

June 7, 2009
Nehemiah 1:1-11
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A Prayerful Life

“Where is the life we have lost in our living?” asks T.S. Eliot in *Four Quartets*. Yes, life sweeps us up in its hurry downstream. We are busy beyond belief doing all we can to complete the demands and tasks of the day. “I need a life,” we hear ourselves saying.

As we open this series on Nehemiah, beginning with his prayer in Chapter One, there are some observations we can make that may be helpful as we contemplate the life that God intends.

First, a quick re-cap of the historical scenario of our text. Nehemiah and the Jews suffered a deep loss in the Babylonian Captivity. They had lost the life they knew. Jeremiah prophesied that a remnant of Israelites would return in 70 years. By that time the Babylonians had been defeated by the Persians. The Persia King Cyrus issued an edict for the Jews to return. Some came back with Zerubbabel in 538 BC and rebuilt the temple.

Ezra led a second group of returnees 80 years later. He found that some of the people, priest and Levites had intermarried violating the law against intermarriage in Deuteronomy 7:3-4. He brought the law of God back to the forefront, initiating a return of the people through confession and repentance. The temple which was in ruins was rebuilt and the sacrificial system restored.

Enter Nehemiah bringing the third group of returnees in 455 BC. The second group had returned with Ezra in 458 BC, the first were led by Zerubbabel in 538 BC. Nehemiah’s job -- the repair of the walls surrounding Jerusalem. The walls were desperately needed to protect the temple from attack and ensure the continuity of worship. They represented power, protection and beauty to Jerusalem.

The narrative begins as one of Nehemiah’s brothers, Hanani, who had traveled the 800 miles from Jerusalem to Susa, tells Nehemiah, “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.” Nehemiah’s reaction is stunning, reminiscent of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem. “When I heard this, I sat down and wept. I mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God-of-Heaven.”

He immediately identified with his people and their agony. And he stopped his regular activity to intercede on their behalf.

He sits down; he weeps. For days he worries, fasts and prays. He grieves and allows God to speak to his heart. This is not the western way. Our first response is not prayer, but action. Upon hearing a concern, we gather the necessary resources, people and draw up a plan of action. Prayer follows, if we pray at all. In fact, prayer is rarely high on our list. If anything, we tend to avoid it. Prayer is for those who can’t do anything else. Let the women pray while the men take action!

Nehemiah unmasks our spiritual poverty. Through prayer and waiting on God to direct him, Nehemiah places God in the center. Humbled and tested by the brokenness of his people’s plight,

Nehemiah's current well-being is held in perspective. He remembers what we too easily forget. Perhaps Moses' words stood in the forefront of his mind, "You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth." (Deuteronomy 8:17-18) Affluence always tempts the soul to lose memory, God-memory. God-life is lost in our living, the warning forgotten in our plenty that "our hearts" will become proud and you will forget the Lord our God." (Deuteronomy 8:14)

Gandhi, who based much of his faith and life on Jesus, became a great leader of India. He took Jesus' Sermon on the Mount to heart in his philosophy of non-violence. But he was also a man of prayer. One of his great acts of leadership was what I would call a Nehemiah-moment. At one point, the Indian independence movement was stalling. There was tremendous pressure for Gandhi to do something – anything. What he did was unexpected. Instead of quick, decisive action, Gandhi gave them prayer.

He spent eight months at his ashram praying and seeking God's will despite the pleas to do something. One day, while sitting by a pond, God's answer comes. He asks his followers to pack their things, join him in prayer, and then prepare to act. Gandhi had his supporters walk through the towns and villages, with many joining in, with British soldiers surrounding him; he comes to the edge of the water where a large chunk of salt had been formed by the evaporation of water from the hot Indian sun. He picks up the salt, walks over to a British soldier and says, "I have manufactured salt. You must arrest me!" Only the British could manufacture salt and in a simple gesture Gandhi had shown the absurdity of that British law in India. Millions made their own salt by pouring seawater into pans and letting it evaporate on their rooftops. (*Humble Leadership*, Standish, pp 4-5).

Nehemiah's prayer comes alive after spending his time with God. And it begins in a profound God-focus. God's person and character cascade into consciousness, a God of heaven, great, awesome, faithful to his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands. Note the important connection between us and a belief in God's promises. Faith is a response and belief that God is able and that God is willing to engage us. The challenge is this: Whatever life throws at us personally may be met by fixing our eyes on God – capturing a vision of God's person and character. "Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying day and night for the people of Israel." (vs. 6).

That encounter and petition brings him to a place of confession. What is unique is the confession itself. He not only owns his own failings but identifies with the sins of his people. Prayer is never a monologue. Jesus did the same when he submitted to baptism under John the Baptist by identifying with our humanity. We have difficulty with this because of our heightened individualism. Sin in my own family: I'll own that when appropriate, but I'm not going to own corporately the sins of others before me even if they are my ancestors.

But Nehemiah did. John White in his book *Excellence in Leadership* is right, "True prayer is always initiated by God and represents our response to what God is doing." (p. 27). True prayer moves from God to us, carried on the wings of the Spirit. It is therefore more than asking and receiving. It is a radical engagement and encounter with the living God. For example, I may come petitioning God, sensing a need or that something is wrong. In the course of the encounter, God's spirit might turn the course of the conversation. I want to tell about my neighbor, but God wants to talk to me about my failings and need for reformation. I may want to talk to God about the horrors of AIDS in Africa, but God wants to talk to me about my next door neighbor. I come with my "to do" list but God wants me to

focus on one thing I must do. The challenge is to spend the time waiting before God, where I am willing to allow God's spirit to move in my heart and direct me.

A good pattern in prayer to follow is this: ask God how God wants you to pray; then wait before you intercede; pray according to that leading; then record what you prayed, the date and degree of certainty that you feel God's promises and the biblical evidence support; and then leave a place to record results.

God may ask us to do things that don't make sense. Nehemiah ultimately hears God leading him to action. But first he must give up his life, comfort and position in Susa. So he asks God for favor with the king to resign his position as cup-bearer.

Nehemiah challenges us to live a life that is a radical, prayerful openness to God. Let us allow God to guide us that we might lead others to experience what God is already preparing. "Where is the life we have lost in our living?" It is found in being open to the God-life." Amen.