



## "The Prayer Life of a Leader" (Nehemiah 1:4-11)

### I. INTRO

A. We all have multiple components of our lives that we need to think about and plan around:

1. We have our home life – or family life (with some crazy schedules: dance, sports, music lessons, robotics, etc.)
2. We have our work or vocational life, (the 40-hour work week is scarce these days –the national average is 47-hours a week and only 40% of Americans work a 40-hour week<sup>1</sup>)
3. All this leads to us needing to think about and plan for a work-home life balance.
4. Many of us have an active church life and some of us volunteer at other organizations as well.
5. (And remember, retirees, I want to remind you, there's no such thing as retirement, only reassignment!)
6. We have our social life (or not!),
7. And some of us even have a romance life.
8. And, hopefully, we have our health and fitness life.
9. (Did I just make you feel tired -- or guilty -- by reminding you of all that you've got going on?)

B. For most of us, we think about and plan for these areas of our lives: vocation, family, church, social, romance, and fitness – **but what about our prayer lives?**

C. Do you have a vision for or aspirations for your prayer life? Have you evaluated your prayer life lately?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/on-leadership/wp/2014/09/02/the-average-work-week-is-now-47-hours/>  
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- D. Here's a quote from Tim Keller to help us think about this (blog post too): "Prayer is the only entryway into genuine self-knowledge. It is also the main way we experience deep change—the reordering of our loves. Prayer is how God gives us so many of the unimaginable things he has for us. Indeed, prayer makes it safe for God to give us many of the things we most desire. It is the way we know God, the way we finally treat God as God. Prayer is simply the key to everything we need to do and be in life." --Tim Keller <sup>2</sup>
- E. If that quote rings true to you then a re-evaluation and re-prioritization of your prayer life may be in order.
- F. Today we are continuing our series Nehemiah: God's Work, God's Way, For God's Glory.
1. Neh is an example of a person who took the time to prepare himself to be used by God. (We never know when God is going provide an opportunity for us to be used by God in a significant way.)
  2. Neh was a man who took God's concerns into his own heart and was willing to leave the comfort and opulence of palace living and engage in the desperate brokenness of the world around him. (We've talked in terms of being willing to step out of maintenance mode to see what God might have for us.)
- G. We've been in chapter one for three weeks now and we will be back in chapter one today.
1. Last week we looked at eight qualities and characteristics that were present in Nehemiah's life that formed the foundation for his dynamic leadership role in Jerusalem.
  2. The sermon was titled, The Making of a Leader and we are using the MOST basic definition of a leader as we consider these qualities and characteristics: Leadership, when all is said and done, is about influence.
- H. Today, I would like us to consider, The Prayer Life of a Leader. I will read Nehemiah 1:4-11, pray, and then we'll jump in... "*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. 5 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, 6 let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel*

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<sup>2</sup> Tim Keller. *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*, Viking 2014:18.

*your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. 7 We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. 8 Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, 9 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.' 10 They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. 11 O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.'* Now I was cupbearer to the king."

## II. BODY

A. These verses tell us (at least) 5-things about Neh 's prayer life:

1. **Nehemiah positioned himself for effective prayer (v. 4).**
2. **Nehemiah knows the Scriptures and reminds God of what He has said (vs. 5, 8-9).**
3. **Nehemiah prays with passionate persistence (v. 6).**
4. **Nehemiah prays with a humble and repentant heart (v. 6).**
5. **Nehemiah prays for success with an acknowledged dependence on God (v. 11).**

B. We will look at them one at a time...

### 1. **Nehemiah positioned himself for prayer (2-parts...)**

- a. Nehemiah dug in for the long haul. V. 4 – "I sat down" The Hebrew word is YASHAB: a prime root meaning to sit, remain, or dwell. It's not the coach at the end of practice who says, "Take a knee for a minute..."
- b. Nehemiah grieved well. V. 4 also tells us Neh wept and mourned "for days" This is a healthy and biblical description of grief. My mom was a hospice nurse, so I grew up with a lot of talk about what it means to grieve well.

1) There are many excellent examples of healthy grief in the Bible:

- a) David grieved over the oppression of the weak and wounded (Psalm 10).
- b) Isaiah grieved over the sin of Israel (Isaiah 6:1-7).

- c) Jesus grieved over the loss of His friend, Lazarus (John 11:28-37).
- 2) The Bible teaches us about good grief...
    - a) *"But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope."* --1 Thessalonians 4:13
    - b) Christians grieve but we grieve differently from those who have no real or substantial hope.
  - 3) Nevertheless, pain and life's circumstances involve loss and loss must be grieved. In his classic book *A Grief Observed* C.S. Lewis wrote about grappling with grief after the death of his wife: "Grief still feels like fear. Perhaps, more strictly, like suspense. Or, like waiting just hanging about waiting for something to happen. It gives life a permanently provisional feeling. It doesn't seem worth starting anything."<sup>3</sup> --C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*
  - 4) We must guard itself against denial and inaction to humbly embrace our grief, viewing it as an opportunity to know God and one another better.
  - 5) Neh was willing to feel and embrace the suffering of his scattered and broken people. That was part of his leadership development and it was part of his prayer life development.
  - 6) This is the whole point of the Beatitudes in Matthew 5. Embracing our spiritual poverty and mourning over our own sinful tendencies as well as the brokenness of the world around us are actually the unlikely route to joy.
  - 7) A biblical response to grief involves a biblical theology of suffering and loss that will move through grief to growth and passionately point us to Jesus.<sup>4</sup>
  - 8) For us to move forward as individuals, couples, and families - and as a church, you must fully embrace the sorrow God has appointed for us.

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<sup>3</sup> 1963:33.

<sup>4</sup> Gregg recommends the book *God's Healing for Life's Losses* author Robert Kellemen (BMH Books 2010). The book includes two application/discussion guides for individual or group study.

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- a) We are not to be ashamed of our tears of grief. Let the promise that “*joy comes in the morning*” --Psalm 30:5 sustain and shape our grief with the grace, power, and goodness of God.
  - b) The fruit of this transformational process is that we will reflect Jesus more. Grief is always “grace disguised” opportunity.
- 9) The Bible invites us to live with our confusion and bewilderment – and to take it to God. Here’s another quote from Keller’s book on prayer: “In the Bible, we discover a real and complex God. If you have a personal relationship with any real person, you will regularly be confused and infuriated by him or her. So, too, you will regularly be confounded by the God you meet in the Scriptures - as well as amazed and comforted. Your prayer must be firmly connected to and grounded in your reading of the Word. This wedding of the Bible and prayer anchors your life down in the real God.” --Tim Keller [do you want to meet and know the REAL God?]

2. **Nehemiah knows the Scriptures and reminds God of what He has said.** V. 5, 8-9 – *“And I said, ‘O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love [God keeps His covenants and does not give up on us] with those who love him and keep his commandments...Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, **9** 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.’”*

- a. Nehemiah’s prayer is shaped by what God had already said in Scripture (Torah). Prayer is joining, or continuing, the conversation with God in Scripture.<sup>5</sup>
- b. Prayer is a response to what God has already revealed about Himself in the Bible.

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<sup>5</sup> Keller: 83.

- c. It's not about believing in God, it's more about the kind of God we believe in. The kind of God that we believe in will determine the kind of prayer life we will experience.
    - 1) We've been saying since April that doctrine matters.
    - 2) What we believe about God is the most important thing about us. We need an accurate doctrine of God that is rooted in the Scriptures. What we believe about God will shape our prayers.
  - d. Because Neh is familiar with how God has revealed Himself in Scripture his prayers are shaped by what God has said about Himself.
  - e. If we are to grasp the biblical idea of prayer we must not let our feelings be at the center of our prayers. Our feelings might provoke prayer, but our feelings are not to shape our prayers. Our prayers are to be shaped by a strong and comprehensive doctrine of God.<sup>6</sup>
  - f. Do you have a compelling and accurate image of God? Neh did and he threw himself into prayer.
3. **Nehemiah prays with passionate persistence.** V. 6 – *“That I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel...”*
- a. A habit of prayer will cultivate a heart of prayer.
  - b. Neh cultivated a habit of prayer. We need to unlearn the habits of our culture and our habit of neglecting God and re-learn the habit of prayer.
  - c. Communing with God and relying on Him in prayer.
  - d. Scheduling our prayer life is critical – like everything else in our lives that needs to be scheduled.
  - e. Prayer initiative: 30:10:20...
4. **Nehemiah prays with a humble and repentant heart.** V. 6 – *“Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned.”*
- a. The reason the people of Jerusalem are in the mess they're in is because they and their *“father's house”* have sinned. We have ALL

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<sup>6</sup> Keller quoting Eugene Peterson: 56.

sinned. We've sinned against God. *"Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, So that You are justified when You speak And blameless when You judge."* --Psalm 51:4 (NASB)

- b. We have sought to find our joy, comfort, and delight in things other than you God. Sin is not primarily the violation of a rule it is the vandalism of a relationship.<sup>7</sup>
- c. **\*\***To effectively deal with the brokenness outside of us we need to humbly deal with the brokenness inside of us – by regularly applying the gospel to our lives. (We never outgrow our need for the gospel.)
- d. What is the gospel? It is knowing that we cannot appease God. Only perfection can appease God. That is why Jesus came. Christianity is NOT about trying to appease God (again, Jesus did that). Christianity is seeking to please God out of joy for what God has (already) done in Christ.

**5. Nehemiah prays for success with an acknowledged dependence on God.**

V. 11 – *"O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man..."*

- a. I've heard a lot of pastors over the years promise their congregations that God wants them to be successful. While there is truth in that statement, I've heard things like, "Just believe and receive," or "You just do your best and God will do the rest."
- b. We need to see that success is the fruit, not the goal. What's the goal? To love God supremely and to love people completely (i.e., The Great Commandment).
- c. In every church I've ever pastored I've come to a dark night (season) of the soul<sup>8</sup> where the reality of the need is WAY beyond my ability. God wants us to depend on Him for the things that only He can do.
- d. What God wants to do in your life -- and in the life of KHC is WAY beyond our ability or capacity to accomplish.

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<sup>7</sup> J.R. Vasser.

<sup>8</sup> *Dark Night of the Soul* is the title of a poem written by 16th-century Spanish poet and Catholic John of the Cross. It is a description of the soul's journey from "dark night" to "divine union" with God.

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- e. God wants us to come to Him, as Neh did, in desperate dependence on God for success. We want things to happen around here that NO ONE can take credit for.
- f. *“Grant [me] mercy in the sight of this man.”* Nehemiah knows that, as powerful as Artaxerxes is, he still just a man. When God becomes big to us people and problems become small.
- g. *“Be imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”* --Hebrews 6:12

C. The Bible is full of everyday people who trusted in a big God and saw amazing promises fulfilled. Nehemiah is one of those guys.

### III. CONCLUSION

#### A. Five Prayers For Good Bible Reading

1. God open My Eyes to Wonder: *“Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Your law.”* --Psalms 119: 18
2. God have Mercy on me: *“And he [Bartimaeus] called out, saying, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’”* --Luke 18:38
3. God open my eyes to Jesus and the beauty of the gospel throughout the Bible: *“Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He [Jesus] explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.”* --Luke 24:27
4. God make me a doer of your word: *“But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.”* --James 1:22
5. God, “draw me after you that we might run together!” -- Song of Solomon 1:4a



## **P.A.S.S. Questions For KHC Life Group Leaders**

**Sermon Dates:** Jan 30-31, 2016

**Sermon Title:** The Prayer Life of a Leader

**Sermon Passage:** Nehemiah 1:4-11

**P** - Participation (get everyone involved in the dialog)

1. What is the first thing you typically do when faced with a problem?

**A** - Application (makes it personal)

2. Grieving well is being willing to feel loss and take it to God, knowing that there is nothing we suffer that God has not suffered. Do you grieve well or do you tend to "stuff" your pain and sorrow?
3. Based on Nehemiah's prayer, how do we as a church need to respond? How do you need to respond?

**S** - Scripture (thinking biblically is a learned behavior! :-)

4. What does Nehemiah's prayer indicate about his relationship with God?
5. Nehemiah confesses his sin and his people's sin. Why is it important to do both?

**S** – Sharing (aim for a time of honest reflection, authenticity, and transparency in a safe atmosphere modeled by you). [Choose one of the following as a final dialogue question.]

6. When you consider that Nehemiah points us to Jesus, what do you learn about Jesus, what do you learn about Jesus from chapter one?
7. Nehemiah knew God through the Scriptures and was confident that God would do what He said He would do. What is your current level of confidence?