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*As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And I said, “O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.’ They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.” Now I was cupbearer to the king. Nehemiah 1:1-11*

We gather together this morning in the lingering spiritual glow of Gerhardt Du Toit’s time with us last weekend, where over a period of three days he shared his heart with us regarding our desperate need to pursue intimacy with God through prayer. In seeing the effect of his ministry to us in six different sessions, I sensed God’s desire we continue to follow through in the things He was speaking to us about last weekend. And so throughout the month of December we are going to take a look at some of the great prayers in the Bible, all of which are grounded in our desperate need for a deeper intimacy with God; and all of which reflect our desperate need for Savior and our most sovereign God’s merciful and gracious provision for a Savior in Jesus Christ; which is the appropriate message we need to hear and share in the season we are entering, as we celebrate the coming of Jesus Christ in his birth as a baby.

This Sunday we are focusing on the great prayer of Nehemiah – and since context is king when it comes to understanding the written Word of God, let’s take a few moments for a short history lesson. In Genesis 12, God called Abram to leave his country and to follow Him to another land. Abraham obeyed and his descendants multiplied. Over time they grew into the nation of Israel but ultimately became enslaved in Egypt for over 400 years until God called them out under the leadership of Moses. Eventually they entered the land God had promised them. Hundreds of years passed during which God’s people continually struggled to be faithful to the God who had saved them. But God continued to bless them, and the high point of their history came when David, a godly king, was called by God to sit on the throne. David reigned for forty years, expanding Israel’s influence for the glory of God.

But in the midst of their prosperity, they lost their heart for God. After so after David’s son, King Solomon died, Israel was split into two kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom had ten tribes and was referred to as Israel. The Southern Kingdom had two tribes and was referred to as Judah. And so because Israel rebelled against God, He allowed the Assyrians to conquer them and scatter the ten tribes. And even though the southern tribes of Judah watched this happen, they continued to rebel against God. And so in 586 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army captured the two tribes in Judah, demolishing the city of Jerusalem – knocking down its protective walls and burning down the temple. The people of God were then forced to leave their home and travel about 1,000 miles to Babylon. But even though it didn’t seem like it, God did not forsake His people. The prophets had predicted this would happen, and that Judah’s captivity would not destroy the people of God.

The prophets proclaimed it would eventually end and God's people would go back home. And so by His sovereign hand God allowed the Persians to conquer the Babylonians - and He moved King Cyrus to make a decree to let some of the Jews return. And in three stages, over about a hundred years, they were allowed to migrate back to Jerusalem, only to discover the city was still demolished and desolate. After the decree of Cyrus, 50,000 Israelites returned to Judah and began rebuilding the temple. But they became so discouraged that they quit. Then God sent them the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to encourage them to finish the project. Ezra was also sent to help restore the spiritual passion of God's people - just like God sent Gerhardt Du Toit to us. Here is where Nehemiah enters the story; the Persians had replaced the Babylonians as the region's great power and its the twentieth year of the reign of King Artaxerxes. Now the Persian Empire ruled with a very different means of control in that they were committed to resettle captured people back in their native lands. Conquered peoples could act with a comfortable degree of autonomy as long as they supported the King and kingdom of Persia. And so this is the context into which we read Nehemiah 1:1-11.

Now a little more historical context before we walk through these verses. In the very last verse of this chapter Nehemiah writes: *"Now I was cupbearer to the king"* (Nehemiah 1:11). In ancient times a *"cupbearer"* was an officer of high rank in the court of the King, whose duty it was to serve the wine at the king's table. On account of the constant fear of plots and intrigues, a person must be regarded as thoroughly trustworthy to hold this position. His foremost duty was to guard against poison in the king's cup, and was sometimes required to swallow some of the wine before serving it. His confidential relations with the king often endeared him to the king, which gave him a position of great influence.

The position of *"cupbearer"* was highly valued and given to only a very select few throughout history. Nehemiah was the *"cupbearer"* to the Persian emperor, Artaxerxes, the most powerful man in the world. Nehemiah would have had regular access to the king and would have been asked to give advice. His position of influence would have afforded him high status and great wealth. But in Nehemiah 1:2 we will see that he was also an exiled captive and that *"one"* of his fellow *"brothers . . . from Judah"* gave him a sobering report about the place his people had come from. In a real sense, Nehemiah had two identities: he was a *"brother"* to the Jewish exiles and a *"cupbearer"* to the king of his captors.

This is a tension we should be familiar with. We are deeply immersed in a world that embraces and promotes security and status and comfort and wealth and entitlements and rights – yet we also claim to be born-again followers of Jesus Christ, who declared: *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?"* (Matthew 16:24-26). Just like Nehemiah, who was a member of the family of God *and also* a captive to the powers of the world - we who are *in Christ* claim to be members of the family of God also live in the tension between our heart commitment to the one who died for us and saved our souls and calls us to sacrificially live our lives for him - *and also* the powers of the world that woo us with the false promises and hopes of security and status and comfort and wealth and entitlements and rights.

The fear we who claim Christ should have in all of this is that we don't feel that tension. Our Lord Jesus spoke of this in Matthew 7:21-23: *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" It's always interesting to hear the reactions to those words. Usually its one of two things: 1) people feel so convicted they begin to get involved in all sorts of Christian activities, or 2) people get so convicted they become confused as to what to do, and they feel defeated and do nothing. Nehemiah didn't choose either of those options. When faced with the reality that he was a member of the family of God but also a captive to the powers of the world, Nehemiah chose to spend time in the presence of God in prayer.*

Prayer is one of the overriding themes of the biblical book of Nehemiah. Prayer was also the secret to his success. The prayer in chapter one is the first of 12 different prayers recorded in this book. It begins with prayer in Persia and closes with prayer in Jerusalem. His prayers are filled with adoration in chapters 8 and 9; thanksgiving in chapter 12; confession in chapters 1 and 9; petition in chapters 1 and 2. There are prayers of anguish, joy, protection, dependence and commitment. Nehemiah's story is story of compassionate, persistent, personal and corporate prayer. Prayer gave Nehemiah perspective; it widened his horizons, it sharpened his vision and it soothed his anxieties because Nehemiah knew that prayer drew him into an ever deeper relationship with God.

Nehemiah's public prayer life was the overflow of his personal prayer life, which was steeped in, and shaped by, a lifestyle of prayer. Nehemiah's devotion to God, his dependence on God and his desire to be filled with God confirmed and strengthened his membership in the family of God and *over-ruled* his status as an exiled captive to the powers of the world. In our text for today we see a pattern of prayer that ultimately restored a captive, exiled people from ruin and despair into a new walk with God.

*The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel, that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire." As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. Neh 1:1-4*

The first step we see here in the pattern of prayer for restoration is *Concern for God's People*. We can clearly see Nehemiah's deep-hearted concern in that when he "asked" one of his "brothers" about the "Jews who had escaped" from the exile and those who had "survived the exile" – and "concerning" what was happening in "Jerusalem." Brothers and sisters, *concern for one another* – perhaps a better wording would be "love for one another" – is a significant starting point when praying for restoration, because if we don't care for one another (if we don't love one another) we won't pray for one another. What's significant is that Nehemiah had never been to Jerusalem; he probably didn't know many people there. *But he did know they were God's people* – and so he was concerned, he cared, he loved them *because* they were members of the same family in God. Jesus spoke of this to his disciples in John 15:12: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." The apostle John extrapolated on Jesus' words in 1 John 4:7-12: "Let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us."

Because Nehemiah loved God's people and God loved him – Nehemiah was broken by the report he heard about the condition of God's people and the city they lived in. Those who had escaped and survived were "in great trouble and shame" – and the walls of Jerusalem were in shambles and its gates had been "destroyed by fire." The word "shame" here speaks of disgrace and reproach, which implies the people of Jerusalem had become complacent in their situation. They were living in ruins and they accepted it. Nehemiah's response to this was love-filled grief. If we truly love one another, then that should be our reaction to those in our midst who are complacent in their walk with God. Colossians 1:10-11: "Walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. . . . strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy." Because he loved God and loved God's people, Nehemiah was deeply concerned and grieved about the "trouble and shame" in God's people.

*“As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.”* We know from the calendar they used in those days that the period of “days” Nehemiah “*sat down and wept and mourned*” was about four months. This would be the “putting ourselves under the burden of God” and the “lingering” that Gerhardt Du Toit spoke of last weekend. Most likely, during those four months, Nehemiah went back time and again to be with God. He didn’t understand and he waited for answers. He didn’t take the easy way out. He carried the burden with God and listened for direction. For four months Nehemiah sat before God and wept and mourned and prayed. In verse 6 we read Nehemiah was so concerned that he did so, *“day and night.”*

*And I said, “O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments. Nehemiah 1:5*

In this prayer we see that the second step in the pattern of prayer for restoration is *Conviction regarding God’s Character*. After Nehemiah becomes concerned about God’s people, he next expresses his conviction of God’s character in verse 5: *“O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments.”* Nehemiah called God “*Lord*” here, affirming that He recognized God as his master, which is affirmed again in verse 6, when refers to himself as God’s “*servant.*” Nehemiah then refers to God as the “*Lord God of Heaven*” - acknowledging that God was and is always will be beyond the realm of this world. He next refers to God as “*great and awesome*” – giving God His divine due as the ultimate being in all of the universe. Nehemiah then describes God as the one who “*keeps His covenant and steadfast love.*” God is truthful, completely faithful and can absolutely be trusted. Because of his conviction about God’s character, Nehemiah knew that God was not only able, but also willing to hear and respond to his prayer. But he also knew that he did not deserve to have God treat him with special favor. We hear why in verses 6-7.

*“Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father’s house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.”*

In this prayer we see that the third step in the pattern of prayer for restoration is *Confession of Sin*. After becoming concerned about God’s people and then expressing his conviction regarding God’s character, Nehemiah is now moved to confess his sin and the sins of God’s people. The reality is, it’s one thing to be love God’s people and to have a firm conviction of who God is. But it’s quite another thing to confess our sins, weaknesses, frailties and faults. Many of us never get this far. We might feel bad about our sins or be concerned about how things are going. Our theology about God may even be correct. But we – we, in that I mean *all of us* - hesitate at this next step. Hopefully, taking a look at Nehemiah’s prayer today will help us in this, as his confession of sin contains three main ingredients.

First we see *intensity*. As he stood in awe of God’s character, Nehemiah became overwhelmed by the reality of his own sin. As a result he put himself under the burden of God in prolonged prayer for himself and intercession for God’s people. He prayed day and night, spending every moment of time in God’s presence. We see this in the psalmist’s prayer in Psalm 88:1-2: *“O Lord, God of my salvation; I cry out day and night before you. Let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry.”* Second, we see *honesty*. Nehemiah made no attempt to excuse the people of God for their sin - and he also owned up his part in their culpability. In view of the spiritual faithlessness of God’s people in the past and present, he knew that he was not exempt from blame. Note that he prays, *“confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father’s house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you.”* This is a difficult one for Christians who believe we no longer sin once we are saved. But 1 in John 1:8-10 the Bible clearly tells us: *“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”*

In this prayer of confession of sin we see not only intensity and honesty – and also *urgency*. Nehemiah recognized that sin is not merely a stubborn refusal to obey rules, but is also a defiant act of aggressive personal rebellion against a holy God. He tells God: *“We have acted very corruptly against you.”* Nehemiah didn’t candy-coat his sin. He owned it and called it what it was. And in doing so, he then lifts his heart up to God and affirms the heart of God in His faithful steadfast love for His people.

*“Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.’ They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.”*

In this prayer we see that the fourth step in the pattern of prayer for restoration is *Confidence in God’s Promises*. While Nehemiah’s broken confession was intense, honest and urgent - he did not wallow in a prolonged brooding over his sin and those of his fellow Jews. He owned what he did wrong and then he quickly expressed confidence in God’s promises. And then Nehemiah prays, recalling Moses’ words about the danger of Israel’s rebellion and the promise of divine mercy. Nehemiah’s purpose in doing so was to affirm that God had promised/warned God’s people that if they disobeyed and rebelled against Him, they would be captured and exiled into another land – and he also affirmed that God had promised to rescue them from exile and send them back home to Jerusalem. The first had been fulfilled and the second was waiting to be fulfilled. In other words Nehemiah was praying, “Lord, your first promise (warning) came true. We’ve disobeyed and rebelled against you and we’re in captivity. But Lord, you also made a promise to rescue us from exile and bring us back home. That promise hasn’t happened yet. I’m asking you, begging you, to fulfill your promise just like you fulfilled your first.” God’s Word tells us that God will fulfill His promises. 1 John 5:14 tells us: *“This is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.”* Ephesians 3:20-21 says: *“Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”* Nehemiah knew that God would faithfully keep the covenant promises He made with His people - and so he prayed:

*“O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”* Now I was cupbearer to the king.

In this prayer we see that the fifth step in the pattern of prayer for restoration is the *Commitment to surrender to God’s Will*. After Nehemiah heard of the *“great trouble and shame”* God’s people were experiencing because of their disobedience and rebellion against God, his loving concern for them led him to brokenness before God that caused him weep and fast in prayer; and as he did so he expressed his conviction regarding God’s character. In meditating on the greatness and awesomeness of His holy God, Nehemiah was reminded of the depth of his own sinfulness, as well as of the depraved nature of his fellow Jews, causing him cry out in confession. After owning his role in Israel’s depravity he prayed with confidence for the fulfillment of God’s promises – *which then caused him to make the commitment to surrender to God’s will*. It has been said that prayer is not getting man’s will done in heaven but rather prayer is man getting God’s will done on earth. But in order for God’s will to be done on earth, God needs broken people who are surrendered to God to be used by Him. While Nehemiah was praying, his burden for Jerusalem became greater and his vision of what needed to be done became clearer.

In following the pattern of prayer for restoration, Nehemiah came to understand God was calling him to be the instrument of God’s mercy and grace to rescue God’s people and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Those of you who know the story of Nehemiah know that’s exactly what happened. This is what happens when we pray out of a deep intimate relationship with God. When we pray to God for restoration, He will answer our prayers when we put ourselves under the burden that God has for those we are praying for.

This is why so many of us probably don't pray this way. It's risky to do so. But it's also a joyous, obedient fulfillment of Jesus' demand that we deny ourselves take up our crosses and follow Jesus, knowing that Christ will save our lives when we give ours to him. When we base our lives on the Word of God and cultivate an intimate relationship with God and put ourselves under the burden of God - God will use us to answer our prayers, because when we surrender to God's will and put ourselves under the burden of God that God has for the person or people we are praying for - as we grow ever deeper and closer to God our human will, will naturally embrace sovereign God's will and blend into God's divine will - and then, in the words of Isaiah 6:8, God will ask us; "*Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?*" And we, like Nehemiah and Isaiah, will say: "*Here I am! Send me!*"

This is what our Lord Jesus did on the cross. He sacrificially surrendered his life to will of God and placed himself under the burden of God to rescue and save His people from their sin. He died on a cross for the forgiveness of our sins so we might be forgiven and redeemed and restored back to God. This is the gospel. The gospel is not how people get to heaven. The gospel is how people get to God. And God calls us through Jesus Christ to join Him in sharing and living out the good news that Jesus Christ is the way and the truth and the life. And while it might be risky in terms of the standards and values of the world to do so, Jesus promises us when we do put ourselves under the burden of God for others, our lives bear fruit "*a hundred-fold*" (Matthew 13:3). Why not go out on a limb? That's where the fruit is.

In surrendering his heart and life to the will of God Nehemiah did more than rebuild a wall. God used him as a divine instrument to restore of a people from ruin and despair into a new walk with God. Jerusalem is not only an historic city, which has for centuries been the center of the life of the nation of Israel, it is also a symbolic city. Jerusalem is a picture is the place where God desires to dwell. King David built the great temple in Jerusalem because that is the place where God would dwell among his people. But for us who know Jesus Christ, Jerusalem is not the actual place where God dwells. God, through Jesus Christ, seeks to dwell in the human spirit. This is what the apostle Paul was talking about in Colossians 1:27 when he wrote of "*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*" In Christ, God lives within us!

At the end of Nehemiah 1 any tension of being both a brother to the exiles and cupbearer to the king was resolved. Chapter 2 opens with Nehemiah asking the King for permission to go to Jerusalem and help re-build the walls and restore God's people back to God. The answer God gave him in during his four months of prayer was, "Nehemiah, you go." Where is God telling you to go for Him today? Do you feel the tension that is keeping you from going? I pray God will use this morning to tell us what he wants from us. I pray the Spirit would empower each one of us to make the commitment to surrender to God's will, so we might be instruments of His mercy and His grace in praying for those who need restoration.

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Pastor Leland Botzet

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