

Using God's Word to Pray

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[0 : 00] Well, it's a great delight to be with you. It's been more fun than sitting at home, I can tell you. And I'm feeling much better tonight. But I do have just a little bit of a cold left. So if you'd like a cold, then we'll have a chat later on and I'll breathe over you and we'll see what happens.

Thank you, Jenny, for that wonderful reading. The setting for Nehemiah chapter 1 is that the people have been in exile in Babylon and some of them have returned to Jerusalem, but the return is not going very well.

When you read those chapters 40 following from Isaiah, you think that the return from exile will be a wonderful and exciting and victorious experience.

But it wasn't quite like that. Not many returned first off and they did find Jerusalem in a mess and the temple, of course, destroyed. And the rebuilding program for the city walls and for the temple was complicated.

The Persian governor had given them good supplies, but their neighbors were being unfriendly. You might have had an experience like that with a building program with unfriendly neighbors.

[1 : 27] And Nehemiah, who is in one of the Persian cities, Susa, hears about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile and about Jerusalem.

And as we heard, those who survived the exile and are back in province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down.

Its gates have been burned with fire. When I heard these things, Nehemiah says, I sat down and wept.

For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

And I think what we have in the prayer, which Jenny read out, is if you like a summary of his mourning and fasting and praying.

[2 : 30] You know how it is that often you need to pray to find out what you need to pray. You need to start putting it into words and then you can finally express what you really want to say to God.

And I think that Nehemiah's prayer is one which was, it's kind of based in the scriptures. It's based on the scriptures and based in the scriptures.

But it also comes out of his days of sitting and fasting and waiting on God and praying. And how wonderful, of course, that that was his first reaction.

Sometimes people come to talk to me and they say, I've got a problem and I thought you might be able to help. So my response is always, have you prayed about this?

And sometimes people unwisely say, well, no, I thought I'd ask you first. And I think that is not a very good policy, really, to ask Peter Adam first or indeed anybody else.

[3 : 49] But it's interesting, isn't it, how it's more easy to pour out our grief and our great desires to other people than it is to bring those desires and griefs to God.

But God should be the first person to whom we turn for anything and particularly when things go wrong.

And things have gone wrong, not just for Nehemiah, but, of course, for God's people. Now, we have the prayer in the notes that have been handed out.

So please find that prayer. It's the left hand column. I want you to notice that the prayer begins by addressing God, as you might expect.

But notice the words that Nehemiah uses to address God. Now, it's worth thinking who we're talking to when we're talking to God.

[5 : 24] And we can learn from Nehemiah how wise it is to think of the nature and character of God and the words of God and the actions of God which are appropriate to this prayer.

So, if you're part of God's people, they're in great need, then, of course, the first thing you'll do is to address a powerful God.

Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God. But what about the next bit? Who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments?

That's saying, well, it's not just that you are a great and awesome God, but you do keep your covenant of love with those who love you and keep your commandments.

So, he's reminding himself, and as it were, reminding of God, that God is a powerful God and a loving and a faithful God.

[6 : 34] Now, the bigger God you believe in, the more confident your prayer will be. Because, actually, confidence in prayer doesn't come from our confidence.

It comes from the greatness of God. If you have a feeble God, and many people in the world today have a feeble God, then, no matter how much you pray, how fervently you pray, it won't do much good.

A friend of mine was brought up with a monkey God. Well, monkeys are immensely attractive creatures, mostly, but they're not tremendously powerful.

If you want a powerful animal, an ape, I think, might be more appropriate than a monkey. One of those apes, that's right.

But pray as hard as you like to a weak God, well, nothing much will happen. But praying to a Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, is the right thing to do, and the one who keeps his covenant of love.

[7 : 43] And here's the prayer. Let your ear be attentive. That is, please hear, and your eyes open. That is, please be alert to the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night.

This is the prayer he's been praying for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you.

We have acted very wickedly against you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees, and laws you gave your servant Moses. And that's exactly the reason. He's named the reason why the people were sent off to exile, because they hadn't kept the law of Moses.

He's naming the reason why Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians. Why did God let that happen? Because they had not kept the law of Moses. Why was the temple destroyed?

Because they had not kept the law of Moses. It wasn't just wicked Babylonians. It was the judgment of God. So how wonderful to find in verses 5 to 7 a big view of God, a trust in God's love, a prayer on Nehemiah's own behalf and also for the whole nation, and a confession that we have acted wickedly toward you.

[9 : 12] We have not obeyed the commands, decrees, and laws you gave your servant Moses. Now, the bits that are underlined, what I've done is try to show you in the second column where these words come from.

So, the Lord your God is a great and awesome God comes from Deuteronomy 7.21. The faithful God who keeps his covenant of love, Deuteronomy 7.9.

Paul Barker would be pleased, wouldn't he, all this Deuteronomy? But also in the third column I have, well, what Nehemiah is appealing to is to God's words and his character.

God reveals himself by his words and explains to the people how they should live through his words. But also we find from the words of God the very character of God because God explains who he is, the Lord, the Lord, a great and mighty God.

And he's appealing to God's words and his saving works. That is, he is the faithful God who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments.

[10 : 22] If nothing else, learn tonight that it's useful to know your Bible well, because if you know your Bible well, that will give you words to pray to God.

The better you know your Bible, the richer your prayers will be. Of course, if you're just a new Christian, you don't know your Bible well. Well, God loves the way you pray.

You don't know all those Bible terms and so on, but you just say what's on your heart and God loves hearing your heart. But if you've been a Christian for a while and if you've been reading your Bible for a while, and if you go to a church, I hope you do, where the Bible is respected and loved and taught and preached and proclaimed and explained, and where we feed on the scriptures day by day, and where you meet other Christians who are grappling with the Bible itself and talking about it, and where people share the verse that struck them this morning, and where you're learning from your fellow Christians more and more about the Bible, then the richer your prayers will become.

And perhaps during that time that Nehemiah was mourning and fasting and praying, he was reflecting on the scriptures and thinking what scriptures are appropriate for our situation.

And then he asks God to remember. I'm sure God does remember what he said to Moses, but when Nehemiah says, remember, he's saying, put this into practice.

[12 : 12] Please act this way according to the promise that you made to Moses so many years ago. There it is in verses 8 and 9 of Ezra 1.

If you're unfaithful, I'll scatter you among the nations. Well, that's just happened. They have been scattered. The northern kingdom to Assyria and the southern kingdom to Babylon, which has now been captured by the Persians.

If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you. God promised to do it, and he did it. But verse 9 is the good news. If you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I've chosen as a dwelling for my name.

Now, I was very interested to discover when I looked at the cross references, that is the references in Deuteronomy, that actually the words aren't quoted exactly, but the message is the same.

So, Deuteronomy 4 and 30, if you then become corrupt and make any kind of idol, doing evil in the eyes of the Lord your God, this is the warning given generations before through Moses, and arousing his anger, the Lord will scatter you among the peoples.

[13 : 31] Well, that's the exile happened. But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you'll find him if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul. So, what Nehemiah is doing is quoting God's words.

It's the kind of thing children do with excellent memories. You said last week that if we were good for six days, we could have an ice cream on Wednesday.

Phew! You really have to hand over the ice cream, don't you? Even though you've forgotten what you said, those little minds, they remember promises about food, don't they?

Indeed, it even happens with big minds. So, what Nehemiah is doing is reminding God of what he said, not because God has forgotten, but because he wants God to do what he's promised to do.

And then notice in the last section, last few verses, 10 and 11, he's talked about who God is and what God has done.

[14 : 45] Now, what about the people whom Nehemiah represents? They're your servants, here's the important thing, and your people whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand.

If you have a pen or a pencil, something as antiquated as that, I'd put a little circle around the your servants, your people, you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand.

So, we know who God is now. Who are the people who are coming to God? The answer is, God's people are coming to God. God's family is coming to God.

God's children are coming to God through the words of Nehemiah. For, we read in Exodus 19, although God says, although the whole earth is mine, you, that is, God's people, will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

And then, when we read about God's great strength and mighty hand in verse 10 of Nehemiah chapter 1, that is, of course, a reference to the deliverance from Egypt when God rescued his people with his right hand.

[16 : 06] Exodus 9, you stretch out your right hand, the earth swallows your enemies. In your unfailing love, you'll lead your people whom you have redeemed in your strength. You'll guide them to your holy dwelling.

So it was the hand of God which brought God's people out of Egypt. It was the hand of God which brought God's people all the way through the wilderness for 40 years, and it was the hand of God who placed them in the land he had promised so long ago to Abraham.

God had done it. And Nehemiah is saying, do it again.

You rescued your people powerfully from Egypt. You brought them into the promised land and you made them stable and secure and prosperous there.

So please, God, do it again. You've done it before. You can do it again. They're your people, your servants. You redeemed them by your great strength and your mighty hand.

[17 : 14] And so, Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this, your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name.

If you find yourself doubting God's infinite patience and care and love for you, just remind him of who you are.

Dear Heavenly Father, I am your child. Dear Heavenly Father, you've adopted me into your family through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear Heavenly Father, because you've adopted me into your family, you've put your Holy Spirit to live within me. That's what Nehemiah's doing.

He's saying, well, we're your people. We haven't got another God. You're the only God we've got. And we can say the same thing to God. Well, I'm your person.

[18 : 27] You sent your Son to be my Saviour. You forgave my sins. You gave me eternal life. You poured your Holy Spirit into me. You gave me joy in my salvation.

You've shaped my life. I belong to you, Lord. So, please care for me and provide for me. It's not trying to coerce God.

It's rejoicing in what God has done, isn't it? When we say to God what he's done for us, we're praising him. We're worshipping him. We're adoring him.

We're thanking him for what he has done for us. Well, you might remember that Nehemiah was cupbearer to the king.

That was quite a responsible job, not only because you weren't allowed to spill any of it, but because if somebody was trying to poison the king, well, you would take the first sip and if you dropped dead, the king would say, I think I'll have another glass of whatever it is that doesn't look very healthy.

[19 : 37] So, that was the job, to lay down your life for the king. And remarkably, as we read in Nehemiah chapter 2, Nehemiah takes the wine into the presence of King Artaxerxes.

He's looking a bit sad, which is not a very polite thing to do in the presence of royalty, if you ever meet anybody who's royal. Anyway, he gets away with it.

Artaxerxes asks what is wrong, then asks him what he wants, and here's his request in Nehemiah chapter 2.

If it pleases the king, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it. And, as you may remember, Artaxerxes grants Nehemiah's request, Nehemiah heads off.

It's quite a big change of job from being a cupbearer to being a mason, but anyway, that's his job to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. And next time you have a building campaign, I imagine Andrew will take you through Nehemiah yet again to show you the importance of building.

[20 : 52] That was a joke, by the way. But, dear friends, please notice, here's the point, notice what Bible faith was like. King Solomon, praise be to the Lord who's given rest to his people Israel just as he promised.

Not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through his servant Moses. So Solomon is praising God because God has kept his words.

He's fulfilled his promises. Or from the Psalms, he remembered his holy promise given to his servant Abraham. Or Mary, that his God has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.

Or wonderfully, Paul, I just love this verse. I remember, though it was a long time ago, the first time I read it in the Bible, it was a different version. But I remember thinking how wonderful it was.

no matter how many promises God has made, they are yes in Christ. That is, we can be sure that whatever God promises, God has promised, he will fulfill because he sent his son Jesus and because his promises find their yes in Christ.

[22 : 19] There was another translation, has it, Jesus is the yes to all the promises of God. So, if you find yourself doubting God, remind yourself of Jesus.

Jesus is the yes to every promise of God. Or again, Christ suffered for sins from Peter, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring you to God.

God. I love this quotation from John Calvin, there is nothing more efficacious, that just means effective, than to set his own word before God and then to found our prayers upon his promises, as if he dictated to us out of his own mouth what we are to us.

So, what we should expect when we read the Bible is not just learning what to do or learning more about God, but learning how to pray. So, what a great thing to pray as you read the Bible.

Lord, please help me to receive your words and please show me the Lord Jesus and please teach me how to live and please show me how to pray.

[23 : 35] Do any of you remember the 1662 prayer book?

Well, you may remember it was a bestseller in 1662, but I was once given a book which explained, which showed that every word of every service was a quotation of scripture.

Isn't that extraordinary? The 1662 Book of Common Prayer, you can still find it on the web, it's still alive, alive virtually, is based on the principle that the Bible teaches us how to pray.

I wonder if you've read John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. At one stage, Christian, I love the characters, Madam Bubble, I remember in particular, and here it's Giant Despair, and Giant Despair has defeated Christian, who is the kind of hero of this particular book, and confined him to Doubting Castle, what a wonderful description, Giant Despair confines us to Doubting Castle, isn't that splendid?

After some days of self-pity, Christian makes a wonderful discovery, what a fool I am, am I rather, thus to lay in a stinking dungeon when I may as well walk at liberty.

[25 : 18] I have a key called promise, and that means the promises of God in scripture, that will, I am persuaded, open any lock in Doubting Castle. And so, he gets out, because he uses the promises of God to escape from Doubting Castle.

Now, as I was preparing this, I was remembering a song we used to sing back in the 1820s, I think it was, Standing on the Promises of God. Do you remember that one? Standing, I'm standing on the promises of God, my Saviour, Standing, standing, I'm standing on the promises of God.

Well, you have to be careful where you sing that, and where you do it. I was in Pakistan, and you might know in Muslim countries, Christians have a great respect for their Bible, and on a few occasions when I put my Bible on the ground, the pastor would pick it up and put it back in my hands.

You wouldn't put a Bible on the ground. Well, there was a Christian missionary who was giving a talk on Standing on the Promises of God, so he decided to show them how to do it, and he put his Bible on the floor and then stood on it.

Well, that was not a wise thing to do. There was a riot, and the police had to rescue him from the Christians, who thought this was a wicked thing to do to the Word of God, as it is.

[26 : 54] Well, here are the words of Adoniram Judson, pioneer missionary to Burma, Myanmar, tied up, ready for the flames, like your Christmas turkey, ready to be killed, asked by his opponents what he thought about his future.

He replied, the future is as bright as the promises of God. Isn't that beautiful? The promises of God gave him the faith to face death unafraid.

The promises of God in Scripture gave him the faith to face death unafraid. And I suspect he learnt that little phrase from William Carey.

He'd had some contact with Carey just before he got to Myanmar. I've also been reading a bit of Augustine, who was Bishop of Hippo in North Africa a long time ago, and listened to his vivid words about God and his promises to us in Christ.

First of all, he makes the point that God makes promises and then does them. Christ was not on the earth. God promised and he did it.

[28 : 15] That is, he sent Christ. No virgin had conceived. God promised and he did it. the precious blood had not been shed by which the handwriting of our death would be effaced.

He promised, that is, God promised and he did it. Human flesh had not risen from the dead. He promised and he did it.

And then, because he's preaching on the day of judgment and people are thinking that probably won't come, he says, when all these things he has promised and done, would he lie about concerning the day of judgment?

It will come as these things came. Indeed, that's a wonderful summary of the Bible, isn't it? He promised, he did it. What's that book about?

God's promises and the fact that he fulfilled his promises. The Bible is full of God's promises and full of the fulfillment of God's promises.

[29 : 31] And Augustine has this wonderful idea of God making himself our debtor. God is faithful who made himself our debtor.

That is, he owes us something. He put himself in debt to us, not by accepting things from us, but by promising us great blessings.

So we can claim forgiveness from God because God promised to forgive us through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ on the cross.

We can claim life after death because God promised to give us life to give us life after death. We can claim, we can claim God's promise and ask him to pay the debt he owes us because he promised that he would keep on transforming us day by day as we live as believers more and more into the likeness of his son Jesus Christ and what God promised he will certainly do.

But Augustine goes on, a spoken promise was not enough. He even chose to bind himself to keep his promises by writing, creating for us a written bond of his promises.

[30 : 51] People can promise something, can't they? But you need to get it in writing, don't you? So that when he began to fulfill his promises, we might see their fulfillment of the scriptures in the scriptures.

Or again from Augustine, because one generation goes, another comes, and so generations pass by, it's necessary that God's scriptures should remain as God's written bond for all to read so we can remain in the paths of his promises.

We often read the Bible to find out what we should do, but we should also read the Bible to find out who God is and what he has promised. to give us.

So let us trust in the promises of God. Let us trust in God as debtor most faithful, because we trust in him as a promiser most merciful. From what God has done, we must believe in what he will still do.

Promises point us to God's works, not our own. Promise is what God himself will do. For no person in this world is strong, except in the hope of God's promises.

[32 : 15] Well, I want to remind you that in the first words of the Lord's Prayer, the prayer that Jesus taught us, our Father in Heaven, that's, if you like, the equivalent of Lord, the God of Heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love, Nehemiah 1, verse 5, our Father in Heaven, we appeal to the character of God, the saving works of God, and the words of God.

And the Lord's Prayer was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus. Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done.

How did that happen? Well, Jesus not only taught the prayer, but fulfilled the prayer. God's name was hallowed by the Lord Jesus.

God's kingdom came in the Lord Jesus, and God's will was done by the Lord Jesus. Jesus is the image of the invisible God.

In his incarnate life, he showed us how to pray, and taught us how to pray, those nights of prayer he spent before great times of ministry or choosing his disciple.

[33 : 48] By his death, Jesus enabled us to pray, gave us free access, to our heavenly Father. We have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus.

And by his resurrection to heaven, he took our prayers with him up to heaven. And by his being seated at the Father's right hand in glory, he brings our weak and feeble prayers and prays them himself to his Father from his own lips.

So we may feel our prayers are not getting higher than the ceiling, but our prayers through Jesus ascend to the very presence of God, to God's ears from the lips of Jesus.

Jesus. So, you might like to make a list like this.

I've put down a list which I use, linking the prayers you pray with God's character saving works and promises. Now, you can start from either side.

[35 : 02] You can say, well, here's a verse. Jesus said, I will build my church. I think now, what should we pray? Because Jesus said, I will build my church.

Well, here's a prayer. Let's say it together. Lord Jesus, please build your church here in Doncast. Please bring many people to faith in you and build us up in faith, love and hope and to maturity in you.

Or you might find the verse, wonderful verse in Romans 8, in all things God works for the good of those who love him. Well, what a great prayer to pray, particularly for Christians in confusion or under persecution or in distress.

Here's the prayer. Let's pray it together. You think of a mess? I'm sure you can. I can think of several. Let's pray it together. Gracious God, this is a mess. It's hard to see what you're doing.

But please do as you promised and work it for good in Jesus' name. The Lord is my shepherd. We often think of that as comfort for ourselves, but it's great to use it as a prayer for somebody else.

[36 : 19] I don't know if there's an Anne here, so we're not picking on you. I just took the name out of the hat. Well, not actually a hat, but out of a saucepan. No, it wasn't actually a saucepan.

It was just kind of a random name. But here's a lovely prayer to pray for Anne or for anybody who's in trouble. Dear Heavenly Father, please care for Anne and be her loving shepherd day by day.

May she know your loving protection and care day and night. Or, I find this one a good one when I'm watching the news, which is always bad.

The Lord reigns, he's robed in majesty. Let's pray this prayer together. Great God of all the nations of the world, rule in your mighty power, in justice, in mercy, and in peace.

Bring justice and peace to this world. Or a prayer I often pray, that believers would keep feeding on the scriptures.

[37 : 23] Jesus said, you shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. Imagine you were doing Matthew 4 in your Bible study. What prayer could you pray?

Well, here's a prayer. Let's pray it together. Lord Jesus, teach your followers to live as you lived on every word of God in the Bible. Feed us, teach us, encourage us, warn us, rebuke us, and trade in godliness and good ministry by this heavenly food.

And we all need for ourselves the promise of God's forgiveness, and we may need to help somebody else to believe that God really does forgive their sins because that's why Jesus died.

Here's a prayer. I pray for myself. Dear heavenly father, I have sinned against you. Please forgive and cleanse me as you promised by the blood of Jesus.

And this wonderful verse from Matthew chapter 8. Jesus says, Many will come from the east and the west and take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of God.

[38 : 36] He's talking about people from lots of nations coming to the kingdom. Let's pray this. Gracious God, please do what your son Jesus has promised.

Even in our time, bring many people from every nation and language into your kingdom as they hear and read of the Lord Jesus and his saving death on the cross and mighty resurrection.

Bring them to faith in Christ, repentance for their sins, gospel hope and assurance, and maturity in Christ. Now, dear friends, last comment.

You can use this either way. You can either start with Bible verses and then think what prayer would be good to pray. And I do say to young Christians, don't ever finish your Bible reading without finding a prayer to pray from your Bible reading.

Because if you don't know what to pray, you certainly won't know how to live. So, when you read the Bible, find a prayer to pray from the Bible reading. But the other way to do it is to think, well, look, here's a situation.

[39 : 50] I want to pray about this. Now, what would be a good Bible passage on which I could base my prayer? So, I'm trying to equip you to pray richer prayers, which are a response to God's words and character, God's works, God's words and his saving works.

If we fill our minds with God, who he is, what he has said, what he has done, what he is like, that will enrich and encourage our prayers as that will enrich and encourage our lives in the Lord Jesus.

Jesus. Dear Heavenly Father, please use the Bible to teach us to pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Amen. Our gracious Father, we thank you for your character, that you are the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with his people.

Our Father, we thank you also that we are your people, bought by the precious blood of Christ, and so your ear is attentive to our prayers. And so help us, we pray, to pray.

[41 : 22] pray to use your word, that we may make appeals to you in prayer. Help us to use your word to shape the content of our prayers.

And help us, we pray, to be faithful in prayer. Help us to remember your promises in your word, that we might be able to bring them before you in prayer, and not just in life.

Our Father, we are weak. we tire easily, we get distracted, and the like. So please help us to pray regularly in life.

We ask it all in Jesus' name. Amen. And why don't we close by saying that I'm only outsourcing last for all the words and sometimes when I don't write mercy as if you don't only complete anything or nothing before I mean it goes until the many hours it goes the way to come by.

So let him be making it again. Obviously it's sometimes the issue. So just