

Churches Together Prayer Link – April 2020

Principles of Prayer – Nehemiah

1. **Context** - Read Nehemiah 1:1-3

Here you have Nehemiah asking for a report on surviving Jews who had been exiled & he is also enquiring about the city of Jerusalem. If you have been exiled it means that you have been barred from your native land, the land in which you would call home.

In 586bc the Babylonian Empire sieged the land of Judah & captured Jerusalem, which was Israel's capital city & the place of God's temple. For Jews, this was the **most significant** location. Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon at the time, wrecked & looted the city, including the temple & he exiled the Jews. This exile happened either by the Jews running away or by being taken back to Babylon headquarters to serve the empire.

The Babylonian empire is then overthrown by a man called Cyrus. Cyrus was King of the Persian empire & it is under the rule of this empire that the Jews are allowed to start returning to their homeland. However, the news coming back is that Jerusalem & the people living there are in pretty bad shape.

2. **Nehemiah's response** - Read Nehemiah 1:4-11

Nehemiah receives some bad family news. One of his brothers shares of the despair & shame of those living in post exile Judah. Acknowledging that they are in *"Great trouble"* (vs 3) & this trouble & despair is reflected physically by a city that it is now in ruin *"broken down, and its gates destroyed by fire"* (vs 3)

Now this brother, is unlikely to be concerning Nehemiah's immediate family, but is more likely to be in line with him viewing the nation as his family. The identity of Jews is wrapped up in understanding their unique relationship to God as a nation that exclusively belongs to Him. He is their God, they are His people. Nehemiah is a part of that.

If you are part of a Church family, that's reasonably easy to relate to. When you choose to put your trust in Christ Jesus, you become a Son or Daughter of God. You become part of & inherit a family of millions of brothers & sisters across the globe. Which, when you receive news of the Church struggling or in great trouble in a different nation. You receive it as bad family news. This is automatically a family matter for you, as it was for Nehemiah.

Application:

How do you respond in a family crisis, how do you respond when you receive bad family news? Especially if you are not physically there when it happens?

Study continued...

Verse 4 tells us that as soon as Nehemiah hears those words, he “*sat down and wept and mourned for days*”.

I think it's important for us to remember that weeping, grieving, mourning is a natural response when you receive bad family news & is an important process. For Nehemiah, that was to empty himself before God, pouring out his pain in light of this news. It's not necessarily limited to right there & then, but can go on for days, months & sometimes even years.

That's something to bear in mind when drawing alongside people who may be grieving. Scripture tells that we shouldn't “*...conform to the pattern of this world*” (Rom 12:12) but that we should be transformed by the renewal of our mind. Part of that means a change in the way that we think, leading us to conform more to God's way of thinking seeing & doing, rather than the world's way of thinking, seeing & doing. Which in connection to what we are talking about, that pattern of British cultural mentality, the stiff upper lip, the soldier through it attitude needs to be abandoned in favour of viewing grief as strength rather than weakness.

In particular, looking at Nehemiah, this should be a message to strong capable men, Nehemiah was a leader & project manager overseeing huge construction projects. Strong men grieve. Nehemiah grieved & mourned for days & it was his passion to see change that led to his next step.

He prayed. Not only did he pray, but he fasted.

What is fasting?

- Fasting is a Biblical principle of seriously setting time aside (At the expense of other valuable ways you may spend your time) in order to petition to God in prayer. It is meant to be a costly exercise to demonstrate your passion & desire to see God move in a particular area. In the old testament to “*hold fast*” was to cling on. Fasting is the act of seriously clinging on to God.

Application: In what area of life do you desire to see a move of God?

What did Nehemiah pray for & how did he passionately petition to God for it?

Nehemiah is asking for God's mercy, God's mercy upon a nation who have been unfaithful to God. He is asking for an opportunity for that nation, to turn things around in their relationship with Him. And he is also asking God to grant him success in his own environment & his own sphere of influence in order that he can play his part in restoring what has been broken.

Additional note: Nehemiah's commitment to pray & fast (Taking time out to seriously cling to God) is birthed out of a burden. Nehemiah's heart is breaking for the state of his homeland. If you are going to fast & pray, what is your burden? What breakthrough are you looking for? Why is this a moment for **you** to seriously cling to God?

Prayer & Fasting overflows from a burden which demonstrates an overwhelming desire to see change.

Nehemiah's prayer

- He starts in **verse 5** by **magnifying the Lord**, declaring His greatness & faithfulness to those who remain faithful to Him. *"Oh Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God"*. This is a great principle of prayer, a principle that runs throughout scripture, starting prayer by giving Glory to God. Even in the context of challenge & bad news, this does not deter Nehemiah from acknowledging how great God is.
- In **verse 6** Nehemiah **humbles himself** in light of who God is & asks for His ear to be attentive to his request. Like in the gospel of John, another principle of prayer is *"He must increase, but I must decrease"* (John 3:30) Give glory to God, humble yourself.
- In **verse 6/7** he **confesses the sins** of his Jewish brothers & sisters, including his own confession of sin. At this moment Nehemiah is praying response to a specific context the Jewish people find themselves in (The nation had offended God), which is why the confession of sin is important. And confession of sin is an important principle if applicable to the situation. Meaning, if you know you should confess to something, do it, because you are then looking to God's faithfulness in response.
- In **verse 8/9** He **reminds God of His promises** spoken over the people of Israel, Nehemiah's brothers & sisters. This is another good principle of prayer, to remind God of the promises that He has spoken over you. And they might be Biblical promises, regarding identity, future, provision, family, safety, growth, gifting or they might flow from prophetic words that God has specifically given to you. Here with Nehemiah, the bad news is about family, so Nehemiah clings to the promises about the family of Israel, this nation that God has fashioned & then appeals to God's mercy to respond & bring about change.
- Nehemiah then **leaves it God's capable hands**.

Principles of prayer – Summary

- Magnify the Lord
- Humble yourself
- Confession / Repentance
- Remember God's promises
- Leave it God's hands

The final part of this principal of prayer study should lead us to one final outcome:

Expectation

3. **Nehemiah's breakthrough** – Read Nehemiah 2:1-8

Remember that Nehemiah is in service to one of the most powerful rulers in the world. He has asked God to grant him success in response to his prayer, & mercy within the context of serving the Persian King.

I'm not sure that Nehemiah knows what this success or mercy might look like at this point? As cupbearer to the King, when the King sees that Nehemiah is sad, Nehemiah is filled with fear. I can't imagine that unhappy cupbearers had long employment opportunities to Kings of Persia? In fact I don't think they would have had very long life opportunities! The Kings at that time were pretty ruthless.

So, the first measure of success or breakthrough is, Nehemiah doesn't die! However, more is to come, because in addition to not executing him, the King demonstrates mercy & compassion towards Nehemiah's burden.

The Kings compassion leads to an important question; *"What are you requesting?"* (2:4)

Here, Nehemiah doesn't just answer immediately, he then goes and prays further for wisdom & direction, which is another good principle for when responding to potentially big questions. You don't have to answer right there & then, take time to pray & consider, that God may help lead you in how you respond.

The overriding success to Nehemiah's prayer is found in the Kings willingness to allow Nehemiah to return home. But even more than that, God's hand is shown when the King **not only permits but provides** the materials to aid Nehemiah in his mission to build what had been broken.

And so in scripture & personally we commonly see God going beyond our expectations when it comes to prayer. Not only in success & mercy, but with permission & provision. God's sign of favour are those unexpected bonuses.

Conclusion & Application:

As we come to the end of this brief study, let's be reminded that even though all Glory goes to God for who He is & what He does. We must also give a little credit to Nehemiah who demonstrates to us what is to take steps of faith quite courageously in the middle of challenge, with the hope of breakthrough.

Let's be courageous like Nehemiah & take steps of faith in challenge, knowing that prayer is powerful & that our God with His favour upon us will go beyond our expectation. Success, Mercy, Permission & Provision.

Hopefully the **principals of prayer** template will prove a helpful addition in your prayer life this month!