

Sermon Outline

“Prayer and Action”

Nehemiah 1:4-11; 2:1-8 - Joshua Harris – February 6, 2011

Main Idea: Like Nehemiah, we must be a people who pray and act ... in that order.

Introduction

1. In 445 BC, the Persian Empire was the world’s great super-power. It’s borders stretched from Egypt to India. Among the conquered peoples that lived under Persian rule were the Jews. Because of their disobedience and faithlessness, the people of God had been defeated and scattered from their homeland. After years in exile, some returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the Temple (see Ezra). But the ongoing work of rebuilding the walls of the city stopped. From a human perspective, the work of God seemed to be at a standstill.
2. Chapter 1 of Nehemiah can be summed up with the word “prayer.” We meet Nehemiah on the day he learned that the walls of Jerusalem are still in ruins and its gates burned with fire. He responded with immediate, heartfelt, persistent *prayer*.
3. Chapter 2 can be summed up with the word “action.” It records the decisive and forceful action taken by Nehemiah to begin the rebuilding project.

Pray for the Impossible (Nehemiah 1:4-11)

1. Nehemiah was bringing an incredible request to God – the rebuilding of the walls. King Artaxerxes, Nehemiah’s employer and king, had ordered the construction on the wall of Jerusalem to stop. For Nehemiah to approach the King and request help for his people meant asking him to reverse his own policy. Even more, it meant risking the King’s suspicion over Nehemiah’s true loyalty and possible death.
2. Nehemiah felt powerless in this situation. But his first response was to fast and pray. He prayed for the impossible. Nehemiah threw himself on the mercy of God and was ceaseless in his petitions. Verse 4 says he “continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.”

With so much modern emphasis on joy and triumph in the Christian life, large numbers of believers have seldom or never fasted with prayer. Fasting is a refusal to be distracted from what we are requesting of God. It is an expression of wholehearted engagement with God concerning the subject of our petitions from his gracious hand.

Both Old and New Testament point us to *fasting* and prayer. In Mark 9 our Lord Jesus’ disciples had failed to cast a demon out of a child. Jesus saved the lad from his dreadful bondage. When his disciple asked, ‘Why could we not cast

Sermon Outline

it out?' (Mark 9:28), 'He said to them, "This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting"' (Mark 9:29, NKJV). There are oppositions from powers of darkness, there are crushing defeats when we fall into sin, and there are family crises, none of which will give way to anything less than prayer and fasting! The gates of heaven must be stormed ardently. Damages by Satan's activity must be undone by diligence and painful effort.

Jesus launched his ministry with extraordinary fasting (Matt. 4). The early church launched Gentile missions with fasting (Acts 13:3). Paul conducted his ministry with frequent fastings (2 Cor. 6:5; 11:27).

Do you at this time experience heavy responsibilities, heavy trials, or heavy guilt for recent sin? Have you fasted and prayed in connection with these difficulties? David did so, in faith, believing in the grace of God. His grace does not remove responsibility from us. Those who trust in God's grace must labor by fasting and prayer. An inability to enter such labor suggests a weak faith in the mercy of God. —Walter J. Chantry

3. If we would be people who see God overthrow the works of darkness and advance his kingdom in ways that seem humanly impossible, there must be a *wholehearted engagement*—a refusal to be distracted, and a total reliance on God's mercy that expresses itself in persistent, passionate, unrelenting petition before God.

Pray and Be Ready For Action (Nehemiah 1:11)

1. Faith-filled prayer is not at odds with human action. We need both. Nehemiah prayed, "... give success to your servant today." He was asking God to use him and he was looking for an immediate opportunity. That's prayer and readiness for action.
2. But God didn't answer Nehemiah immediately. For four months, Nehemiah prayed and asked, "Lord, give me success today." Nehemiah had to wait patiently on the Lord's perfect timing.
 - a. We should not stop praying because God hasn't answered prayer after a day, a week or even a month. We might have to pray for four months or four years or forty years. What this story teaches us is that *in an instant* God can transform a situation that we thought was unchangeable.

Pray and Plan Diligently (Nehemiah 2:1-8)

1. When the king responds with the most amazing question in verse 4: "So what are you requesting?" Nehemiah offered up a silent prayer asking for the Lord's help, and then he answered the king.

Sermon Outline

2. The way in which Nehemiah answered tells us something: even as he prayed he had planned and prepared for this moment. He not only had the courage to make a bold request but he also had a specific and clear plan to present to the King.
 - a. Prayer and reliance on God doesn't negate the importance of tactful speech, careful planning and wise strategy. Nehemiah's words were winsome and succinct. He avoided mentioning Jerusalem by name or stirring up the bad associations with the city. And then he asked for letters to ensure safe travel and to secure the timber needed for the building work.
3. Sometimes we over-spiritualize the work necessary to advance God's cause. Nehemiah doesn't fall prey to the erroneous notion that being a person of faith means you don't need to plan and prepare. He had already thought through what he needed to accomplish the task.
4. It is important to note that all of Nehemiah's training, study and cultivated skill was used in this moment for God's glory. He had gained the role of cupbearer by his hard work and faithfulness. Our work is a form of worship. Our integrity, skill and labor bring glory to God. And if we are faithful and diligent, God can position us to serve him in mighty ways.

Conclusion

1. Nehemiah's story should comfort us: God is sovereign over every sphere of our lives—our job, our employer, our government, our families, the church, etc. And the Lord can move the heart of a man like Nehemiah to pray for his priorities at just the right time.
2. Nehemiah's story should also challenge us. Does the welfare of the church and the advance of God's purposes in his church grip our hearts? Do we love God's glory in the gospel of Jesus Christ so much that we weep when it's hindered? Do we long to see Jesus made famous so much that we're willing to fast and pray? Do we see our gifts and abilities—even our position at our job—as part of God's bigger purpose to advance his glory? And are we willing to take risks to be used for God's mission? Are we willing to not only pray but offer ourselves for God's purpose?

Fellowship Starters

1. Josh shared with us that Nehemiah prayed for the impossible. What is on your list of impossible prayer requests?
2. Josh shared that Nehemiah prayed for four or five months before the Lord answered his prayer to present his request to the king. What makes it difficult to persevere in prayer for an extended period of time? How can knowledge of God's character grow your faith to persevere in prayer?

Sermon Outline

3. How has the Lord used fasting and prayer in your life to advance his kingdom? Is this a discipline you practice regularly or one in which you desire to grow?
4. Josh shared that faith-filled prayer is not at odds with action. What can you do now to prepare to take action, to speak or to go when the Lord opens a door?
5. Does the welfare of the church and the advance of God's purposes in the church and the world grip your heart like it gripped Nehemiah's? If not, what might be hindering your wholehearted engagement?

Sermon Outline

Sermon Outline