

TJW, HT, 4.1.09, 9.15am & 11am, Nehemiah 1.1-2.10

In this sermon I want to give you a vision for a richer, deeper prayer-life.

At the start of every January, and every September, we have a Sunday, like today, which we call Vision Sunday - in which we set a vision from the Bible for one area of our life in which I'm convinced, as the vicar of this church, that we need to grow, and to focus our efforts.

Of course we always need to be committed to prayer - but as a church family we simply must strengthen and deepen our prayer-life right now because of what we'll be doing in the next two months.

A month from now, the two new Home Groups for the members of the new 4 o'clock church will form. That will mean reorganisation of membership for some existing Home Groups - and for all Home Groups it will mean some freshening up and reinvigoration.

And a month after that, on 1st March, the 4 o'clock church will start meeting on Sunday afternoons - and at the same time we'll be looking at ways to re-focus the life of the two morning congregations.

And isn't it right that we should feel nervous about these new ventures, concerned about them, if they are not backed up with a renewed devotion to prayer. Because without the backing of prayer we might just be building castles in the air - or, to change the image - we might be trying to skate on very thin ice.

Of course, God isn't like a vending-machine. He never promises that all we have to do is pray, press the right button, and he'll make all our plans succeed.

Nor is God powerless, like a TV that you've forgotten to plug in - longing to act but unable to do so unless we switch his power on through our prayers. He isn't dependent on us, to act.

But yet God does urge us to pray continually.

That's one of the shortest verses in the whole Bible. It's 1 Thessalonians 5.17.

And God urges us to "pray continually", not because he needs our prayers in order to act - but because he especially loves to act in response to our prayers.

I'd love us to write these two words on our hearts this year: "pray continually."

I know that many of us are already committed pray-ers - and this sermon to you will be like a refresher - an encouragement to keep going.

But it's also true that, for many Christians, one of the very best ways to make them squirm with embarrassment is to ask them about their prayer-life.

And do believe me when I say that that's just as true for ministers like me, as it is for other Christians.

Why are many of us embarrassed about our prayer-lives? I think that the big reason is simply that we have this strong sense that we're not praying the way we should.

Well, God is very good to us, and in the Bible he teaches us how to pray.

And we're going to look at one of the great model-prayers from the Bible this morning.

It's at the beginning of the book of Nehemiah.

We know this is a model prayer for us because it follows pretty much the same pattern that Jesus gave us when he said: "This is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name...".

We'll see more of that in a moment.

It's a prayer prayed by this man called Nehemiah - and probably not all of us know much about him or his book, so let me paint the picture for you, and set in the scene in which Nehemiah prays this great prayer.

Nehemiah was a Jew, from Israel, but he was a long way from home. *[Here's a map of the Middle East, to help you. There's Israel in the middle, at the top.]*

Nehemiah was an exile. It's 450 years before the birth of Christ - and many Israelites had been captured by an army from mighty Babylon - from *[over there in]* the east - and taken off into exile in Babylon. The exile was God's judgment on his people, for having disobeyed him and rejected his word.

But now things had changed. A new empire had taken over - called Persia - in the area that's now called Iran. And Nehemiah is working for the Persian king, as what he calls his 'cupbearer'. His main job was to taste all the king's wine, to make sure it hadn't been poisoned. That was an important job. It was probably a good job if you liked wine-tasting - but you would also probably want quite a lot of danger money for taking it on!

Now recently one of the Persian kings had let some of the Israelites go home, to start rebuilding their city of Jerusalem, which had been demolished by the Babylonians. It was God who caused him to do, so he could restore the fortunes of his people.

But things didn't go very well. The king called Artaxerxes, who was Nehemiah's boss, had sent out an order that the work to re-build Jerusalem should be stopped - and stopped by force if necessary.

Nehemiah hears this news from one of his brothers - and all he can think about is the trouble back in his homeland - and the dishonour that that seems to do to God's name. Look at the very beginning of chapter 1 [READ verses 1-4].

Nehemiah has got a big challenge. He wants to be the one who will go back to Jerusalem, his home city, and build it up again.

But there's a lot standing in his way: - He's got to persuade his boss, the king of Persia, to change his mind and let Jerusalem be re-built. - And he's got to persuade the king to give him leave from his job as royal wine-taster to go and do it.

Have you ever gone into your boss's office wanting to ask for something like that?!

And what does Nehemiah do? For four months he said nothing to the king at all. (We know how long it was, because the dates are carefully given to us, at the beginning of chapters one and two.)

And for those four months - he prayed.

Now the rest of this book shows us that Nehemiah was a man of action, who liked to get on with the job. But right at the beginning here we see that he also knew when he had to prepare, through prayer.

We in this church family will have a lot to act on in the next few months.

Will you take on your responsibility to prepare, through prayer?.

And then we get a report of what Nehemiah prayed. Most likely it's a summary of what he was praying for those four months.

Now I'm going to read this prayer. And while I read it, I want you to put yourself in Nehemiah's shoes - facing a big, daunting task - uncertain if you'll succeed. And ask yourself - would **I** have prayed the way he did? [READ verses 5-11].

Here's where Nehemiah's prayer is so different from the way I sometimes pray - and from the prayers I often hear others pray. It's God-focused prayer.

We would often dive in by praying: “Lord, I’ve got this problem. Please help me. Please make the king change his mind. Please give me the right words to say. Amen.”

Now Nehemiah does get round to praying that. But here’s the point: he prays a whole lot of other things before he gets there. It’s what he prays before he gets there that makes this a rich, model prayer. And let’s see how it’s all focused on God.

He starts by focusing on God’s greatness and power - he prays: “Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God.”

He knows that he needs to remind himself that God is not too small to do what he’s asking. God has the power to make it happen, if he chooses to.

When a husband is talking to his wife about a tricky topic between them, isn’t their conversation so much richer if reminds himself who this woman really is to him: “You’re my love, the one I adore above all others...”. If you remind yourself who it is you’re really talking to, it’s so much easier to talk sincerely, to talk meaningfully.

And do you see that this is exactly how the Lord’s Prayer begins: “When you pray”, Jesus said “say: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name...”. Focus on God’s greatness and power.

Next, Nehemiah remembers God's love and faithfulness: "...God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments."

God is not only awesome and mighty. He has also drawn close to his people - committing himself to be our God, to love us - and faithfully to keep his covenant-promises of love to us.

For Christians, the way Jesus has taught us particularly to express this is when we call God 'Father'. As he said: "When you pray, say: Our Father...".

And when we start our prayer remembering God's love and faithfulness - that he has called himself our Father - then we can pray confidently, as Nehemiah does in verse 6, "Lord, please hear my prayer." As our loving, faithful Father, he will listen.

God's greatness and power. And his love and faithfulness.

Do you see what happens when we deliberately focus on God this way, when we pray? We save our praying from being faithless, or self-pitying - or focused just on me and the big problem that I want God to sort out.

Rich, deep, God-focused prayer, starts with God.

Now Nehemiah's prayer moves on. He focuses next on his people's sin - and his own sin. I'll read from half-way through verse 6 [READ verses 6b-7].

Nehemiah knew that God had caused his exile in Babylon, as punishment for the people's disobedience to God.

And he doesn't hide that from God in his prayers - he confesses it. Sometimes when we cry out to God to help us, frankly we're in trouble partly because of our own foolishness of sinfulness. That's not always true - but sometimes it is.

So confess that to him with great confidence - confident that our sin cannot thwart his greatness and his power - and confident that, in his covenant of love, he delights to wipe out the sins of those who repent.

And then Nehemiah appeals to God's promises - verse 8 [READ verses 8-9]. He knew that God had promised to bring his people back from exile, when their hearts turned back to him - and so he reminds God - and reminds himself of that promise.

And finally - only after all this God-focused prayer - does he make his request to the Lord - the end of verse 11 [READ verse 11b].

Now here's the vision for our prayer, which this model-prayer gives us...

Learn to pray God-focused prayers.

Every good friendship gets deeper and richer over the years.

In the same way, our relationship with the Lord through our prayer-lives should deepen over time.

It saddens me when I hear someone who's been a Christian for a while who's prayer-life isn't much richer than a shopping-list:

"Father, I pray for my friend who's sick - I pray for my family - I pray for people who are suffering."

But don't you want all your friendships to grow and deepen over the years. Don't you want the way you pray to your Lord to get fuller and richer, the more you learn to love him?

Of course, "arrow-prayers" are fine - as long as they're rooted in richer prayer.

"Arrow-prayer" is a phrase people sometimes use. If you don't know what it is, there's an example right here in Nehemiah - when suddenly Nehemiah gets his chance to ask the king for what he wants. It's in chapter 2 verse 4 [READ 2.4-5].

Right there, in the middle of talking to the king, Nehemiah send up a quick 'arrow-prayer'.

I'm sure you do that all the time - and it's good that we do.

"Lord, I can see that person coming up to talk to me who always winds me up. Please help me right now to bite my tongue, and be gracious."

That's fine - but do you see how Nehemiah's arrow-prayer grew out of much richer, deeper prayer, that lay behind it.

How do we learn to pray like this? Pray Bible-prayers.

Many of the things Nehemiah prays are direct quotations from what God had said to his people years earlier through Moses - as written down for us in the book of Deuteronomy.

Nehemiah's prayer is rich because it's rich in Scripture.

When you pray, use what you know from the Bible.

So how might you tomorrow, having read Nehemiah's prayer today?

Not just, "God, please heal my friend who's ill." Not just, "please make the church-plant a success." But: "Lord, God of heaven, God of love, you heard Nehemiah's prayer when he prayed to you, please will you now hear me as I present my requests to you..."

Take what God tells you about himself in the Bible, and turn into prayer back to him, making the words your own.

Isn't God good? He gives us the words we can say, to make our prayer-life deeper and richer.

We need a vision for growth in prayer this year.

At the end of this month we'll have an evening focused on prayer for the church-plant. And I trust that even those of us who are still unsure about it will put our shoulder to the wheel in rich, deep prayer for it, as it starts.

But this should be a vision for prayer that will enrich our whole life as a church-family, and the whole of our life in the Lord Jesus Christ.