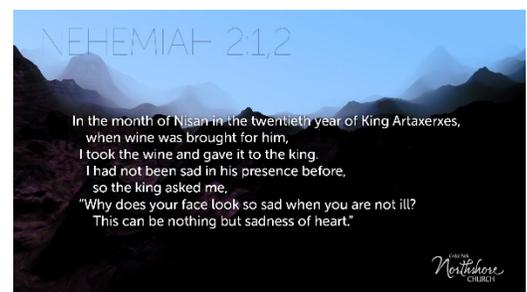
"who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?"⁹

Who knows... perhaps you and I are precisely where God wants us *for such a time as this*.

In chapter 2 we see Nehemiah's moment of opportunity:



In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before,² so the king asked me, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart."¹⁰



The month of *Nisan*... let's see, how many months is that after Kislev? What, you don't have the months of the Jewish calendar memorized? Kislev is the 9th month, then there is Tebeth, Shebat, Adar to finish out the year, and Nisan is the first (I had to look it up).

⁹ The New International Version. (2011). (Es 4:14). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁰ The New International Version. (2011). (Ne 2:1-2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

The point is that several months passed before there was opportunity. Nehemiah didn't hear the bad news, pray, and emerge with God's answer and provision right away. I suspect that this was a matter of constant prayer, daily, perhaps even hourly. I wonder how he prayed, especially in terms of the *timeline*.

Sometimes I listen to myself pray and I am embarrassed by how impatient I am. I here myself pray and often hear the words "right now." God I want your answer "right now." I want your provision "right now." I need healing "right now." I wonder if my Father in Heaven hears such demands the way I hear the same sort of foot-stomping, petulant, demands from a spoiled child. I need to remember that prayer is less about my demands on God and more about His demands on me.

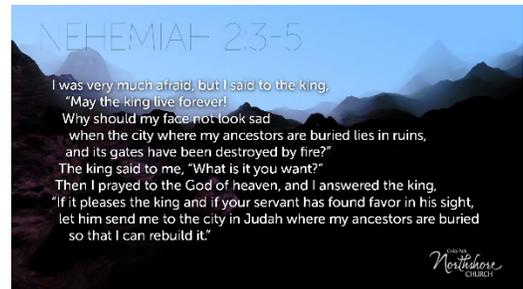
It seems that often times, His demands on me takes time to *sink in*. Perhaps it was something like that for Nehemiah... that in those four months God was developing courage and passion and wisdom and such for the challenges ahead.

Nehemiah proceeded with King Artaxerxes.

I was very much afraid, ³ but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"

⁴ The king said to me, "What is it you want?"

Then I prayed to the God of heaven, ⁵ and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it." ¹¹



This was no small thing. Nehemiah's own testimony was that he "was very much afraid," even after praying these many months, even with the special, trusted position that he held.

He was asking to be **released** from his important position... not the sort of thing that was done. Not like our White House where positions seem to be quickly *turned over* and positions often reshuffled in and out of a revolving door.

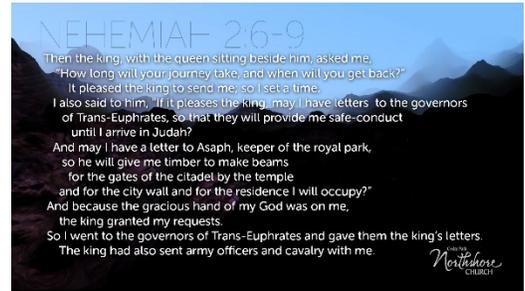
Nehemiah was asking to **fortify** Jerusalem. It could have been interpreted as an act of treason (we'll see that some of the local opposition wanted to position it that way). Rebuilding the walls and gates of Jerusalem could have seemed like a call for separation and independence from the empire.

¹¹ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ne 2:2-5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

And then there was the implied ask for **resources...** a request that got more specific:

⁶Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, “How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?” It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time.

⁷I also said to him, “If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? ⁸And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the royal park, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?” And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests. ⁹So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king’s letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me. ¹²



If you have been keeping up with this sermon series, you may notice that Nehemiah did not choose the path of Ezra. Ezra, you might remember, considered it an *act of faith* to go without even a bodyguard. Nehemiah, the more practical governor and administrator, went with an army and cavalry. Nevertheless, Nehemiah was still a man of faith, acknowledging that the king’s favor was all “because the gracious hand of my God was on me.”

Was Ezra more spiritual than Nehemiah? Let’s be careful about so simply measuring spirituality. I’m pretty sure that the metrics God considers about such things are different than ours.

Here’s the “so what?” for today: **pray now**. You may remember seeing that on the title slide for today’s message: **pray now**.

Even though Ezra was the priest, the clergy, the Bible scholar and professional man of God... Nehemiah is still distinguished as one of devout prayer. Ezra, the clergyman, was certainly a man of prayer... but it is Nehemiah, the layman, who is even *more distinguished* and highlighted as a man of prayer.



In my observation, including my current experience here at Northshore, that while the clergy do have significant prayer lives and carry a certain responsibility for prayer, it is often those among the non-professionals, the laity, who have the most truly admirable prayer lives. I am grateful for those among us who possess such gifts and passions for prayer. This is the *Body of Christ* in action, each fully working with their gifts.

¹² The New International Version. (2011). (Ne 2:6–9). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

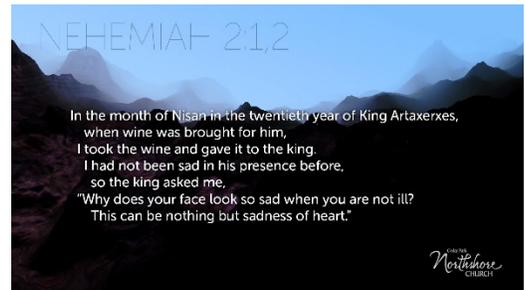
We see many aspects of Nehemiah's prayer life in these couple of chapters.

- He devoted himself to **private** prayer. Mourning and fasting.
- He devoted himself to **public** prayer. While not explicitly made clear, I think it is reasonable to assume that what is recorded was likely prayed publicly, among his fellow worshippers of Yahweh. We'll see that he prayed publicly throughout the chapters ahead.
- He prayed, on behalf of those he would lead, in **repentance**.
- And he prayed **constantly**, in the moment.

I would like to focus on that here at the end.

Notice again near the beginning of chapter 2:

⁴The king said to me, "What is it you want?"
Then I prayed to the God of heaven, ⁵and I answered the king...¹³



Now in this case, I'm fairly certain that this prayer was one of those *quick-and-silent* prayers... a prayer that summarized what Nehemiah had been praying over the months before.

It was quick. Can you imagine if Nehemiah had told the king to just hold on while he *got God on the line*?

It was private. Can you imagine if Nehemiah would have made a crazy spectacle of himself with some out-loud ceremony of prayer?

Nevertheless, he found gifts of courage and direction in this moment of prayer.

Like I said, I'm sure this was merely a matter of quickly rehearsing what had been labored in prayer for the months before. God can certainly act on a spontaneous, even desperate, prayer... but if prayer is mostly about *God changing us* rather than *us changing God*, I suspect that God most often honors the prayer that is consistent with a long road of prayer.

¹³ The New International Version. (2011). (Ne 2:4–5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

And, let's note that this **was** a moment of **significance**. I'm remembering a story of a fellow who took the direction to *pray without ceasing* to a ludicrous extreme, finding himself praying about **every** decision, even the most routine and mundane decisions. He found himself staring into his closet one morning asking God which shirt he should wear for the day ahead, and God answered that prayer... perhaps not in the way he expected, but in a meaningful way when God answered, "I am your Heavenly Father, not your mother... be a man and pick a shirt."

We are going to see other instances when Nehemiah shoots these quick *arrows of prayer* in the course of leadership and decision making. I like to call it **pray now**.

I am grateful for times and events reserved for prayer. We have a number of times like that around here, times when we are sure to pray for you, and our work together, times when we pray for prayer requests that have been submitted. Let's do that... more and more... but let's not allow that to release us from opportunities to **pray now**.

I find myself, too often, *putting off* prayer, when I could **pray now**. I want to be more of a **pray now** person. I want us to be more of a **pray now** people.

When there is opportunity for prayer, **pray now**. Sure, we can write it down and put it on a list, and get others involved in the work of prayer. That is all good. But, whenever possible and appropriate, pray now. Out loud if possible.



Pray now is practical:

1. We actually do it.
2. It builds faith at the moment it might be most needed. Every moment could be a *such-a-time-as-this* moment.
3. It involves the one who perhaps needs faith to arise the most.
4. It provides an atmosphere in which the Holy Spirit may work.

Let's be **pray now** people.

Perhaps you are like me and you've been more of a **pray now** person in the past.

Perhaps you have never thought to be a **pray now** person; let's give it a go.

Perhaps you aren't really a person of prayer at all, and today is a day to believe and become a person of prayer.