

Prayer at Work
Nehemiah 1:1-2:8
Summer Sermon Series on Prayer
Kenwood Baptist Church
Pastor David Palmer
August 24, 2014

TEXT: Nehemiah 1:1-2:8

As we continue this morning in our summer series on prayer, let us turn our attention to the Word of God. We look specifically at Prayer at Work. Work is a significant part of our lives.



Consider the following statistics: The average person spends 90,000 hours of their lifetime at work, yet 25% of US employees say that their work is their main source of stress; 40% say their job is extremely stressful; 25% of people check into work hourly, even on vacation; 64% of Americans canceled their vacations last year, and one third did it for work-related reasons. Work is a major part of our lives, and yet, for many of us, there is a

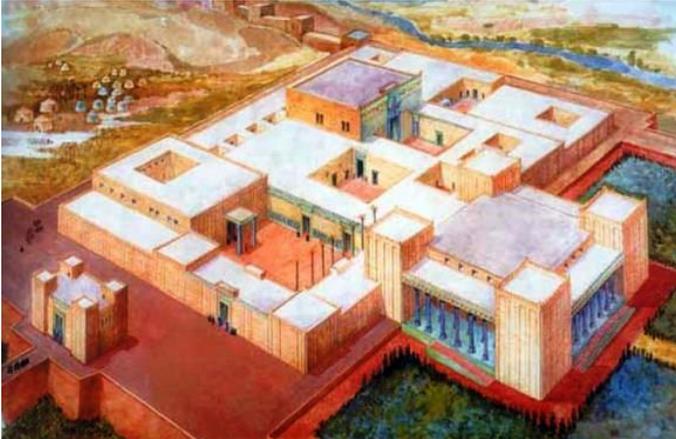
great divide between our walk with Christ and our workplace day.

Our text this morning forges a profound connection between our work and our worship. I want to clear up one common misperception before we look at Nehemiah, and that is that work is **not** part of the curse. Adam and Eve were commissioned to cultivate and care for the garden of Eden even before the Fall. Their labor was to be God-honoring and meaningful. Sin does not bring work into the world; sin makes work difficult and extra challenging, and that's an important distinction. As we look at Nehemiah, we will find a way to connect our worship of the Lord with our work lives. It's a wonderfully instructive passage. In chapter 1 of Nehemiah, we will learn to pray, and then in chapter 2, we will see Nehemiah praying on the job. Let's follow this tremendous passage. Nehemiah 1:1 begins:

“The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah: In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa.”

The name Nehemiah means *the Lord Yahweh is merciful to me or kind; He is my comfort*. He is the son of Hacaliah. We don't actually know what his name means, but it has the name *Yahweh* at the end. We do know that Nehemiah was in the citadel of Susa in the month of Kislev. It is in

December, the winter time, and it is the 20th year. We will find out that this is the reign of Artaxerxes, so this is December, 445 B.C. Susa was the winter capital of the Persian kings, and so, just as a brief aside, we see the reliability of the Bible in even these very small details. If you were going to be anywhere with the King of Persia in Kislev in December, you are going to be in Susa. The summertime capital is in Persepolis. The Bible can be trusted even in these very small details. The citadel of Susa was a magnificent place. The largest, tallest columns of antiquity were there. It was a place to receive dignitaries and guests. Lavish banquets were cast by



Persian kings, and Nehemiah is there. He receives news through his brother Hanani, news about his own people, and the situation in Jerusalem and those who had been exiled. Hanani reports devastating news that those who survived the exile, the small trace that has returned, are in trouble and disgrace. The wall remains broken down; the gates still burned with fire. This is the destruction executed by Nebuchadnezzar more than 100

years earlier, and the situation is still desperate. When Nehemiah hears the news of this report, he goes to God in his distress, illustrating yet again in Scripture that when hard times come, when difficult news arrives at your doorstep, go straight to God, not away from Him. That is when you need Him the most. Nehemiah heard this, and he sat down and wept. He mourned and fasted and prayed for many days before the God of heaven, and then we are given access to the prayer of Nehemiah. It is a wonderfully instructive prayer.

In Nehemiah 1:5, he comes to God first with praise:

“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,”

He goes high up into God's glorious person. God is transcendent and sovereign; He is powerful; He is great and awesome. In light of His greatness, our problems come into scale. Yet, the God of the Scriptures is not only sovereign, not only transcendent and powerful, but He is also good. Nehemiah says: “You are not only the great and awesome God, but You are a covenant-keeping God; You are a God of steadfast love and faithfulness, and You have Your eyes upon those who love You and keep Your commands.” Nehemiah's prayer begins with praise; then he asks that God would hear him and see him. In Nehemiah 1:6a he prays:

“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, the people of Israel.”

He exalts God and praises and asks God to hear him and see him, to take notice of his situation.

Then he moves on to confession of sins in Nehemiah 1:6b-7:

"I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against You. We have acted very wickedly toward You. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws You gave Your servant Moses."

Notice that Nehemiah does not just confess the sins of Israel in general, but he confesses his own sin. He says, "I confess my sins and the sins of my father's house." In the light of God's glory and sovereign power and His holiness, your sin and mine become visible. They become visible, not that we should be condemned by them, but they become visible so that we might confess them and that God might forgive. A pastor friend of mine was overseeing a renovation project at their church. The workers had finished a large section of drywall, and they were ready to go home for the night. The pastor came by, and the workers said, "Were all done and we're leaving." The pastor took one the spotlights from the sanctuary, and he rotated the spotlight and lit up that drywall. Under the light of that spotlight, every imperfection and flaw in their work was obvious to see, and the workers stammered, "These are not natural lighting conditions. No one will see these defects with the naked eye." "But," the pastor said, "they are there!" and the workers said, "We'll fix it. We'll fix it!" You see, in the light of God's holiness and His righteousness and His glory, our sins become obvious. They are to be confessed, as Nehemiah does, not just the sins of others, but my own and my family's.

He turns then from confession to trusting God and His promises. In Nehemiah 1:8, he says, quoting Leviticus 26:33:

"Remember the instruction You gave Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations.'"

God's redemptive purposes, however, do not end with the scattering. God's redemptive purposes move forward. Nehemiah then quotes Deuteronomy 30 where God says that "after you've been scattered in judgment, then you will return to Me and obey My commands," and, in Deuteronomy 30:3, he says:

"Then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, and He will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you."

God promised: "Even if you have been exiled to the farthest horizon, I will gather you and bring you back to the place where I will cause My name to dwell." Sometimes we imagine that our sin is too great, that it's beyond the scope of God's redeeming love. Sometimes we imagine that our sin has placed us beyond the horizon, but God says, "No, even if you been scattered to the uttermost limits of the earth, I will re-gather you to Myself."

Nehemiah's prayer teaches us much about coming to God. I have learned different acronyms

for praying over the years, and I'm sure many of you have as well. I found the acronym PACT in this prayer: Praise, Ask, Confess, and Trust God for His promises. Sometimes when we come to God in prayer, we're just not sure what we're doing there. It is always right to begin with praise; ask God to hear us; confess our sins; and trust His promises. Nehemiah ends in Nehemiah 1:11 with a short prayer:

"Give your servant success today and grant him favor in the presence of this man."

Pay close attention to this prayer. As Nehemiah 1 concludes, we finally find out that Nehemiah's work is to serve as the cupbearer of the king. I don't know if cupbearers had a union in antiquity, but they were high officials. The cupbearer had a very high office in the Persian court. There are reliefs from antiquity that depict the cupbearer with close access to the king. He was responsible for the king's security. He was often a trusted advisor, and we



learn of Nehemiah's place in this society right next to the king. The Persian kings had fabulous dining ware. Their bowls were gold; their drinking glasses were gold. We have these fine examples of Persian dining ware right here in Cincinnati at the Cincinnati Art Museum. This is a gold bowl from Artaxerxes' grandfather Darius. This is an example of rhyton or drinking glass that Nehemiah held. Can you imagine how you'd feel just to lift a glass like this? It makes you feel a certain way to lift up

a gold glass with a lion coming off of it. This is a cool drinking cup, and it's in Nehemiah's hands.

We read in Nehemiah 2:1:

"In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before."

It is now spring time, the month of Nisan. Notice that that's four months later than when this narrative began. It is four months later in the 20th year of Artaxerxes, and it's the time of the Spring Festival. This is the major holiday in Iran today. Wine was brought for the king, and Nehemiah took it and gave it to the king. The Spring Festival time is a time of great celebration and joy. The Persian kings knew how to throw a banquet, and it is in the midst of this great celebration that Nehemiah cannot hold on to his grief any longer. He has been praying and fasting for four months, and everyone around him is celebrating. Everything is right with the world from the Persian point of view, and yet Nehemiah's heart is broken because his ancestral home is in ruins, and he can't hold it in. His countenance looks sad as he holds the cup to for the king. The king of Persia looks at him and says in Nehemiah 2:2:

“Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.’ I was very much afraid.”

The king of Persia demonstrates great psychological perception and says this is nothing but sadness of the heart. Nehemiah says, “I was terrified.” I believe that Nehemiah was afraid for at least three reasons:

First reason: You are required by Persian court etiquette to be cheerful in the presence of the king. When Spring Festival is going on and there is a Persian banquet, everybody's happy. It's a requirement.

Second reason: A downcast face in the midst of this banquet, especially as you hand the king the goblet, and you look down and sad, could easily be interpreted as perhaps the king shouldn't be drinking this goblet, and maybe his life is in danger.

Third reason why Nehemiah was terribly afraid: He was afraid because Artaxerxes had already issued a royal decree prohibiting the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and Nehemiah knew this was the burden of his own heart. The decree of Artaxerxes is preserved for us in the Bible in Ezra 4. Governors of trans-Euphrates had written to Artaxerxes and said: “Don't allow the rebuilding of this rebellious city.” So, Artaxerxes had written a royal edict in Ezra 4:21 saying:

“Therefore make a decree that these men be made to cease, and that this city be not rebuilt, until a decree is made by me.”

No wonder Nehemiah was terrified. Yet, rising above his fear, he told the king the burden of his heart. He let the anguish of his soul be known. He turned to the king in Nehemiah 2:3 and said:

“May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?”

Nehemiah did what we should all do in a moment like that. He said, “Oh King, may you live forever!” Remember, you always start with that. If you are walking into that big meeting with your boss, you may want to start with something like, “Oh boss, may you live forever.” It may be a good way to incline the heart of your boss, your faculty advisor, in your favor. So Nehemiah begins with “Oh King, may you live forever,” and he goes on to say, “Why should I not be sad? My ancestral home is in ruins. Its gates have been destroyed by fire.” Nehemiah makes known the weight of the world he is carrying. The King of Persia looks at Nehemiah in Nehemiah 2:4 and says to him:

“What is it you want?”

Then comes my favorite line in this passage. After the king of Persia asks him what he wants, Nehemiah records in Nehemiah 2:4b-5:

“Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king.”

If the King of Persia were to look you in the eye and ask you what you wanted, how long do you think the interval would be between his question and your reply? I'm thinking you've got a maximum of five seconds. I practiced this several times this week in my office. I got it down to 4.75 seconds: Nehemiah 1:11:

“Give your servant success today and grant him favor in the presence of this man.”

Are you willing to pray the five-second prayer of Nehemiah on the job? I've been trying it out all week, and sometimes that's how much time you have before a meeting or before a big moment just to pray: “Give Your servant success. I’m Your servant. I'm on the job. I'm in this place. My work matters to You, oh God, so would You give me success, not for my sake, but for Yours, that I would be God's man or God's woman or God's child in this situation? Would You grant me success for Your cause, and would You give me favor in the eyes of the person I'm about to meet with, whatever that meeting pertains to?”

Nehemiah prays, and he answers the king in Nehemiah 2:5:

“If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it.”

It's an astonishing request. He's asking the king for a leave of absence from his high position in the court. He is asking the king to overturn a decree that he has already issued. Can't you imagine that Nehemiah's heart is pounding? That's a great place to be when you step way beyond your own sufficiency and you are risking everything with God's help and your heart is pounding. Will God answer that five-second prayer? Will Nehemiah find favor in the eyes of the king? Nehemiah 2:6 continues:

“Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, ‘How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?’ It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time.”

The NIV says here “the queen was there.” The word used here is actually the word for *concubine*, so it is probably one of his favorite concubines there, and the king pauses in the midst of the banquet after hearing his request and asks him, “Well, how long is it going to take? When will you be back?” Nehemiah will end up serving as the governor for 12 years. For now, he just gives him a time frame when he would be back, and he sees that God is a God who answers the five-second prayer. Notice that the five-second prayer on the job is resting on the foundation of four months of prayer in private. Don't be just a five-second prayer person only, but remember God hears that five-second prayer. The king seems inclined and willing to send him, so Nehemiah continues. He says in Nehemiah 2:7:

“If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah?”

He doesn't record the king's response, but apparently the king says something like, "Get those letters done," because Nehemiah keeps going. He asks the king for one more extra letter in Nehemiah 2: 7:

"And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?"

The term used here for the king's forest is really *paradise*, the Royal Gardens. Isn't that amazing? He is asking the king: "Would you give me the right to go; would you send me; would you give me letters to clear my path; and would you give me the main supplies that I need as well?" *Asaph* is a Hebrew name, and Asaph was probably another of the Judean exiles who had a high position in the society. His job was to be in charge of the king's forests. Just imagine the exchange between Nehemiah and Asaph when Nehemiah walks into his office and says, "Take a look at this letter. That is Artaxerxes at the bottom with an 'X.' Cut down the timber for the walls of the temple." The king grants his requests, and in Nehemiah 2:8b we read:

"And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests."

Here we find a dramatic intersection between our workplace life and our worship of Almighty God.

Let me apply this in five short ways.

Number one: View your work as a sphere of service to Christ. It is a place of spiritual transformation and formation for you. It is a place of tremendous spiritual opportunity, and I want you to see this part of your life, these 90,000 hours, as part of the sphere of holy things under the Lord.

Number two: Enter your workplace upon the foundation of private prayer. Nehemiah goes to work after a consistent daily devotional life. There was a faculty retreat at Gordon-Conwell a few years ago, and the vice president of the school was asked to give a prayer at the retreat. When he stood up to pray, he prayed for every faculty and staff person by name together with their spouse and their children by name. In the midst of that prayer, I could see that he didn't have any notes. He was using the organizational chart of the institution as a prayer guide, and all he was doing that day was something that he did regularly - pray for everyone by name. Might you enter your workplace having used your organizational chart as a personal prayer guide.

Number three: Offer to God the five-second prayer of Nehemiah: "Give your servant success and grant me favor in the sight of this person."

Number four: If God opens the door for you and for Him in your workplace, be bold.

Nehemiah says, "Would you send me to rebuild the city, and could I have letters for protection and for all the supplies I'll need?" That's bold. Nehemiah 2:9 goes on to tell us that Artaxerxes gave him army accompaniment and chariots and cavalry to escort him, and Nehemiah didn't even ask for that!

Number five: Give praise to God for the way, timing, and results of your prayers. Nehemiah takes no credit. He says the king did all of this because the good hand of God was upon him. There's a beautiful transformation of our working lives in Nehemiah 2:4. It is consistent with what we read in Colossians 3:23-24:

"Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ."

He's the One we are serving in our workplace. Are you willing to embrace the challenge of Nehemiah to connect your work with your worship of the Lord? He shows us a great way to do that. Let us pray.

Father God, we thank You this morning for the opportunity to learn more of You. We thank You, Father, that You grant the five-second prayer. We praise You, God, that You are always teaching us, always calling us close to You. I pray for every one of us this morning, that our workplace lives this week would be a place of Your presence, and that we would enter them filled up with prayer, Father. I pray that if You open the door, we would walk through it boldly, and that we would give You the credit and the praise for everything. We thank You for our jobs. We pray for those we work with, for those we report to, and those who report to us. Lord, be glorified in our workplace. Help us to be men and women of prayer even there. Lord, today we choose to follow You and to give our 'yes' to You. Lord, help us serve You in every area of our lives.

In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.