

## How to Pray (Part 1)

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How is your prayer life? Are you struggling to find something to say to God? Does it feel like you are in a spiritual drought? Do you know what you want to say, but are battling to verbalize it? Do your prayers sound a bit like a shopping list? Are you uncomfortable praying? Can you pray in public? Do you worry about what others might say about your public prayers?

I am editing a script on the Book of Nehemiah, and I came across something so inspiring, that I simply had to share it with you! In the Book of Nehemiah, we find his truly remarkable—yet simple prayer—with 8 elements, that can help bring us back to the basics of praying.

### **Scripture Reading** Nehemiah 1:4-11 (NIV)

<sup>4</sup> *“When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.*

<sup>5</sup> *Then I said: "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,*

<sup>6</sup> *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 family, have committed against you.*

<sup>7</sup> *We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.*

<sup>8</sup> *"Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations,*

<sup>9</sup> *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.'*

<sup>10</sup> *"They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand.*

<sup>11</sup> *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."*

### **The Element of Reflection and Humility**

Nehemiah, before he prayed, 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."*

Nehemiah heard – meaning he absorbed and processed information – and this brought him great sorrow (tearfully so). Nehemiah was accurately in touch with his emotions and set out to seek the will of God for a particular situation.

Nehemiah was very serious, he moved from tears to mourning to fasting to praying, but not any prayer, the Hebrew suggests that he judged matters and interceded. From this, I understand that he was discussing with God what he observed, how he felt about it and what to do about it. He was actively seeking the will of God in a particular scenario, something he did throughout the Book of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah sat down. Before the God of heaven, Nehemiah was not proud or arrogant, he simply and humbly discussed things with God to discern God's will.

For us, the question we answer is, *"what am I going to pray about?"*

The lesson for us is in humility, discernment, honesty, empathy, emotional maturity, dependence on God, and a good attitude. All these things will grow as we grow spiritually. Spend time in the Word of God.

Perhaps a point of reflection, now that we know how Nehemiah responded to what he saw, is to compare it with our responses to what we see. When last did you fast over a problem? When last did you physically humble yourself before God when seeking His will? When last did you discuss things as you see them – at length – with God?

### **The Element of Praise**

*"...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..."*

Nehemiah, like Jesus, taught us to do in the Lord's prayer, starts by praising God. We praise God when we acknowledge His greatness. By declaring that God keeps His covenant of love, Nehemiah is declaring something of God's character and from this point of departure, petitioning God to intervene.

Since God brought the heavens and the earth as well as everything else into being by His Word, if God is the one who provided a way of salvation, if God is the one who loves us and chose us, if God is the one who sustains us, then there is much to praise Him for.

In other words, Nehemiah confessed something of who God is – for him – in his moment of need. At the same time, this confession reinforces faith in that God is loving and willing to get involved as opposed to being indifferent to his need.

For us, the questions we must answer are, *“who is God when I need His help and what has he already done for me?”*

The lesson for us is how to approach God. Nehemiah did not burst onto the scene with a “shopping list” or a “hit and miss series of sentences.” His need to praise and acknowledge a loving God who is willing to intervene was at the forefront of his heart. Praising God went ahead of asking God.

For reflection. So much of Scripture reveals parts of the character of God. What part of God's character do you want to praise Him for?

### **The Element of Petition**

*“...let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night...”*

When we petition God, we ask Him for something. It stands out that Nehemiah has not yet asked God to intervene with this petition. All he is asking of God is to listen to him and to see what he sees (Nehemiah). Nehemiah is the servant and wants to bring things, in prayer to God, his master. He is asking God to listen and see.

The advantage is that God sees more than we see, he knows more than we know. God's omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience extends from the past, through the present, and into the future. By asking God to look and hear is a point of the genius of Nehemiah. Ralph

Abernathy said some famous words, *“I don't know what the future may hold, but I know who holds the future.”*

Nehemiah has a great task to do. It starts now and extends into the future. Anything beyond “right now” is still in the future and the best that anyone can hope for is that things will turn out okay. But by asking God to hear and see, Nehemiah had more than hope, He had God leading him as he led God’s people onward toward achieving the will of God.

The question we ask ourselves is, *“how can we first focus on God before our trouble or request for God’s intervention.”*

Nehemiah is quite anxious; he uses the words “day and night.” Now it might very well be that you and I are not capable of praying non-stop day and night about a situation.

But there is a lesson here: fill your day and night with God's thoughts, prayer, meditation, etc. In other words, live in intimacy with God so that when your trouble reminds you of its presence, that very call to attention does not assume first place in your mind. In the first place is God and the trouble must be seen in submission to God’s will and your Godward focus.

For reflection. How do you approach the future when you do not know, for certain, what it holds?

### **The Element of Confession**

*“I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, 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.”*

Confession is arguably an overlooked Christian discipline. Confession is necessary.

And Nehemiah still has not asked to intervene. Before he gets there, right, and pure standing with God is high on his “agenda.” We, through Christ Jesus, already have right standing with God and direct access to Him, but that does mean that we should stop confessing our sin. Our sin is forgiven through Jesus, but that does not mean that we can keep on sinning; instead, be aware of your sins so that you can stop sinning, by His power. Repent!

The question we ask ourselves is, *“to what degree do you desire the holy life that God is calling you to?”*

The lesson to learn is that God is holy and pure, and we should make every effort to grow toward Him in Him, which means learning about the holiness and purity of God. The holiness and purity of God will always bring us to the need to sincerely repent.

For reflection. What unconfessed sin is there in your life?

### **The Element of Reminding 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.’”*

God has not forgotten anything. Nor has Nehemiah yet asked God to intervene. In a sense, Nehemiah is again confessing something of God, not to remind God, but to remind himself of who God is and what He has done. This deepens our connection and strengthens our relationship with God in our moment of trouble.

The question we ask is, *“in my moment of trouble, who is God to me?”*

There are some strong lessons here. Perhaps the most important is to ensure that your focus on God is greater than your focus on your trouble. Perhaps simple words to say – I know, but when anxiety grips you and paralyzes you, you have a choice to make.

In our natural being, we want the problem to be gone. Immediately. Plain and simple. In our mature being, however, we want to bring glory to God, even if that means a process of growth through and despite the trouble at hand.

In our natural being, we ask God to take the mist away so that we can see. In our mature being, we ask God to lead us through the mist knowing that He will not leave us and will show us where to step next. When God leads you through the mist, every step is onto holy ground, for the progress you make is given to you by God.

For reflection. What right now, is the desire of your heart?

### **Conclusion**

We will finish next week with part 2. There is enough in Nehemiah’s prayer to write a book.

But for now, we must appreciate that Nehemiah has not yet asked God for anything. At most, Nehemiah has gone to great lengths to rightly position himself toward God, praised God, confessed the goodness of God, confessed sin, and drawn the Lord's attention to what he sees and hears.

So far, Nehemiah has engaged God from a position of servanthood.

So far, Nehemiah has shown us something of His relationship with God.

I must mention that there is no such thing as a "prayer recipe" that will force God's hand.

Prayer is much more than a "shopping list." James 5:16 reminds us that, "...The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective."

Amen.