Praying to the God of Grace

Nehemiah 1 Minister Theo Ma August 30, 2020

Churches today tend to be polarized on their emphasis of prayer versus action. One side acknowledges Jesus alone can fix the root cause of suffering, so they pray and wait for Him but neglect participating in His work in the world. The other side focuses so much on changing the world that they neglect the gospel that should be the distinguishing characteristic and foundation of their work. Nehemiah exemplifies the intersection between prayer and action. He prays and acts because he understands that God is sovereign but we also have responsibility. God wants to work through His people, and our work is meaningful because it's God's work. Moses and Solomon express this same idea in Psalm 90:17 and Psalm 127:1. We must both pray and act with faith and conviction. This applies not only to social issues, but also to our families, our own lives, and our hearts. We must trust and pray for God to work in us and through us, but we must also take part in His work, with action grounded in faith, because we know Him, share His heart, and desire to do His will.

Nehemiah 1 focuses on petition, asking God for something in prayer. We see here how Nehemiah petitions the gracious God in faith. The first exemplary aspect of Nehemiah's petition is that it comes from knowing God personally. In v. 5 he uses God's personal name Yahweh. He also reflects on how great and awesome God is. This isn't flattery, but rather it reminds himself that God is worth praying to because He can make a difference. Nehemiah also recognizes that God keeps His covenant with steadfast love. The word used here for love means goodness, loyalty, and faithfulness, everything we want in a relationship. We have a relationship with God as Israel does. He knows us and He cares (Psalm 139, Matthew 10:30). This is all the more reason to pray to God, because He not only is powerful enough to help, but He also loves us enough to act on our behalf. In vv.8-9 Nehemiah acknowledges God's faithfulness even when His people are faithless. He quotes from Deuteronomy 30:1-5, where through Moses, God predicts Israel's disobedience and exile, but also their restoration and repentance. He recognizes that God is loving and faithful even when we are disobedient. So we can always turn to Him. The more you know God, the more reason you have to pray to Him. In elementary school there was a teacher that used to intimidate us, but when I had him as my teacher, I found out he was actually

a nice guy, and was no longer afraid to approach him. So it is with God. The more you know Him, the closer you will want to be to Him.

The second aspect of Nehemiah's prayer is that he seeks God earnestly. In v. 4 when he learns of the state of Jerusalem, he weeps, mourns, and fasts. It's been 140 years since the fall of Jerusalem, yet this is a wound so deep that it's hard for any Israelite to get over. Nehemiah deals with this pain by lamenting, not alone but in God's presence. He entrusts his grief to God, with all earnestness. This earnestness is expressed in fasting, which is a sincere accompaniment, an exclamation point, to urgent prayer, just like when the Ninevites fasted after Jonah's warning. Fasting isn't a way to gain transactional leverage with God, like the self-inflicted wounds of the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings. God is already listening. Fasting is more for us than for Him. It creates a physical hunger and longing that intensifies the yearning of our soul, which we bring to God. We also see Nehemiah's persistence in fasting for days. It reflects how deeply he longs for what he's praying for and his continuing trust in God to answer. Let's not pray superficial prayers, but with sincerity let us earnestly lift up everything to God in persistent prayer, whether through fasting or however else we express the urgency of our petition.

Finally, Nehemiah petitions God humbly (vv. 6-11). He doesn't even make his request until the end of his prayer, but spends most of it confessing sin. Again, this isn't for leverage, but rather it's a way to have a right relationship with God. How can we ask anything of God without at least acknowledging how we have sinned against Him? It's like asking my wife to cook dinner if I had never seemed to care about her needs before. Jesus did pay for our sin, but we shouldn't pray with the presumptuous attitude that our sin no longer matters to God. It matters to Him just as much as what we are praying for, and in a proper relationship we should care about what He cares about. He takes care of our sin, but we must humbly lift it up to Him. But in addition to sin, there is also grace (v. 10). We are redeemed as Israel was, saved by grace through faith. This should humble us all the more. Even prayer isn't an obligation, but rather it's privileged access to God, which we don't deserve but was given through grace. He doesn't tire of our petitions, but cares about our needs. So let our actions have a foundation of humble and earnest prayer to the God we know personally.