

THE KIND OF PRAYER GOD ANSWERS Nehemiah 1:5-11

The title of this sermon is a backdoor acknowledgement that there are some prayers that God does not answer. I repeat: God does not answer every prayer. In fact, there are some prayers that God will not even listen to, much less answer. That is why this text is such a good model for us. It is preoccupied with God's tendency to ignore certain prayers. Verse 6a says: "let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant" Verse 11a says: "O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant." These statements are anthropomorphisms. They express divine reality in physical terms. John 4:24 teaches that God is a spirit. As such, God does not have eyes and ears. Yet Nehemiah ascribes physical features to God to paint a graphic picture of how displeased God is with some prayers. God finds some prayers so unacceptable that he plugs his ears so that he cannot hear and covers his eyes so that he cannot see. But that did not happen to Nehemiah. God heard and answered Nehemiah's prayer. And scripture records this transcript of Nehemiah's prayer to teach us the kind of prayer God answers.

Now, do not expect this sermon to give you an easy formula for answered prayer. I hate religious formulas that domesticate biblical truth, trivialize God's sovereign ways, and rob the walk of faith of its intended adventure. So don't expect any shortcuts to answered prayer here. In fact, I plan to give you the long, scenic route to answered prayer. Here it is: God typically answers prayer that is offered by the person who is totally committed to him. Answered prayer is the natural overflow of a committed life. Nehemiah's prayer did not move the hand of God because he said the right words the right way. God accepted Nehemiah's prayer because God accepted Nehemiah. It was not what was being said as much as it was who was talking.

James 5:16b puts it this way: "The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working." Translation: God is not moved by wordy eloquence, vain repetition, emotional intensity, high volume, name-it-and-claim-it, or any other religious hocus-pocus. But when a person whose heart is right prays, God's ears are open, God's eyes are attentive, and God's hands are outstretched to answer their prayer. The question is: What must I do to get God's attention, approval, and activity like this? I don't know about you, but when I pray, I want God to take off his cosmic headphones, silence the angels, lean over the balcony of heaven in full attention, and begin reaching for his divine resources to answer my prayer. Nehemiah's prayer illustrates four aspect of the kind of prayer God answers.

I. GOD ANSWERS *SINCERE* PRAYER.

Nehemiah 1:1 opens this story in Susa, the winter residence of the King Artaxerxes of Persia. Verse 2 tells us that while Nehemiah was fulfilling his official duties as the king's cupbearer, his brother Hanani showed up with some men from Judah. During their visit, Nehemiah inquired about the condition of the remnant of

Jews who had returned to Jerusalem after being released from Babylonian captivity. Verse 3 records the news Nehemiah received: "And they said to me, 'The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by faith.'" Verse 4 records Nehemiah's response: "As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven." Sitting, weeping, and mourning were Nehemiah's natural reaction to the bad news he received about Jerusalem. You and I would have probably reacted the same way. But many of us would not have followed his spiritual response: FASTING and PRAYER.

Nehemiah prayed. Not only did he pray, he prayed sincerely. I know it was sincere because of what is between verse 4 (which records that he prayed) and verse 5 (which records what he prayed): Absolutely nothing. That's the kind of prayer God answers: God answers those who make prayer their first response, not their last resort. Nehemiah was definitely a man of action. In fact, the book of Nehemiah is a masterful manual on effective leadership, wise planning, shrewd organization, focused activity, and unwavering diligence. But Nehemiah did not make a move without praying. There are at least twelve prayers of Nehemiah recorded in this book. That's sincere prayer. Sincere prayer recognizes that there is much that can be done after you pray, but there is not much that can help the situation until you pray. Sincere prayer recognizes that when we work, we work. But when we pray, God works. Sincere prayer recognizes that it happens after prayer.

There are those who say: "If you've tried everything else, and everything has failed, try God." I know that statement means well. But it is really just a call to hypocrisy. If you only go to God after you have tried everything else, your prayers will lack one of the most important things God is looking for: CHILDLIKE DEPENDENCE. God is ready, willing, and able to help those who trust in him. But God is dishonored when we treat him like some cosmic 9-1-1 emergency service. Think about it. You do not trust the police, ambulance, and fire department. And I know that you don't trust them because, though you call them when you need them, up until that point you hope you won't need to call them. That is how many of us treat God. And that is why our prayers don't work. James 1:6-8 affirms the importance of sincere prayer when it says: "But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways."

ELISHA A. HOFFMAN pastored in Lebanon, Pennsylvania over a century ago. And one day he went to visit a member who had been going through many troubles and afflictions. And he found her in great discouragement. The sister unburdened herself, concluding with this question: "Brother Hoffman, what shall I do? What shall I do?" He quoted some scripture to her, and then added, "You cannot do better than to take all of your sorrows to Jesus. You must tell Jesus." The sister thought about it for a moment and became lost in meditation. Then her eyes lit up as she exclaimed, "Yes. I must tell Jesus." And after Hoffman left, he could still see her face illuminated with joy. And he

could still hear her voice saying, "I must tell Jesus. I must tell Jesus." And by the time he reached his study, Hoffman had the words the beloved hymn.

I MUST TELL JESUS ALL OF MY TRIALS,
I CANNOT BEAR THESE BURDENS ALONE
IN MY DISTRESS HE KINDLY WILL HELP ME,
HE EVER LOVES AND CARES FOR HIS OWN

II. GOD ANSWERS REVERENT PRAYER.

Verse 5 records the opening words of Nehemiah prayer: "And I said, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments..." Nehemiah went to the Lord carrying a heavy burden. It was so heavy that it caused him to sit on the floor weeping and mourning for many days. But Nehemiah did not rush into God's presence with requests, petitions, and supplications. In fact, he does not mention the thing that led him to pray until verse 11. Instead, Nehemiah begins his prayer with words of worship, adoration, and praise.

- He recognized the **TRANSCENDENCE** of God: *"Lord God of heaven..."*
- He ascribed **MAJESTY** to God: *"the great and awesome God..."*
- He honored the **FAITHFULNESS** of God: *"who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments..."*

I submit to you that God answered Nehemiah's prayer because it was reverent, worshipful, God-intoxicated.

When I entered high school, I discovered a new phenomenon. I had classmates who called their parents by their first names. On one hand, it was weird. On the other hand, it was kind of cool. It seemed mature to me to refer to their dad as "Bill" or their mom as "Jackie." So I tried it. I went home and started calling my dad H. B. My dad did not say anything. So I continued to do it for several days, until my mom told me how much I was hurting my dad. Not only did he think I was being intentionally disrespectful, but he also thought that by calling him "H. B." I was rejecting his paternal authority over my life. That day changed my life. It wiped out my foolish ideas about adulthood. I understood that day that becoming mature did not put me on my dad's level. No matter how old I got, there would always be a distance between us, because he was not one of my friends, he was my father. And he deserved my respect. But it saddens me to admit that the lesson I learned that day about my earthly father, is a lesson I am still learning about my heavenly father. And I'm not by myself. One of the greatest problems of our times is that we have become nonchalant about the Father in heaven. We suffer from a low view of God. We do not recognize God's sovereign authority. But whenever you go to God prayer, you must first and foremost remind yourself that God is God. Do you know who you are talking to when you pray?

- **It was God who before history’s dawning unrolled the blueprint to the foundation of the world and brought cosmos out of chaos with his own voice, saying, “Let there be light.”**
- **It was God who sent the spinning on its axis as it orbited the sun, and who placed Mother Nature and Father Time on it and told them to dance together and don’t get dizzy.**
- **It was God who made the sun from the brilliance of his own face and caused it to slide, as it were, on a visible cable across the heavens.**
- **It was God who flung the stars, like a million flaming skyrockets against the ebony dome of evening.**
- **It was God who flung the fleecy white clouds against the azure colored canvas of the vaulted blue.**
- **It was God who gave the lion it’s roar, the cow its moo, the duck its quack, and the dog its bark.**
- **It was God who took a lump of clay; stamped his image on man’s brow, put the quest for truth in man’s heart. And then he exhaled. And man stood on tiptoe as a living spirit.**

I submit to you that when we don’t begin our prayers the way Nehemiah did we are not able to conclude our prayers the way Nehemiah did. In verse 11, Nehemiah says: “And give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.” Then the last sentence of verse 11 tells us why he prayed this way: “Now I was the king’s cupbearer.” Nehemiah 2:1 tells us that the king was Artaxerxes. At that time, the Persian Empire was the world’s sole superpower. So politically and militarily, Artaxerxes was the most powerful man on the face of the earth. But notice how Nehemiah refers to Artaxerxes in verse 11. He doesn’t call him the “Great, Mighty, and Sovereign Artaxerxes.” He didn’t even refer to him as the king. He called him “this man.” Artaxerxes was just another man to Nehemiah, because he had magnified the greatness, glory, and goodness of God. And I declare that the greater God becomes to you, the smaller your problems become. Some of you miss church because of things you are dealing with at home, work, or school. But I don’t understand how you would dare miss church in light of the things you are dealing with at home, work, and school. You need to be in church so that we can remind you that God is God.

- **Your husband or wife is not God.**
- **Your children are not God.**
- **Your boss and coworkers are not God.**
- **You teachers and classmates are not God.**
- **Your enemies are not God. God is God.**

III. GOD ANSWERS HONEST PRAYER.

After Nehemiah offers his words of adoration, verse 6 moves to the next major aspect of Nehemiah’s prayer. Again, Nehemiah delayed mentioning the specific thing that led him to pray. Instead, after spending time in worship, he begins to deal with the things that were standing between him and God. From verses 6-10,

Nehemiah confessed his sin to God. The children of Israel had sinned. His family had sinned. And he had sinned. Verse 7 says, "We have acted very corruptly against you." Nehemiah explains that statement by admitting their failure to keep the commandments, statutes, and ordinances of God in the Mosaic Law. And verse 8 confirms the warning of the Lord: "If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples."

The sinfulness of Israel was great, pervasive, and indefensible. And they were getting exactly what they deserved. You would think that this confession of sin would cause God to ignore Nehemiah's prayer. But I submit to you that Nehemiah's confession actually motivated God to respond to his prayer. Why? God answers honest prayer. Psalm 32:3-5 says, "For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and you forgave the iniquity of my sin." Proverbs 28:13 says, "Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy." And 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Unfortunately, confession is probably the most neglected area of prayer. And because we aren't honest with God about the sin in our lives, our prayers go unanswered. Psalm 66:18 puts it bluntly: "If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened." Yet we go on lying to God, lying to others, and lying to ourselves about who we really are. And we lie about our real selves because we fail to interpret God through the perfect revelation of himself in the Lord Jesus Christ. And when we fail to view God through the lens of love provided in Christ Jesus, we inevitably try to earn God's favor through our own efforts at being good. And it is impossible to be honest with God when you are trying to impress him with how good you are. So we become hypocrites. And then hypocrisy flows into all of our relationships. Consequently, honesty with others and with self is a precious commodity seldom found in either the world or the church. We fear that if we bare our souls, we will be abandoned by friends and ridiculed by our enemies. We all wrestle with the questions BRENNAN MANNING posed in his book, "Abba's Child." He asked: "Is there anyone I can level with? Anyone I dare tell that I am benevolent and malevolent, chaste and randy, compassionate and vindictive; selfless and selfish, that beneath my brave words lives a frightened child, that I dabble in religion and pornography, that I have blackened a friend's character, betrayed a trust, violated a confidence, that I am tolerant and thoughtful, a bigot and a blowhard, that I hate hard rock music?"

Let me answer that for Manning, you, and myself. The good news for us ragamuffins is that there is someone we can trust with all of our sins, weaknesses, and limitations. It's the same one we keep running from, because of his holiness, justice, and wrath. Verse 8 recalls God's warning: "If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations," which is exactly what God did. But verse 9 goes on to say:

“but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.” God is holy. In his holiness God says: “If you turn away from me, I’ll punish you.” But God is love. In his love God says: “If you return to me, I’ll pardon you.” In fact, God will not only forgive, he’ll restore. He says that even if you are cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, I’ll get you. I’ll bring you back. I’ll restore you. “Trust,” said ST. AUGUSTINE, “is courage to accept acceptance.” God is just waiting for someone to trust him enough to be honest. Someone who will come to him and say: It’s not my father... mother... sister... brother, but it’s me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer!

A certain man was driving along the New Jersey Turnpike one summer afternoon. And a Lincoln Town Car was one hundred yards ahead in the same lane. The man was shocked when he saw the right rear door of the Lincoln, still moving at full speed, swing open. The passenger threw a collie onto the pavement. The dog hit the concrete and rolled into a ditch. But, bleeding profusely, the collie got up and started running after the car and the owner who had cruelly abandoned him. His relentless faithfulness was not conditioned or diminished by the abuse and callous disregard of his master.

I submit to you that the faithfulness of that collie is nothing in comparison to the stubborn love of God. In spite of the fact that we keep kicking him to the curb, the hound of heaven keeps pursuing us with his furious love. Why? Why does God keep putting up with us? Why does God keep on loving us? Why does God keep on extending to us another chance? Verse 10 answers: “They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and your strong hand.” Nehemiah says, “Lord, the people are no good. But they’re yours. They’re yours because you redeemed them by your great power and outstretched hand.” I love that. Family and friends may reject you if you fail to live up to their standards along the way. But before the journey ever begins with God, he says, “Now, I know you’re going to miss the mark. But I want you to know that whatever happens, I won’t change my mind about you. You’re still mine.”

**BLESSED ASSURANCE, JESUS IS MINE!
O WHAT A FORETASTE OF GLORY OF DIVINE!
HEIR OF SALVATION, PURCHASE OF GOD,
BORN OF HIS SPIRIT, WASHED IN HIS BLOOD.**

IV. GOD ANSWERS BELIEVING PRAYER.

When Nehemiah heard about the condition of Jerusalem’s walls, he made himself available to God to do something about the situation. He was even willing to leave his white-collar job as a royal executive in order to go rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. But Nehemiah knew that nothing would be accomplished in his own

strength, wisdom, and authority. No matter how willing he was, the success of the entire project rested in the helping hand of God. And because Nehemiah knew that the outcome was in God's hands, he prayed bold, specific, and courageous prayers. Look at verse 11 again: "give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man." On the surface, those petitions might not seem like much. But the last sentence of verse 11 shows us the magnitude of these requests: "For I was the king's cupbearer."

The cupbearer was the most important cabinet position in the kingdom. The king trusted the cupbearer with his life. So Nehemiah couldn't just go into the throne room and tell Artaxerxes that he was taking a leave-of-absence. And not only was the request to leave dangerous, but his reason for leaving put him in greater danger. Ezra 4 tells us that the king had previously ordered that Jerusalem not be rebuilt. And Nehemiah now plans to go to this paranoid king and ask his permission, provisions, and protections to go rebuild wall that he had previously ordered to remain broken down. All of the odds were against Nehemiah. But Nehemiah knew a King that is greater than Artaxerxes. And Nehemiah asked that greater King to make him successful. He asked God to touch the heart of Artaxerxes, so that he would receive all he needed to get the Lord's work done. And God answered Nehemiah's prayer.

Read chapter 2 of Nehemiah. In Nehemiah 2:5, he received the king's permission. In Nehemiah 2:7, he received the king's protection. In Nehemiah 2:8, he received the king's provisions. And the last sentence of 2:9 says: "Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen." Nehemiah asked for a visa. But the Lord moved so that he got the visa and a security detail to travel with him. And I submit to you that God honored Nehemiah's prayer in such a great way, because Nehemiah had great faith in God. He walked by faith and not by sight. He tried something so great for God that he was sure to fail if the Lord didn't help him. That's the kind of prayer God answers. God answers believing prayer. Well, what is it that you need God to do in your life? Whatever it is, I have great news for you: God is able!

- **God is able to put your marriage back together.**
- **God is able to bring your wandering child back home.**
- **God is able to heal your sick and hurting body.**
- **God is able to straighten out your finances.**
- **God is able to save your love loved-ones.**

The issue is not God's ability to move in the situation. The issue is, do you really believe that God is able to do immeasurably above all you can ask or think. Are you willing to step out on faith? Jeremiah 33:3 says, "Call to Me, and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known." Matthew 7:7 says, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." And 1 John 5:14 - "And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us."

I'll close when I tell you about a family whose house caught on fire. The father led the family down the stairs, followed by his wife and their five children. But while they were making their retreat, the youngest boy became frightened and turned back

upstairs. And the flames rose, making it impossible to make it down the stairs. And so the father stood under that nearest window and called out to his son. And his son answered. The father said, "Son, jump." "I can't daddy," came the young voice hidden in the smoke. "Yes, you can son. Jump!" "But daddy, I can't see anything." The daddy replied, "That's alright son. You can't see me. But I can see. So jump. I'll catch you."

THAT PROBLEM THAT I HAD, I JUST COULDN'T SEEM TO SOLVE.

I TRIED AND I TRIED, BUT I JUST GOT DEEPER INVOLVED.

THEN I TURNED IT OVER TO JESUS AND I STOPPED WORRYING ABOUT IT.

I TURNED IT OVER TO THE LORD AND HE WORKED IT OUT.