The Power of Prayerful Leadership Memory Verse: Proverbs 16:3

Jan 13th, 2024 Scripture Reading: Hebrews 10:19-24

SLIDE 1: TITLE

 Today we are going to pick up with Nehemiah. We were introduced to him last week. He was born to Jewish parents in exile in Persia. He lived and served as the cupbearer to King Aretxerxes. Due to his role, Nehemiah spent a lot of time with the king and was a trusted servant. As far as we can tell, it seems as though they had hit if off pretty well. There was some mutual respect shared between them.

 While serving in this position, messengers come with some bad news about Jerusalem, the hometown Nehemiah had never known. But there was reason to hope! The Temple had been rebuilt and some progress had been made to reestablish Jerusalem. However, King Artaxerxes was advised to put a stop to any more progress. So the Jews were forced to cease and desist and some time after, the progress that had been made was undone by the locals who did not want to see Jerusalem be established. This is the report that comes to Nehemiah. All hope was dashed. Jerusalem had been burned, it was in ruins, and Nehemiah responds in mourning. He knows that this is not the way things should be. But in addition to tears, Nehemiah also turns to God in prayer.

 I love when Scripture gives us an example of prayer. It just seems to be the best way to learn something. In our house, we divvy up the chores on a weekly basis. So one kid has bathrooms for the week and one kid has, what we call, Phin duty, in which they have to keep Phineas occupied, and one of the jobs is kitchen duty. And depending on the day, kitchen duty can be a pretty fun chore, because the kid’s have chance to help make dinner. My wife is usually the one doing the cooking…the nights I’m in charge involve pulling out a lot of frozen food and warming it up, but when mom is making dinner, the kids get a real chance to learn how to cook. They get a hands-on experience, and they are able to learn by example: how to measure out ingredients, how to tell when something is done, how to clean up as you go… Not only do they get to benefit from the example of their mom, but they also benefit from the knowledge of those who taught their mom. Just the other day, Tracy was making a pie crust and I heard her say, “This is how my mom does it.” That knowledge passes down to the next generation.

Cooking is one thing…there is clearly a wrong way to do it, and the reaction of the family around the dinner table can be a good indicator that something when wrong along the way. Prayer is not so cut and dried. Is there a wrong way to pray?

**SLIDE 2: Is there a wrong way to pray?**

 As a pastor, I am inclined to tell people that there is no such thing as a bad prayer. I figure, any communication with God is better than none. But maybe that is so broad as to not be helpful. If there are good prayers and bad prayers, how would we know? The bible provides many examples of prayer for us to model, the Lord’s prayer being the primary one. But, in our day to day, is not as if God sends us instant feedback on how we could improve upon our prayers. Maybe we ought to say there are good prayers and there are better prayers. However we might land in this discussion, we can say, it is nice to have an example that shows us how it is done.

As Nehemiah hears this heartbreaking news, he weeps and fasts, and he prays. I am going to read through his prayer here and then we will look at some things that we can pull out. Nehemiah 1:5-11 READ.

**SLIDE 3-5: Nehemiah 1:5-11**

Nehemiah begins simply with words of adoration. He acknowledges that God is great and awesome, that he is faithful to keep his promises. And on the surface, it might seem silly to tell God who God is, but adoration is a crucial aspect of prayer. It is not because we need to butter God up before we ask him for something, but the exact opposite. We need the reminder. We need to be clear about who it is that we are dealing with. We need to know that this great and awesome, faithful God is listening to us as we speak to him. This adoration piece, it’s for our sake.

Nehemiah moves right from adoring God to confessing. “I confess the sins of the people of Israel, which we have committed against you.”

**SLIDE 6: “I confess the sins of the people of Israel, which we have committed against you.”**

I confess the sins we have committed. Nehemiah lumps himself in with the Israelites. He knows the story. He understands why they are currently in the mess that they are in. But he is not going to beat around the bush. He is up front and clear about the fact that his people have lived unfaithfully to God’s commandments. When is the last time you confessed on behalf of other people? That seems like a strange thing to do. We are much more apt to pin the blame on someone else, not share the blame. But Nehemiah considers himself as one among his own people, a sinner in need of restoration. And he is willing to stand before God as guilty among them.

Next, Nehemiah turns to the promises he knows to be true, promises God himself has made in the past. “Remember, Lord, what you told Moses: If you disobey, you will be scattered…well, we got that part.

**SLIDE 7: “Remember, Lord, what you told Moses: If you disobey, you will be scattered…**

We know that part all too well, but I know that is not the end of the story. You also said, if you return to me and actually obey, I will gather you again. Do that part now Lord, after all, these are your people, you picked them and you redeemed them. Restore us to proper relationship with you.”

And then Nehemiah concludes with sort of a practical real time request, “Give me success and favor with the king. I have absolutely no business asking for some time off to go rebuild another city, a place he has already given permission to be destroyed…Why he should he care in the slightest?…but Lord, I ask you for favor in this situation anyway.”

One thing to note here is that this prayer is sort of an amalgam, or a summary of what Nehemiah would have prayed over the course of about four months. We see he hears the bad news in the month of Kislev, which is the ninth month, and then in chapter two, we see he speaks with the king in Nisan, the first month. So Nehemiah is engaged in prayer for this specific request for about four months. So what we have just read in these verses is encapsulating Nehemiah’s overall plea. Now I suppose it could be that he repeated these very words every day for four months, but however we might imagine Nehemiah prayed his prayers, we can easily conclude that he was persistent. He was stubborn in his prayer. And let me tell you, to persist in prayer, to remain stubborn is not easy. When we pray, we want results, we want answers and sooner is always better than later, at least from our perspective.

Throughout the last year, our PAX teams have been praying for various requests, and church events. Things come on and off the prayer list, but one thing that has stayed on the list since we started PAX teams, was a request for the Holy Spirit to move in our services. That is something I think we all want to see. We all want to come to church expecting to experience the effects of the Holy Spirit. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, than you know you need the Holy Spirit, and so our prayer has been a plea for the Spirit to come and move among us. What more can we do? We can continue to persist. We can continue to have faith that God will answer our prayer. We can keep our eyes open for the ways in which he does answer that prayer, even if it is not in the ways we might expect it. So prayer becomes for us an active waiting. We wait on the Lord to move while we remain active in prayer. We don’t sit and twiddle our thumbs. We don’t kill time paging through a magazine. We are actively laboring in prayer! So I want to encourage you all to join up with a PAX team, or start up a PAX team. They can meet here or in a home or even meet over Zoom. Just come and talk to me and we can get another one going. There is some info on the calendar page in your bulletin.

Our call is simply to be active in prayer and Nehemiah did just that. He has this strong desire to head back home and repair that damage done. He wanted to leave yesterday, but he continues in his role, serving the king in Susa. He waits, while actively praying, for God’s timing. And sure enough four month later, Nehemiah sees his prayer get answered. Chapter 2 verse 2:

**SLIDE 8: “Why do you seem sad? Since you aren’t sick, you must have a broken heart.”**

The king asked me, “Why do you seem sad? Since you aren’t sick, you must have a broken heart.” I was very afraid, and replied, “May the king live forever! Why shouldn’t I seem sad when the city, the place of my family’s graves, is in ruins and its gates destroyed by fire?” The king asked, “What is it that you need?” I prayed to the God of heaven and replied…

 Interesting here, we don’t want to miss that the narrative includes this little detail, another example to us of Nehemiah offering up a prayer, but this prayer is instantaneous, it is not spoken aloud, it is simply a plea to God right in the midst of another conversation. As stated, Nehemiah is feeling afraid to be talking to the king about his heart’s desire in the first place, but Nehemiah allows that anxiety to drive him to pray, even while the conversation with the kings goes on. So in response to the question, “What is it that you need?” Nehemiah throws up a prayer and answers the king honestly, and in faith that God will provide.

 Nehemiah says in verse five: “If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor with you, please send me to Judah, to the city of my family’s graves so that I may rebuild it.”

 Well, the King is agreeable, he provides Nehemiah all the time off he needs, he even provides some official letters so that Nehemiah can get through all the red tape of those who are in charge over in Judea. He also provides him with some building materials. The king seems more than willing to be helpful!

 Nehemiah sums it all up in verse eight, “The king gave me what I asked, for the gracious power of my God was with me.”

**SLIDE 9: “The king gave me what I asked, for the gracious power of my God was with me.”**

 In the rest of the chapter then, Nehemiah makes his way to Jerusalem, and after a few days there he takes a night ride and he travels around the ruined wall seeing for himself the situation. But we can notice in this section, though Nehemiah is now face to face with the destruction, and loss and reproach, Nehemiah does not continue to mourn or weep…now it was time for action. God had provided Nehemiah with this opportunity, and he was not going to let it pass by. Nehemiah gathers together the small remnant of Jews remaining in Jerusalem, and he tells them his story. How God had given him favor and how he had a mission to accomplish. And the people are with him! They shout together in verse 18, “Let’s start rebuilding!” and they eagerly began the work.

 Now, here we have a small population of beaten down, dejected, defeated people. They live under constant threats from the nations surrounding them, all they see every day are the ruins of something that was once great…yet here they are now, all of a sudden gung-ho about rebuilding? How? Why? What changed? And the answer is, they had someone who came along to give them vision. Nehemiah shows up, and yes, he looks at the burned ruins of a city, but that is not what he sees. He sees repaired walls, he sees restoration. And the vision speaks to the heart of the people. That is what they all want to see, but there is just too much reality in the way. The walls are broken down and that is just the way it is. I wish it was not that way, but it is. We just have to deal with that fact. But Nehemiah, with his vision for restoration, says, let’s change that fact! We can fix this! It’s a big job and it’ll take some doing, but, if God is with us, I believe it is possible!

**SLIDE 10: but, if God is with us, I believe it is possible!**

 So as a leader, as a man of God, Nehemiah is willing to see beyond the ruins. He lives with God’s vision. Now, you and I don’t have walls to rebuild…we don’t come from cities and hometowns that depend on wall for safety…we don’t live under the thumb of a foreign power…but despite that, there are areas in our life that need to be restored.

 We can look around and see people in need, people within this very church, who could use a visit or some sort of helping hand. People who could use a little restoration in their lives. As we look around at the people gathered here today, as we think about those who are not here, can we see them with God’s vision? Can we see their burdens as our own? Can we be moved from sorrow to action just as Nehemiah was?

 Each of us are embedded in relationships…and sometimes those relationships break down and diminish, just like an old wall. This is especially true with family. We don’t get to choose our family, we are just born into it, and often when we gather with family the best we can do is ignore some of them. We congratulate ourselves on being able to get through the event, maybe the holidays, with a pasted-on smile and civil tolerance. But what if we were able to see these relationships with God’s vision? What if he sees restoration for us? Would be willing to put in the effort it takes to rebuild those relationships?

 And finally, as we should always be asking, where are we at with God? How is our relationship with him? We can echo Nehemiah’s prayer when it comes to failing to follow God’s ways. We are all guilty of falling short. We all deserve exile. But instead of accepting the state of things as they are, we can look to the cross, the place where God came down to be with us, the place where Jesus died for us, the place where restoration was made. If we could see with God’s vision we would know that God desires that all people would be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth, as we read in 1 Timothy. Or even as we see throughout the Old Testament, Ezekiel 18:23, God asks, “Do I take any pleasure over the death of the wicked? Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?” The Father sent his Son so that our relationship with him might be restored. That’s what our scripture reading today was all about. What was broken down is now repaired. And we have been given a call now to live with God’s vision and toil and labor and work and pray for the restoration of others as well.

 It’s not easy to live with God’s vision in a world that is so focused on the here and now, a world that only looks at high probabilities and sure things. But faith goes well beyond what these human eyes can see. Yes, like Nehemiah, we can see destruction, we can see brokenness, now what is our response? May we take up his word in our hands, may we take up prayer in our hearts and may we see with God’s vision, and get to the work of restoration. Amen.