

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **SERMON SERIES: Forward - Together!**

(studies in Nehemiah)

### **When You Care Enough to Pray the Very Best** Study #2

(Nehemiah 1:4-11)

#### **Introduction: Crisis response (445 BC and AD 2008)...**

Crises of varying degrees hit us all from time to time. I've found that backpacking trips into the Rocky Mountains can serve as excellent breeding grounds for crisis and can easily become laboratories that enable us to deal with crises.

A dozen or so years ago, on my nearly annual summer backpacking trek to the mountains with my sons, Ben and Zach, we hit the trail on a beautiful Colorado morning and hiked for a few hours and a few miles on great trails.

When we stopped for a break, I checked our map and realized that we were nowhere near where we were supposed to be. In fact, I couldn't locate our location on the map at all.

This is known as being "lost." Great - CRISIS! Now, at the time, Ben was about fifteen and Zach was probably thirteen. Me? I was, well young enough to get myself and my two young sons into this pickle.

What do you do when you hit a crisis like this?

Patrick McManus (one of my favorite authors) once wrote an article for **Field and Stream** magazine that found its way into his book, A Fine and Pleasant Misery.

The article is titled, "*The Modified Stationary Panic*." In this article McManus helps backpackers deal with the exact predicament into which I had led us, that of getting lost.

The Modified Stationary Panic is one of two suggested methods for dealing with the angst that hits when you are miles and hours - or days - from the car and don't know which way to go. Contrary to most advisors, McManus recommends giving in to the panic and getting it out of your system. The Modified Stationary Panic (MSP) consists of bouncing up and down in rhythmic fashion, arms flailing, while shouting and screaming at the top of your lungs.

This is not to be confused with the Full-Bore Linear Panic (FBLP), a strategy consisting of running in a straight line at full tilt until you run into something solid (rock, tree). You then bounce off of the solid object, fall down, get up and then re-direct your panic in another direction. This continues until you run out of steam, at which point you are able to deal with your lostness in the manner in which survival experts would all agree on: check to see on which side of the tree moss is growing (?), build a shelter, gather food, etc..

Well, Ben and Zach and I did not engage in either the Modified Stationary Panic or the Full-Bore Linear Panic when we found ourselves lost in a Rocky Mountain wilderness. Our method for dealing with our crisis was far less entertaining, but ended up being effective.

Disaster was averted and the crisis was resolved.

These days, our church is seeking direction. It's not that we're lost. But we are considering the way forward in three critically important arenas.

We are, first, considering what **MINISTRIES** we need to pursue in this season. The ministries that are up and running will continue, of course. But we are praying and talking about what new initiatives we should begin, what new doors the Lord might open for us, and what new directions we should travel to serve more and more people both in and out of the church in Jesus' Name?

We are also entering a season when we are considering church **STAFF** and the need to take on a part-time Youth Pastor and a full-time Pastor of Family Ministries. We certainly need God's wisdom and provision for these very important hires.

And, we are considering the direction we should move with respect to **FACILITIES**. Earlier this summer, the church membership affirmed that the Master Plan which had been developed by the Building Committee would be the direction we would move when we decide to build. The Elders believe that now is the time to pray about and to talk about whether now is the time to build or not.

These issues we are facing in this season are critical. The way we proceed and the decisions we make regarding **staff, facilities** and **ministries** will determine the course Northwest will take for years to come.

Now of course there has never been a season of our church's life when we did not need to be dependent on God for His wisdom, His guidance and His leadership. But there have been precious few seasons when I and others (hopefully YOU!) have felt our need for God's wisdom and leadership as keenly as we do right now.

As we seek the Lord and talk with each other about these issues over the next several weeks, we'll be poring over an Old Testament book, the book of Nehemiah.

The main character of the book, Nehemiah, was facing crisis. We're going to watch to see how he faced his crisis, because Nehemiah's example is instructive.

The way he dealt with the crisis confronting him has served many people and many churches as a model for how the people of God can work together to move the purposes of God forward.

My prayer is that God would use our time together in this portion of His Word to equip us with His wisdom and guidance for the way forward as we confront the critical issues facing us, now.

Nehemiah's crisis concerned the condition in which his people, the Jews, were living in Jerusalem, God's city.

When his brother, Hanani, came to visit from Jerusalem, he brought back a report that rocked Nehemiah's world.

One hundred and forty years after the Babylonians<sup>1</sup> had destroyed Solomon's Temple, had taken many of the Jews captive, had impoverished the remaining population and had flattened Jerusalem's walls, the city was **STILL** in shambles!

This is not the way things should have been! The Temple had been rebuilt by Zerubbabel, Ezra the scribe had gotten the people back on track with regular worship.

But when Nehemiah heard, [1:3]... "*The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire...*" he was undone.

#### **Hearts That Break With God's Heart (v. 4)**

#### **An Immediate and Emotional Response!**

The Bible tells us, [4a] *When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days*

It is true that the time of his grief can be counted in days. But it can also be counted in months.

The opening lines of our book set the scene in the Jewish month, Chislev. That is when Hanani came to Susa to give the Jerusalem report to his brother, Nehemiah. The first chapter ends with another time stamp marking the end of the season of prayer - the month Nisan.<sup>2</sup> The time between Chislev and Nisan is about five months!

Over a period of five months, Nehemiah was consumed by grief about the condition of God's land and God's people.

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<sup>1</sup> Under King Nebuchadnezzar

<sup>2</sup> Chislev = November/December; Nisan = March/April

When was the last time you were so devastated by something that came your way that you sat down and wept and mourned for days? Have you ever experienced such a personal earthquake that you had a season during which you wept and mourned for months?

And if you did, about **what** did you weep and mourn? Was it a family grief? Was it a health challenge? Did it concern finances, or a job? Did a treasured relationship go sour? Did you suffer a devastating personal loss?

We might refer to any of these as “personal 9/11’s.” Suffering such losses is enough to undo anyone! And the normal, human reaction to a realization that all is wrong with the world is to **“weep and mourn.”**

But notice what it was that devastated Nehemiah? He was undone by news about the condition of the Kingdom of God and the people of God.

Things were not as they should have been back in Jerusalem. The walls should have been rebuilt long ago. The city should have been protected. Jerusalem should have been commanding respect from the nations.

Broken-down walls meant humiliation. God’s people should have been living as lights in a dark world, but their condition invited that dark world’s reproach.

We notice that Nehemiah heard the news and initially, immediately, took no action. He didn’t move to remedy the situation. He just expressed his grief and broken-heartedness.

We watch Nehemiah writhing in emotional agony.

But as he wept and mourned, he did something that we (I, at least) often fail to do. Describing his condition in words lifted from the apostle Paul, we might say that he was **[2 Cor. 4:8]...afflicted...but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; [9] persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed** - and in his pain, he turned to the Lord.

## A Godly Response!!

***[4b]... and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.***

Proving that he was a man of God from the knees up, when he received the news from Hanani, he prayed!

While he was an extremely practical man, Nehemiah shows us here that he was above all, first and foremost, an intensely spiritual man. Before he was an activist, before he was a busy man, he was God’s man.

And following his initial pained response, we read a summary of his days, weeks, and months of seeking the Lord in his grief through prayer and fasting.

He prayed - and he fasted. Interesting. He fasted. That means that he went without food - on purpose. He intentionally went hungry, on and off, for five months.

This morning I want to consider fasting with you. Nehemiah fasted. Many others have fasted throughout history, and we should understand what fasting is all about, why we might consider fasting, ourselves, and what might be the purpose of that fasting if we chose to engage in it.<sup>3</sup>

## Section on FASTING

To fast is to intentionally suspend normal eating habits. Many religions around the world practice the discipline of fasting. And many people around the world fast for completely non-religious reasons for its associated health and psychological benefits.

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<sup>3</sup> Some of the passages that address fasting in the Bible include the following: 1 Samuel 7:6; 2 Samuel 12:16; 12:21-23; 2 Chron. 20:3; Ezra 8:21; 8:23 - So we fasted and sought our God concerning this matter, and He listened to our entreaty.; Neh. 1:4 - Now it came about when I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.; Psalm 35:13; Isaiah 58:4-6; Daniel 9:3; Matthew 4:2; Matthew 6:16-18; Luke 18:12; Acts 13:2-3; 14:23 - And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

We may have the idea that the Jews of the Old Testament fasted frequently. No doubt many Jews did fast somewhat regularly.

But there was actually only one day out of the year when they were commanded to fast - the Day of Atonement. This fast was to last from the evening of the 9<sup>th</sup> day of the seventh month until the evening of the 10<sup>th</sup> day (sunset to sunset).<sup>4</sup>

All other fasts were fasts voluntarily entered into, or were fasts that the Jews determined to observe, usually for excellent reasons.

- At certain times they held regular fasts to remember times of tragedy.<sup>5</sup>
- Then, they fasted when seeking the Lord about certain things, as Daniel did, when he sought to understand some of Jeremiah's prophecies.<sup>6</sup>
- And, as Nehemiah did, they would fast in times of great distress.<sup>7</sup>

The biblical list of people who fasted is impressive.

In addition to EVERY God-fearing, faithful Jew of the Old Testament (because they were commanded to fast on the Day of Atonement), there are such New Testament fasters as **Anna** (a godly widow mentioned at Luke 2:37), **Jesus** (Matthew 4 records His forty days fast in the wilderness, at the end of which came His temptation from Satan.), **the disciples of John the Baptist** (Matthew 9:14), **the leaders of the church at Antioch** (Acts 13), **the elders in the just planted churches of Asia Minor** (Acts 14:23) and **the apostle Paul**.

These people weren't fasting out of a crass sense of trying to wrench some blessing out of God, or out of the misguided idea that God would pay more attention to them if they fasted.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The term used is "humble your souls" and is understood to involve fasting.

<sup>5</sup> There are four fasts mentioned in Zechariah that commemorated events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem. The prophet dismissed these fasts as having become meaningless ritual, devoid of significance.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel 9:3 - *So I gave my attention to the Lord God to seek Him by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes.*

<sup>7</sup> Nehemiah. 1:4 - *Now it came about when I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.*

<sup>8</sup> Although... Jesus did say that fasting motivated by a desire for God's will and presence does bring reward. *[Matthew 6:16] And whenever you fast, do not put on*

Sometimes, God's people fast for discipline's sake.<sup>9</sup> As a discipline, fasting is a marvelous way to gain mastery over the body's appetites. We can learn, by fasting, to "*eat to live*" as opposed to the American tendency to "*live to eat*."

Also, as an aid to prayer, fasting can be a means of focusing the soul on God. While fasting, we are reminded, especially at mealtimes, to remember God, our ultimate Sustainer.

And, in times of distress, it can be a way to remind ourselves - and a way to say to God - "*There are things going on around me and in me that are more important than my daily bread.*"

This was no doubt the reason Nehemiah fasted, on and off, during the five months between Chislew and Nisan while living in Susa, Persia after he heard from Hanani about the desperate situation back home in Jerusalem.

As he deprived his body of its regular nutrition, his soul became focused on what was, for him, more important than his daily food.

He wanted something from God so badly - Jerusalem's renewal, revival, restoration - that he deprived himself of food as a way to demonstrate to God how badly he longed for this thing.

One time, a father of a young son emerged out of a crowd, falling on his knees before Jesus.

Listen to what he had to say: *[Matthew 17:15] "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is a lunatic, and is very ill; for he often falls into the fire, and often into the water. [16] And I brought him to Your disciples, and they could not cure him."*

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*a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. [17] But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face [18] so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you."*

<sup>9</sup> Richard Foster lists the following "spiritual disciplines" in *Celebration of Discipline: Disciplines of Abstinence*: Solitude, Silence, **Fasting**, Frugality, Chastity, Secrecy, Sacrifice; *Disciplines of Engagement*: Study, Worship, Celebration, Service, Prayer, Fellowship, Confession, Submission

Jesus cast out the demon that was causing the problems with a word, and then answered the question from the hapless disciples, “*Why could we not cast it out?*”

*[20] And He said to them, “Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, “Move from here to there,” and it shall move; and nothing shall be impossible to you. [21] [BUT THIS KIND DOES NOT GO OUT EXCEPT BY PRAYER AND FASTING.]<sup>10</sup>”*

The disciples’ failure was not a failure of nerve or of theology, but of seriousness. They failed because of a lack of willingness to exert great energy for a holy task - to free a young boy from the grips of a demon.

Nehemiah took the awful condition of God’s people and God’s city with utmost seriousness. He demonstrated that seriousness by prayer accompanied by fasting. Jerusalem’s ruin and his hope for its revival meant so much to him that he went without food.

There are, right now, matters of extreme gravity facing you and me - health concerns for us or for our loved ones, financial concerns, concerns for the future of our nation, relationship concerns. How much do we care? Enough to pray? Enough to fast?

There are, right now, matters of extreme gravity facing our church - **ministry direction, facilities development, staffing needs** - and more. Do you, do I, care enough to pray? Enough to fast?

Nehemiah models how to pray when we care enough to pray the very best. When there is an extreme level of caring, there is always going to be an accompanying level of sacrifice, demonstrated by expenditure of time, energy - and sometimes even fasting!

We read about Nehemiah’s initial pained response in the fourth verse. The chapter continues with a summary of his days, weeks, and months of intermittent prayer and fasting.

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<sup>10</sup> These words (v. 21) do not appear in many early manuscripts of Matthew’s gospel. But they do reflect a very ancient tradition, and are therefore included in most editions of the English Bible.

### Prayer: First Things First (vv. 5-11)

#### Nehemiah Knows “Who Art in Heaven”! (v. 5)

*[5] I said, “I beseech You, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments...*

Notice that the first and primary focus of the prayer is on the greatness of God. Nehemiah reminds himself that the God he serves is great and awesome.

- Jerusalem might be in ruins, but God is great and awesome.
- Opposition might come, but God is great and awesome.
- War in Iraq and Afghanistan may continue unabated and Georgia vs. Russia is extremely troublesome, but God is great and awesome.

And we can personalize this.

- My health may be deteriorating, but God is great and awesome.
- People I love may have rejected me, but God is great and awesome.
- The needs represented in the neighborhoods surrounding our church are weighty, but God is great and awesome.
- Our worlds might be coming apart at the seams, but our God is great and awesome!

When Nehemiah begins to pray, he begins NOT with his neediness, but with a recognition of God’s awesomeness.

Then, from the peak of a recognition of the worthiness of God, Nehemiah is made aware of his own unworthiness. The next item of business in dealing with God involves confession of sin.

#### “If We Confess Our Sins” (vv. 6-7)

*[6] “let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins<sup>11</sup> of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You...*

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<sup>11</sup> Sin here is the Hebrew *chata*. This word signifies missing the mark. Judges 20:16 - anything less than a bull’s eye.

As he prayed about the bad condition of Jerusalem, he confessed moral failure.

If you've watched much of the Olympics this week, you've seen a commercial or two. One of my favorites is the spot that highlights "We won!"

The idea is that Michael Phelps wins. He's an American. We're Americans. Therefore, **WE** win when Michael Phelps wins!

Well, in the Old Testament, there is this great sense of, "We're in this together" for the people of God. That mindset requires that the people of God rejoice when one has a victory and mourn when one suffers a tragedy. It also requires that the people of God confess a corporate guilt when one commits sin.

When Nehemiah confesses the sins of Israel, he has in mind idolatries from the days of Moses and moral atrocities from the days of Jacob and rebellions in the wilderness and murders of prophets.

He knows that it was these things that led to the discipline of God in the first place. And he continues with his confession.

We honestly don't know how well formed Nehemiah's thoughts were, early on, about being a part of the solution to Israel's dilemma. We do know that he has identified himself as a part of the problem.

**[6] "...I and my father's house have sinned. [7] "We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.**

Now his confession becomes more personal. He thinks of sins committed by his family. Going back generations, is he thinking of things that his father and grandfathers and great-grandfathers might have done to have helped Jerusalem, so far away, to no longer be a reproach?

And then he turns the spotlight on himself. He's being completely honest here. He's asking himself, "Over the course of my life, have I done everything I might have done to further the Kingdom of God? While serving in King Artaxerxes' court, have I used every opportunity to help my people in Jerusalem?"

He asks those questions and has to accept the answer: "No, I haven't done all that I could."

He didn't wag his finger at "all those bad people" out there who were responsible for the predicament in which Jerusalem found itself.

He included himself in the big club of people who have failed to work for God's glory and Kingdom. He can't claim innocence in Jerusalem's sorry condition and he knows it.

Then the prayer takes on a different tone. Having confessed, Nehemiah turns the corner and asks God to DO something.

### **Standing on the Promises of God (vv. 8-10)**

**[8] "Remember the word which You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples; [9] but if you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.' [10] "They are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand.**

Even though he had spent his entire life in Persia, Nehemiah was one of those Jews who had given himself to learn God's Word.

He's referencing passages here from Deuteronomy (chapter 30) and Leviticus (chapter 26). It was a common practice among devout Jews of the captivity to memorize Deuteronomy. We learn by his prayer that he was a devout Jew.

Nehemiah was a man of the Book. And being a man of the book helped him tremendously when it came to knowing how to pray for His people.<sup>12</sup> What we read in his prayer (vv. 8-10) remind us of what God had said would happen if the people rebelled AND what would happen if they repented.

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<sup>12</sup> In fact, he quotes Scripture all the way through the book, as he reminded God of His Word at various critical points.

And the fact that prayed what he knew from Scripture tells us volumes about what he knew about God. He knew God to be a God of His Word, Someone who could be counted on to do what He said He would do.

Nehemiah believed that God was approachable, that His heart was for His people, that He was good (Better than we would ever dream He is!), that *[Hebrews 11:6]...He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.*

He has realized through his meditation and mourning and praying and fasting and seeking God that the need of the hour is repentance. He humbles himself before God and turns his attention to God.

And he finishes up his prayer with something very specific. He asks for something that will change his world.. Without a very smooth transition, Nehemiah moves from praise to confession to reminiscences of God's warnings and promises to a bold ask.

**“Father, Please!” (v. 11)**

*[11] “O Lord, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight<sup>13</sup> to revere Your name, and make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man.”*

Prayer that launches effective ministry is specific and bold. And bold, specific prayer grows in the heart of someone who has honestly looked at the rubble - and sees God as the only solution to the devastation at “ground zero.”

Prayer isn't the only thing that needs to happen when there are pressing needs, and it isn't usually the last thing that occurs at a time of crisis.

But Nehemiah points the way forward for us to address the pressing concerns that face us. First things first: PRAYER!

Next Sunday we will see the specific request that he makes of God in living color. In fact, we will see the beginning stages of his mission next week.

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<sup>13</sup> “Delight” (*Hebrew, chaphez*) is a highly charged emotional word.

What we need to see this morning, though, is that the mission was launched with PRAYER, the best manifestation of dependence there is.