

PRAYER OVER PROBLEMS

Nehemiah 1:1-11

None of us is a stranger to problems. Some problems are comparatively small and others are incredibly large. There are those of us today who are facing an unwanted pregnancy while at the same time there are those who desperately want a baby. Others are barely coping with psychological depression that just will not go away. There are parents who are distraught over the direction of their children's lives and there are children who don't know where to turn with their parents' problems. Some problems are not just issues of health and family, but have to do with business or with school or with the nation.

What do you do when you're up against a problem and there seems to be no solution? I suppose that is what went through the mind of Abraham Lincoln when he admitted:

I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that of those about me seemed insufficient for the day.

If you count yourself among those who, like Abraham Lincoln, have nowhere else to go but prayer, I give to you the Old Testament book of Nehemiah to learn how to pray over problems. But first, let me give you some background to understand the context in which this book was written.

The Old Testament kingdom of Israel reached its peak under kings David and Solomon. Following Solomon there was a civil war caused by competing claims to the throne, and the kingdom was divided. Ten of the twelve tribes formed the northern kingdom called Israel; two of the twelve tribes formed a southern kingdom called Judah. The northern kingdom never had a righteous king. The southern kingdom fluctuated between righteous and unrighteous leadership.

Both kingdoms were conquered and the people were deported. In 722 B.C. the Assyrian army defeated the northern kingdom of Israel and captured the ten tribes. Those tribes either died out or intermarried until they lost their identity. They are no more. They became popularly known in history as the ten lost tribes of Israel.

It was not until 586 B.C. that calamity came to the southern kingdom. It was then that the armies of Babylon invaded, defeated and led into captivity the southern kingdom, although a small remnant was left behind in Jerusalem and the surrounding environment. They stayed intact while in captivity, unlike the northerners. The name of the dominant tribe was Judah although eventually the language corrupted that and they became known as “Jews”. Some of them began to trickle back to Palestine; others were left behind as a small remnant. They were a pathetic bunch . . . poor, desperate, largely subservient.

Many of the Jews did amazingly well in captivity. Some became successful merchants; others entered into political service and actually reached positions of lofty power among the people of Babylon. One of those was a man named Nehemiah. He rose up through the ranks of political service until he eventually became the cupbearer of the Persian King Artaxerxes I. The cupbearer originally was the one who tasted the king’s wine to make sure it wasn’t poisoned. But as the position evolved through the years it became quite a bit more for he became the confidant and the political and even the military and economic advisor to the Persian emperor. In modern terms, Nehemiah the Jew became Prime Minister of the land that had captured his people Israel.

Nehemiah was probably born in Persia, so he had never personally been to the land of Israel or the city of Jerusalem. He had never personally seen the dilemma of the remnant that was left behind. Yet he had a great interest and a deep compassion for the land and the people of his ancestors. That is why he asked about the welfare of the people in Palestine when his brother Hanani returned from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Let’s read the story first hand from Nehemiah 1:1-11:

The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

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.”

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

“Oh Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, 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. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

“Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, 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.’

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

I was cupbearer to the king.

This is the story of a man gripped with a great problem. But it is more than a story about Nehemiah and the problems he faced. It is also a story for us in the problems we face. It is a story with the message that such problems call us to prayer.

Let’s look at the problems that Nehemiah faced. Leading his list were the troubles of others. Hanani’s report was bleak. The people who had escaped exile and were left behind

were not strong in the first place. The conquerors had left no leaders, no wealth and no one with obvious talent. They tended to be the weakest and the poorest and the most ignorant.

Survival in occupied lands is difficult. It is that way for the people in the Gaza Strip today. It is there that Palestinians live totally at the whim of their conquerors. They have little money, no passports and minimal hope for the future.

So it was for the remnant around Jerusalem in Nehemiah's day. They were easy prey for invaders and bandits. They had no city walls to hide behind for protection. They were constantly facing plunder, rape and murder. And they had no power to resolve their plight!

It is a terrible thing to feel powerless, to face a problem that is painful and to have neither the resources nor the energy to change a thing. Maybe you understand because you have such a problem in your health or marriage or job or school or church. You can't live with it and you can't do anything about it. And so you can understand what the remnant living in and about the city of Jerusalem was experiencing.

Although Hanani reported to Nehemiah the plight of the Jewish remnant, it was not Nehemiah's problem. He was powerful, rich and comfortable at the winter palace in Susa. Oh, he no doubt had problems of his own, but none of the magnitude of his fellow Jews. Those were other people's problems. But he took them as his own.

There was another problem, too. Not just the suffering of the remnant, but the reputation of that remnant's God. It's true that God had allowed their defeat and subjugation. It was a punishment for their spiritual infidelity. But, remember that they were God's people. Israel was the Promised Land. Jerusalem was the holy city atop Mount Zion. It was the place of the Temple to Yahweh. And God's reputation was weakened by the situation his people now faced. That had to weigh heavily on the heart of anyone who loved and believed in God.

There is a sense in which Nehemiah could have written that off as God's problem. Who was he to take on God's worries? After all, Nehemiah had a king to protect and a country to run. He could have left the problem of God's reputation to God. But Nehemiah took the problems of others and of God upon himself. In verse four he said, "When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven."

When I face the impossible problems of life, may God give me a friend like Nehemiah! I want the kind of friend who takes my problems as his own problems.

There are some stunning things to notice here: he wept and he mourned. It wasn't just an intellectual or academic exercise. He felt the problem deeply. It gripped his heart and soul.

And he fasted. That is a little known spiritual discipline in our society. We are more likely to have lunch over our problems than to fast. Fasting gives time for prayer. Fasting sharpens our spiritual awareness. Fasting demonstrates to God the depth of our caring.

He wept; he mourned; he fasted; and he prayed. Not just once or twice, but again and again for days. I do not pretend to understand why such repetition in prayer seems so important in the Bible, but clearly it does. **Rarely are there instant answers to prayer. The great saints talked long and repeatedly to God about the problems they faced.**

All of this went on for four months! The story opens in the month of Kislev in Nehemiah 1:1 and the prayers continue until the month of Nisan in Nehemiah 2:1. That is from November/December in 445 B.C. (the 20th year of Artaxerxes I) until March/April in 444 B.C.

We shall see in chapter 3 that he kept up his regular job during all this time. He was not on vacation during those four months. And it was four months before the king could see the difference and ask him what was wrong.

We shall see God do wonderful things through Nehemiah, but let us not forget that first he prayed! Before he planned or talked or anything else he prayed for four months! I cannot help but compare that to our hurried approach to our problems. We want help now! We talk to God for a few minutes, perhaps a few times. And then we can become critical of God and of prayer and upset because our problems are not readily resolved.

How much we can learn from Nehemiah. We can learn that problems call us to prayer, serious prayer. And we can learn that prayer may include tears and fasting and months of repetition before we take a single step toward action.

Nehemiah's prayer begins with praise in verses 5 and 6. He speaks first of the worth of Yahweh, saying:

Oh Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, 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.

Nehemiah begins by declaring God's greatness and wonder! He praises God for being a faithful covenant keeper, and he announces God's wonderful love.

Great prayers for help almost invariably begin with praise. There are many reasons for that. Surely, the main reason is that it is true! God is great and good and loving. He does keep his covenants or promises. It needs to be said.

It is also because the one praying needs to focus first upon God rather than on the problem. Otherwise, God becomes a means to an end. He becomes an object, a pawn, something to be used to achieve our human desires.

A huge reason why we need to begin our prayers with praise is because seeing the greatness of God puts our problems into perspective! When we see his power and love and commitment, our problems have a way of shrinking and our faith has a way of growing!

Remember, this was not a one-time prayer. Nehemiah praised God for four months! My friends, next time we face problems that seem to have no solutions, let us begin by praising God!

You might think that when the praise was done the asking would begin. Not so! Instead, Nehemiah moved from praise to confession. He prayed:

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

It is a fascinating confession. He begins with general confession of sin. He then becomes specific, indicating the laws of Moses that have been broken. He confesses the sins of others, including his own father and family. But, he is also very personal, including himself in the list.

Here is another lesson for us to learn. Before we ask, we need to confess. Whether we are asking for others or for ourselves we should confess sin in general and name sins specifically. Avoid self-righteousness by listing personal sins even if the prayer is for someone else.

Even after praise and confession Nehemiah does not ask. Instead he includes a set of reminders to God:

“Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, 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.’

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

Nehemiah was reminding himself as much as God. It wasn't that God forgot. The idea here is more a matter of asking God to act in accord with the promises he has made.

I cannot help but be impressed with Nehemiah's familiarity with God's words. He incorporated the Word of God into his prayer. That is a diminishing art in our generation. We too often prefer to couch our prayers in our terms rather than in God's terms. Perhaps it is because we are often ignorant of the promises God has made and are ill prepared in our crises to claim those promises and ask God to act upon them.

So here is another lesson for those of us who pray over problems and are desperate for solutions. **We should take the time to learn the promises of God and then quote back to God those promises and ask him to act on them in our behalf.**

Finally, in verse 11, Nehemiah comes to his request:

“Oh 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.”

It is not a petition one might have expected. Nehemiah did not ask for liberty for those in captivity or for wealth for the remnant. He did not ask that the city walls of Jerusalem be rebuilt. He did not ask for food for the remnant or power to solve their problems. All he asked for was that God would move the mind and hand of the man in power to do what was good and right.

Dare we pray that way for our families and church and nation and the problems we face? Can you imagine four months of prayers, tears and fasting to ask God to simply do what needs to be done? How different from so many of my prayers. I fear my prayers are often more demands than requests, more self-centered than God-centered. But, not so for Nehemiah. Nehemiah says, “God, here is the problem. You are the one to resolve it by whatever means you choose.” That takes breathtaking faith.

If we learn today what Nehemiah learned, we have a new edge on spiritual truth and power. We are prepared to tackle life’s problems with a whole new supernatural approach.

I don’t pretend that we can do in a few minutes what Nehemiah did in four months, but I would like us to at least begin. So I invite you to bow your head, right now, and pray. Begin with praise. Tell God how great he is, and praise him for who he is. From praise, go to confession. What are the sins of others or of yourself that God lays on your heart? Confess those sins to God right now.

Do you know some promise that God has made in his Word, the Bible? Could you quote it from memory? Quote or read that promise back to God and claim it. Remind him of it as a means of calling it into action in your life.

Then, ask. Lay before him the problem that seems to have no solution. Don’t tell him your solution; instead, give him the problem and tell him that you trust him to do what is right and good.

Praise.

Confess.

Remind.

Petition.