

O Lord, Hear My Prayer

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 18 July 1999

Preacher: Phil Meulman

[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 18th of July 1999. The preacher is Phil Muleman. His sermon is entitled, O Lord, Hear My Prayer, and is from Nehemiah, chapter 1, verse 1, through to chapter 2, verse 8.

Let's just bow our heads for a word of prayer. We thank you, God, for your love to us. We pray now that as we open your word that it would make sense to us and that we would live it out in our lives for Jesus' sake.

Amen. Please be seated. Well, I want you to imagine, if you can, that you are a foreigner living in Australia and you have been living here in Australia for some time.

You moved to Australia when you were young because of the ongoing tensions within your own country. But you still have lots of relatives and family living way back in your homeland.

Now that you are grown up, you have a good job and your boss confides in you with the big decisions of the corporate world. And you have an influence on the way things are done.

[1 : 2 0] And you yourself live a very comfortable life. One day, you come home from work feeling oh so pleased with yourself after having been influential in your boss's winning decision to invest in some worthwhile shares on the stock market.

And the decision that you have made has helped the company to have an enormous windfall of \$2 million profit or something like that.

Wouldn't that be good? You're going to get a handy little bonus from this as well. Well, you sit down, you turn on the TV to the news that the hometown that you grew up in has been attacked.

The buildings have been sacked, burned and destroyed by the people. And people, most likely relatives, have been killed, wounded or are running around frantically.

And you had always hoped that there would be peace in your time so that you could go back to your hometown to go establish your roots. But now, the situation before you has got worse.

[2 : 2 9] What do you do? How do you respond to the reports and the images that you are seeing on your TV? Thank goodness I live in Australia.

Or do you think of some other course of action? Well, the sort of situation I've tried to describe is not all that unreal today. Just look at the situation in Kosovo.

I'm sure that there are Kosovo-born residents living here in Australia for some time who have heard eyewitness reports or seen footage of their homes, villages being destroyed, along with people, possibly relatives or friends.

Their question must be, how do I respond? Now, the Kosovo situation on the surface is not too dissimilar to the crisis that Nehemiah faces that was read to us by Ian this morning.

And we will see over the coming weeks, and I hope that you can join along with me in that process, we'll see in the coming weeks how Nehemiah deals with the crisis of rebuilding the city walls of Jerusalem and reforming God's people in obedience to his commandments and his statutes.

[3 : 45] I want to encourage you to follow along in the Bibles this morning with Nehemiah. It's found on page 374 in the Bibles in front of you. Now, the opening verses of the book of Nehemiah introduce us to the man, Nehemiah, himself a Jew, living as a foreigner in the royal city of Susa, which was the winter residence, apparently, of this king called Artaxerxes, and he was the Persian king, the dominant force at the time.

And we learn from verse 11 of chapter 1 that Nehemiah was employed as Artaxerxes' cupbearer, and that means he held a very responsible position.

He had to drink the wine to make sure that it wasn't poisoned. That was one of his jobs. Just before the king drank it, he would drink it to make sure that nothing untoward was in it. And his position, therefore, earned him the trust of Artaxerxes, and he was no doubt involved in quite confidential conversations, perhaps helping in the decision-making process and so on.

And you would have to say that he enjoyed the favour of the king and all the luxuries that came with the job. Now, Judah, or Israel as we know it today, is the homeland of Nehemiah, and that was about a thousand miles away.

That was a long way in those days. He says, to us, we can drive that in a day if you're an idiot, and you can get a thousand miles in a day. But it took them a long time to travel a thousand miles.

[5 : 23] And he was, if you like, Nehemiah was a fish out of water in Susa. And he still retained a warm love and a keen interest for his homeland and the people within his homeland.

And he was very interested in the fortunes of the descendants of the Jews who had returned from captivity or exile to Judah almost a century before under the leadership of a guy named Zerubbabel.

And he was also interested in the Jews who had accompanied Ezra in just a few years prior when they went back to Jerusalem. Now, Nehemiah's concern was not merely for nostalgia for the good old days, which so many of us seem to get involved in, but rather it was rooted in the conviction that the Jewish nation was chosen by God and that the land of Judah was God's gift to them.

You see, the choice of the Jewish people and the gift of the land were part of God's bigger plan to eventually bring the Lord Jesus Christ into the world so that he might die and rise for sinners on a Roman cross.

We just heard this morning how it is through Jesus that our sins are forgiven if we confess our sins to God. But for now, Nehemiah longed to see the realisation of God's plan and promises.

[6 : 52] So in verses 1-4 of Nehemiah 1, we see, firstly, the sorrow of Nehemiah. Inquiring about the Jews of the city of Jerusalem from his brother Hanani, who had just returned from Judah and is now in this place Susa, along with some other men, we learn of the desperate situation that is going on back in Jerusalem.

The captives who have come back to Jerusalem are having all kinds of trouble. As they walk through the city of Jerusalem, they are no doubt having trouble coming to grips with the destruction that surrounds them.

The city walls, they are devastated. They are receiving, as well, opposition from people within the city walls. And there is great despair amongst the people.

Now, there have been previous attempts to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, but they have been frustrated, as the book of Ezra tells us, by the adversaries of Judah who were living in the city at the time.

No doubt, when the Kosovo refugees who are currently living in Australia return to their homelands in Kosovo, there will be much sorrow and despair among the people as they begin to try and rebuild their lives.

[8 : 08] Well, this news that Nehemiah receives is devastating. And verse 4 tells us that he sat down and he wept and he mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

Now, the report of the physical destruction is bad enough for Nehemiah, but most of all, he wept and mourned because the city, which was meant to be a light to the nations, as the book of Isaiah tells us, it tells us, we see that this city of Jerusalem has just become an international joke.

It lies in ruins, in tatters. So this news leads Nehemiah to fast and to pray. And verses 5 through to 11 reveal to us the nature of the prayer.

And there are four things which I want us to notice in this prayer. First of all, he addresses his prayer to the great and awesome God in verses 5 and 6. Nehemiah prays to the God of heaven who is superior to the most powerful kings and to all the imagined gods of the nations.

He is great and awesome in his might. He is great and awesome in his might, holiness and justice. The God to whom Nehemiah prays is also a gracious God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments.

[9 : 37] Now our love and obedience do not earn us his love but are the evidence that we are indeed objects of his grace. We are saved by grace.

And Nehemiah's prayer is both earnest and persistent as he prays both day and night for God's ears to be attentive and his eyes open to him.

The psalmist tells us in Psalm 34, The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are open to their cry. When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and rescues them from all their troubles.

So that's the first thing. Nehemiah addresses his prayer to this great and awesome God, the God of heaven. The second thing he does is he confesses his own sins and those of the nations.

In other words, as we've heard earlier, it's a prayer of confession. And Nehemiah's reflection on the character of God makes him aware that the sorrow of the Jews is related to their sin.

[10 : 44] So his prayer is confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which he says, we have sinned against you. And he goes on to say, both I and my family have sinned as well.

They're all caught up in it. And the sin, of course, is the fact that God's people did not obey God as he had commanded them to. Now Nehemiah had a real sense of corporate responsibility here, which most of us, I think, lack today.

We seldom feel part of the church in quite the same way that Nehemiah felt part of Judah. Our culture stresses individuality.

It stresses do whatever you like. We are individual members as well, if you like, of the church. So we don't confess the church's failure as our own.

We don't accept that responsibility. We say, it's the church's fault. But hang on, we are the church. What we see here in this prayer is Nehemiah identifying with the people, which seems to be, as I said a moment ago, sadly lacking in our world today.

[11 : 56] Now one person writes on this same passage, and he uses quite a graphic illustration to try and draw out the point. As a medical student, I once missed a practical class on venereal disease.

Because of this, I had to go to the venereal diseases clinic alone one night at a time when students did not usually attend. As I entered the building, a male nurse, I didn't know, met me.

A line of men were waiting for treatment. I want to see the doctor, I said. That's what everybody wants. Stand in line, he replied. But you don't understand.

I'm a medical student, I protested. Makes no difference. You got it the same way everybody else did. Stand in line, the male nurse repeated. In the end, I managed to explain to him why I was there, but I can still feel the sense of shame that made me balk at standing in line with men who had VD.

Yet Jesus shunned shame as he waited to be baptized. You see, Jesus was baptized because he wanted to identify with the people he was with. And the moral gulf that separated him from us was far greater than that separating me from the men at the clinic.

[13 : 19] Moreover, my dislike of venereal disease was as nothing compared with Jesus' utter abhorrence of sin. But Jesus crossed the gulf, joined our ranks, embraced us, and still remained pure.

He identified with those he came to save. He became like us. It is the same identification that makes Nehemiah's prayer a truly great prayer because he identifies with his people and he takes on as a result the responsibility.

Well, the third thing to notice in this prayer is that Nehemiah recalls the promise of God in verses 8 and 9. Nehemiah calls on God to remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses.

The word remember refers not to God's recollection of something forgotten like I might do when I forget to pick up the kids from school or something like that, but it refers rather to his intervention on behalf of his own people.

And we see in verse 9 how he paraphrases words from Deuteronomy chapter 30 where Moses says to God's people, if you are unfaithful, that is, if you are unfaithful to God, then I will scatter you.

[14 : 35] God's people have been unfaithful and they have been scattered, which is sort of what is going on here. It's their predicament now. But these verses then go on to say, as verse 9 points out, but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are under the farthest skies, I, God that is, will gather them from there and bring them to the place at which I have chosen to establish my name.

Obedience will bring blessing. Now no problem is too big for God that he can't fix it. The present predicament of God's people in Nehemiah's day is not beyond God's ability either.

He's able to fix it. And Nehemiah's prayer of confession and repentance is a prayer that God will intervene on behalf of his chosen people.

Now the fourth thing that's to notice in this prayer is that Nehemiah appeals to God who has a unique relationship with his people as verses 10 and 11 point out. And in these verses there is an emphasis on the word your.

Your servants and your people whom you redeemed by your great power and your strong hand. These are God's people we're talking about.

[16 : 00] And in these verses there are strong allusions to God's rescue of his people from slavery in Egypt. You know all those Sunday school stories we hear of God rescuing the people from Egypt bringing them out of Egypt and into the promised land?

Strong allusions back to that. And just as God rescued his people from Egypt Nehemiah is now calling on this same God the God of heaven to be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to the prayer of your servants as well.

Well God does hear the prayer of his servants and he answers in his time the requests and petitions of those who seek to obey him. Now Nehemiah pardon me Nehemiah was in urgent need of direction from God to know which action or what action to take on behalf of the Jews in Jerusalem.

And whatever plan he formulated he would have to speak first with the earthly king King Artaxerxes. And it's for this reason that the chapter 1 ends with Nehemiah's prayer to God for his blessing and so he says give success to your servant today and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.

Well we learn in these verses that Nehemiah prayed and interceded on behalf of his people from the month of Kislev that is around November and December until the month of Nisan which is not a car company but is March or April.

[17 : 39] He prayed for a period of four months until the opportunity arose for him to approach the king that is King Artaxerxes. Now do we have this same kind of commitment as we pray for the things that God has laid on our heart?

Are we persistent in our prayer? Well in verses 1 to 8 of chapter 2 we see the results of Nehemiah's patient waiting. The opportunity arises for him to ask King Artaxerxes permission to go to Jerusalem to oversee the building of the city walls and the gates.

And the end of verse 2 tells us that as he went and did that he was very much afraid because there may never be another opportunity to ask the king's permission to go to Jerusalem.

And also he was also afraid because any mistake any little slip up that he makes could mean execution by this Persian king. Well Nehemiah employs wisdom and tact as he brings his request before the king.

And the prayer of verse 4 so I prayed to the God of heaven this instant prayer is often described as an arrow prayer. And in our modern world today we might do better to call it an email prayer.

[18 : 58] You attach your file and send it and all this package goes as he prayed. It's an instantaneous prayer. And it seems to have been effective because as we read on as everything that Nehemiah asked for to King Artaxerxes was granted by the king.

He was allowed to leave the presence of the king and to go to Jerusalem. He was allowed to take letters with him which would give him safe journey on his way. And he was also allowed to take letters which would allow him to proceed safely with the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem.

Well Nehemiah prayed and his prayer was effective. Why was his prayer effective? Two reasons. Firstly it arose out of Nehemiah's ongoing prayer life.

Nehemiah had been praying for this situation to come about for some time now for at least four months. And he was focused on the task ahead of him. And now that the opportunity had arisen he knew what it was he had to ask the king for.

He was still afraid. I get scared of things all the time. But he knew what he had to do because he was in touch. He was praying to God.

[20 : 15] And knowing that he was in a relationship with the God of heaven he could be confident that God would be with him when that situation arose. Now God can give us the same kind of boldness and prudence too when we are suddenly faced with some awkward situation or difficult question.

We can depend on God's Holy Spirit to be with us when we are proclaiming to people who are critical and cynical about what it means to be a Christian and so on.

It's as we pray to the God of heaven through Jesus that we overcome our fear and are filled with God's peace and power. So that's the first reason.

The second reason Nehemiah's prayer was effective is seen at the end of verse 8. The gracious hand of my God was upon me. That's the reason Nehemiah's prayer was effective.

The gracious hand of my God was upon me. Nehemiah was probably working for the most powerful earthly kingdom at the time. Anything could happen to him.

[21 : 25] But Nehemiah realised that there is a far greater king in heaven. Far greater than any earthly king that was with him. And for this reason Nehemiah is prepared to risk all that he has, his own life really, in order to serve him, to serve God.

Well, God heard his prayer and acted accordingly. Nehemiah himself responded wisely, attributing all that had happened to him as God's gracious hand been upon him.

And all those hours of prayer had paid off. For in that time of intercession, of confession, of supplication, and so on, Nehemiah had sought God's will and direction in all that was to follow.

And similarly, for us today, prayer is an important piece of armour we need to equip ourselves with. As Christians, there's another thing I want to read to you which is a challenge for us as Christians to consider, to think about.

We all love committee meetings and often they can be frustrating. Well, here's a piece of advice. In the same way, prayer at the beginning of a committee meeting is of infinitely greater value than prayer at the end.

[22 : 49] If you will lock 90 minutes to the meeting, let 45 minutes be set aside for prayer. Prayer needs leisure. It must never be hurried. We need time to worship, time for confession, time for the Spirit of God to change our perspective and enlarge our vision.

The more time the committee spends in prayer, the less its members will need to spend in futile discussion, and the more its discussion will count for the kingdom. Well, here in a few vital moments, the future of a nation is rescued as Nehemiah comes before the king.

The weeks of waiting on God, as Nehemiah has done, have all been well invested, because the king grants Nehemiah all he asks after only three questions, after asking only three questions.

I think we tend to underestimate the value of prayer. Well, the challenge for each one of us who are Christians is to pray.

We are challenged to make time to pray, not just once for something, but persistently. to pray persistently that God's holiness and might would be seen in all that we seek to do.

[24 : 16] Now, during the week we had a meeting in this church to talk about possible directions for the future, building extensions and so on. Well, as we embark on a building project in the days ahead, which is most likely, we need to pray for God's blessing on that, that God will be involved in the whole process.

We need to pray as well that we don't lose our gospel priorities that are so strong here in this church. We need to pray for ourselves as well that we too would stay sharp in the Christian faith.

And we need to pray that as a result of the outcome of this program, that more people would come to know Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

Well, this week we see that Nehemiah prayed. Next week we'll see what happens as a result of the prayer and how Nehemiah's work for God continues on.

Let's just pray for a moment. God, we thank you for the people in the Bible who are prayers. We pray that we indeed would learn to be persistent in prayer.

[25 : 29] We pray that we would have courage when we are afraid to know what you are saying to us. Help us to speak out boldly where we see injustice.

And Father, may we have gospel priorities. May we always seek to serve you, Lord Jesus, as King. And Father, we thank you for the saving grace that you have poured out upon us in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen. Amen. Thanksgiving. Amen. Amen., amen. Amen. Amen.