

“Seek the Lord, Cast the Vision, Work as One”
Part 1: It Starts with Prayer
Nehemiah 1:1-11

Question: Who is the shortest man in the Bible? Knee-high-miah! [P] This morning we’re kicking off a series based on the book of Nehemiah that we’re calling, “*Seek the Lord, Cast the Vision, Work as One.*”

For starters, I’d like for each of us to read a superb trilogy! Begin with the book of *Esther*, where you will discover how God first began to move in the midst of Israel’s captivity. Then, read *Ezra*, which in the Hebrew Torah is linked with Nehemiah as the same book. Then jump into *Nehemiah* and read it carefully. Because of the richness of this book, you will get more out of this series if you reflect on at least one chapter each week.

I’m excited about what God is going to teach us as we travel through this book. We’re going to examine a critical time in the history of God’s people; we’ll learn things that will help us personally; but especially, we’ll discover principles that will guide us as we move into a time of casting vision here at Riverlawn.

First, some background ... After King Solomon died; Israel was split into two kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom had 10 tribes and was referred to as Israel. The Southern Kingdom had 2 tribes, referred to as Judah. Because of their disobedience, the Assyrians conquered Israel. The tribes were scattered and became known as the “Ten lost tribes of Israel.”

Even though the southern tribes saw all this happen, they, too, continued to rebel against God. In 586 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army captured the Jews; Jerusalem was destroyed; the walls were knocked down; and the temple was burned. The people were deported and forced into slavery ... again.

It must have been utterly traumatic for the Jews to see death and destruction and then be forced to leave their homeland and travel 1,000 miles to a foreign country. Many of God’s prophets predicted that this captivity would not destroy the nation; it would eventually end, and the people would be allowed to come back home.

God did not forsake His people. He allowed the Persians to take over the Babylonians and he moved King Cyrus to make a decree to let many of the Jews return. And in three stages, over about 100 years, they were allowed to migrate back to Jerusalem, only to discover the city was still demolished & desolate. After the decree of Cyrus, 50,000 Israelites returned to Judah and began rebuilding the temple. God sent them prophets to encourage them to finish the project. Ezra was also sent to help restore their spiritual fervor.

Finally Nehemiah tells his story in the 20th year of the reign of Artaxerxes. By now Persia had replaced Babylon, and the Persians ruled with a very different means of control. The commitment of the Persians was to resettle captured people in their native lands.

Conquered peoples could act with a degree of autonomy as long as they supported the state and paid their taxes. As we start the book of Nehemiah, God is about to prompt another movement back to the Promised Land. [P]

Are you ready to dive in?! This morning we're going to begin exactly where we should always begin – with an emphasis upon *prayer*. Prayer is one of the overriding themes of the book and the secret to Nehemiah's success. The prayer in chapter 1 is the first of 12 prayers throughout the 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. It's a story of compassionate, persistent, personal and corporate prayer. Prayer is powerful – for Nehemiah and for us. *Prayer gives perspective, widens horizons, sharpens vision, and dwarfs anxieties.*

Nehemiah's public life was the outflow of his personal life, which was steeped in, and shaped by, a lifestyle of prayer. His devotion to God, his dependence on Him for everything, and his desire for the glory of God found equal expression. He knew that only ventures that are begun in prayer, and bathed in prayer throughout, are likely to be blessed.

This morning, we're going to see how Nehemiah went through *a process of prayer*, and how this has great application and relevance to us today.

1. Nehemiah started with a ... **CONCERN about the Problem** (vs. 1-4). We know from v. 11 that Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the king. His job was to taste the king's wine

before he drank it to make sure it was not poisoned. As cupbearer, Nehemiah had close access to royalty, distinct standing, and a place to live in the palace. It was a cushy job that provided everything he needed. And yet, when one of his brothers returned from a road trip to Jerusalem, verse 2 says that Nehemiah “*questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile.*” Nehemiah was greatly concerned about what was happening in Jerusalem. He could have insulated himself if he chose to, but he didn’t.

This is an important starting point. It’s so easy for us to stay uninvolved and unaware. Some of us don’t want to even think about stuff that’s going on in our own lives, much less take the time to investigate what is happening in the lives of others. Even though Nehemiah had never been to Jerusalem, he had heard stories about it, and knew that his ancestors had been led away in chains when Babylon destroyed it.

And so, Nehemiah listened to the report that the survivors were in great trouble and disgrace, that the wall of Jerusalem was in shambles and that its gates had been burned with fire. As he tried to imagine the shame in the city of David, he couldn’t stand it. The phrase, “*great trouble*” in v. 3 means that the people had “broken down and were falling to pieces.” Three words summarize the bad news: remnant, ruin, and reproach.

Nehemiah was broken over the complacency of the people of Jerusalem. They were living in ruins and they accepted it. They were willing to walk around the devastation instead of being concerned enough to do something about it. Friends, nothing is ever going to change in your life, in the life of this church, or for that matter, our nation, until we become concerned about the problem. [P] Perhaps some of us have become complacent about the way our life is going. Maybe we’re living with rubble and it doesn’t even bother us anymore. [P] Are you ready to allow God to do some rebuilding? [P] If so, we need to become concerned about the problem.

When Nehemiah heard this report, he hit the ground and began to *weep* in verse 4. The meaning behind this word is that he “*bemoaned and lamented,*” much like Jesus did when he cried out as he observed the hard hearts of those in Jerusalem (Luke 19:41).

Nehemiah also *fasted*. In the Old Testament, fasting was only required once a year, but here we see Nehemiah refraining from food for days. In fact, we know from comparing

the different dates in this book that he wept, fasted, and prayed for 4 months! These were intense, prolonged expressions of humility, displaying his deep concern for the problem. Before we can ask God to rebuild, we must first become *concerned* about the problem.

2. Next, Nehemiah expresses his **CONVICTION about God's Character**. Verse 5: *"O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant of love with those who love Him and obey His commands."*

Nehemiah refers to His Lord as the *"God of heaven ... great and awesome!"* He professed that his God is beyond the earthly realm and above all powers & authorities. God deserves to be honored and revered by all because of who He is. Nehemiah affirms more ... God is the one who *"keeps His covenant of love."* God can be trusted for He is ever faithful.

Nehemiah's boss, the king, was considered the mightiest on earth, but compared to God, Artaxerxes was nothing. Nehemiah was in Susa and his concern is in far off-Jerusalem, but both cities – one rich the other poor, one strong the other weak, one proud the other broken ☐ were like tiny specks of dust under the vast canopy of God's kingdom. Friends, when we go to God in prayer, when we take the time to linger in God's presence, marveling at His holiness, surrendering to His Lordship, things get put into their proper perspective.

Because of his conviction about God's character, Nehemiah knew that God was not only able, but also willing to respond to his prayer. But he also knew his own heart, his own need. Like all those who seek after the Lord, his encounter with an awesome God brings him to the place of repentance.

3. **CONFESSIO**n of Sin. After becoming concerned about the problem, and expressing his conviction about God's character, Nehemiah is now moved to admit his sin and the sins of his people in verses 6-7: *"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 ... I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself, have committed against you ... We have not obeyed the commands, decrees, and laws you gave your servant Moses."*

It's one thing to be concerned, and to even have a firm conviction of who God is. It's another thing to actually confess. Many of us never get this far. We might feel bad about our sins or be concerned about how things are going. Our theology may even be correct.

But we hesitate at this next step. [P] But not Nehemiah – he boldly asks God to hear his prayer. I see at least 3 key ingredients in his confession of sin.

Intensity. Overwhelmed by the effects of sin, and in awe of the holiness of God’s character, Nehemiah gave himself to prolonged petition and intercession. He prayed day and night, spending his time in God’s presence.

Honesty. Nehemiah made no attempt to excuse the Israelites of their sin and actually owned his part in their culpability. He surveyed the grim record of Israel’s past and present failure, and he knew that he was not exempt from blame. It would have been easy for Nehemiah to look back and blame his ancestors, but instead he looked within and blamed himself. It’s so easy for us to blame others, isn’t it? We need to learn from Nehemiah and confess honestly, “Lord, I am wrong. I not only want to be part of the answer, I confess that I’m part of the problem.” Honesty.

Urgency. Nehemiah recognized that sin is not merely a stubborn refusal to obey certain rules, but is also a defiant act of personal rebellion against a holy God. He didn’t downplay it. With something so serious as sin & its effects, we can’t hesitate or rationalize – we need to immediately act with urgency. Nehemiah owned it and called it what it was.

The story is told about some Boeing employees who decided to steal a life raft from one of the 747s they were working on. They were successful in getting it out of the plane, but they forgot one thing. The raft comes with an emergency locator that is automatically activated when the raft is inflated. So, when they took the raft out on the river, they were quite surprised by a Coast Guard helicopter homing in on the emergency locator.

Trying to hide our sins from God is impossible. He knows all about them. Friends, we need to recognize that all sin, those things we have blatantly done or carelessly committed, or those things that we have left undone, must be identified and confessed.

4. **CONFIDENCE in God’s Promises**. While Nehemiah spends time in broken confession, he doesn’t wallow in a prolonged fixation of his failures or those of his people. He owns the guilt, and then he expresses confidence in God’s promises in verses 8-10: *“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 mighty hand."

What was the promise Nehemiah was getting at? It was twofold. 1. If Israel disobeyed, they would be sent to a foreign land. That had been fulfilled. 2. When the captivity was over, God would send them back to Jerusalem. They were still waiting for that to be fulfilled. Nehemiah prayed, "Lord, the first part is true. We've disobeyed and we're in captivity. But Lord, you've made a promise to bring us back home and protect us there and that has not happened yet. I'm trusting your promise that you'll make it happen."

Someone has calculated that there are over 7,000 promises in the Bible. The better we know the Word of God, the better we'll be able to pray with confidence in God's promises. Are you as confident of God's promises as Nehemiah was? [P] Nehemiah knew God would keep His covenant of love with his people. [P] He also knew that, even though God did not need his help, Nehemiah was ready to make a commitment to get involved.

5. **COMMITMENT to Get Involved.** We see this in verse 11: "O Lord, let your ear be attentive 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" [the king].

It's been said that prayer is not getting man's will done in heaven but getting God's will done on earth. However, for God's will to be done on earth, He needs people to be available for Him to use. While Nehemiah was praying, his burden for Jerusalem became greater and his vision of what needed to be done became clearer. He didn't pray for God to send someone else; his attitude was: "Here I am! Send me!" He knew that he would have to approach the king and request a 3-year leave of absence, and so he asked God for "success," which means "to break out or push forward." He wanted to see God break out on his behalf when he goes in front of the king to make his request.

Someone has said that the key word in this book is the word, "so," which occurs 32 different times. Again and again, Nehemiah assesses the situation, is moved to concern, and "so" is compelled to action. The true measure of our concern is whether or not we are

willing to make a commitment to get involved. Martin Luther said, *“Pray as if everything depends on God, then work as if everything depends on you.”*

A college choir was all set to present a concert in a large church which was to be carried live by a local radio station. When everything appeared to be ready, the announcer made his final introduction and waited for the choir director to begin. A tenor was not yet ready, so the director refused to raise his baton. All this time, nothing but silence was being broadcast. Growing anxious, the announcer, forgetting that his microphone was still on and that he could be heard on the air, blurted out, “Get on with it, you old goat!”

Later in the week, the radio station got a letter from one of its listeners – a man who had tuned in to listen to the music from the comfort of his easy chair. When he heard: “Get on with it, you old goat!” he took the message personally. He had been doing nothing to further God’s work, and this startling message was enough to convict him and get him going again.¹

Sometimes we need a wake-up call, don’t we? Maybe you’ve received that call this morning and God is saying to you, “Get on with it!” Where are you in this prayer process right now? Are you concerned about the problems you see around you ... in the church ... in our community? Do you have a conviction about God’s holy character? Are you ready to confess your sins? Do you have confidence in God’s promises? Are you ready to make a commitment to get involved in God’s kingdom work? [*I want to invite you right now ...*]

¹ Credit given to Brian Bill, “A Time to Build: Lessons from Nehemiah, Knowing How to Pray”