

BUILD-A-BELIEVER WORKSHOPS

Ezra Nehemiah Esther

People say to me, "How do you build a church?" You don't build a church, you build a believer. As a result, the church will build itself. (John MacArthur).

Nehemiah Chapter 1:1 – 2:8

"The Days of Wine & Weeping"

Introduction

Most of us would like to have a more effective prayer life. I know I would.

By 'effective' we usually mean that our prayers would produce results in the lives of the people we are praying for. If we pray for their salvation, that they will be saved; if we pray for their healing, that they will be healed; if we pray for revival, that it would come.

Nehemiah was a man with an effective prayer life. We'll see and study several of his prayers as we work through his book; and we'll see their effect.

But before we see their effect, or effectiveness, we're going to see something else first. We're going to see that his prayers, and his praying, first **affected** him. I'm using the word "affect," with an 'a,' meaning the subjective, personal influence and impact that his praying had on him. Praying *affected* Nehemiah in a powerful and profound way before it became *effective*.

Perhaps our prayers are not as effective as they could be because we are not affected by them? It's something worth exploring.

We'll explore it by organizing our thoughts around two points: #1 Analyze The Affect Of Your Prayers, and #2 Expect The Effect Of Your Prayers.

#1 Analyze The Affect Of Your Prayers (1:1-11)

The Jewish people had been taken into captivity in Babylon for seventy years. In the year 530BC the power of the Babylonian Empire was overthrown by the Persians. The king of Persia encouraged Jews to return to the city of Jerusalem and rebuild it's Temple and it's walls.

Immediately about fifty-thousand of them did return. Discouraged by the immensity of the task, and by local opposition, they abandoned the work after only laying the foundation for their Temple.

About sixteen years later God raised up two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, who challenged the people to get back to work. They completed the Temple, some twenty years after their first arrival.

Sixty more years passed by and another group of Jews returned, led by Ezra. He set about reestablishing the spiritual life of the returnees. He, too, faced opposition. Although Ezra had great spiritual success among the people, the rebuilding of the city was still halted.

Ninety years after the first Jews returned from Babylon; and fourteen years after Ezra's return; the Lord raised-up Nehemiah and sent him to Jerusalem to rebuild its walls. He would accomplish in only fifty-two days what had not been done for nearly one hundred years!

Nehemiah 1:1 The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. It came to pass in the month of Chislev, *in* the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the citadel, Nehemiah 1:2 that Hanani one of my brethren came with men from Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped, who had survived the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem.

Nehemiah 1:3 And they said to me, "The survivors who are left from the captivity in the province *are* there in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem *is* also broken down, and its gates *are* burned with fire."

Walls and **gates** were critical to the life of an ancient city. It was wonderful that their Temple was rebuilt; but they remained in great jeopardy from their enemies.

Throughout our studies in Nehemiah we'll be using **walls** and **gates** as a metaphor for things in our lives that need rebuilding. Like the

Jews, we may have our Temple in the sense that we are believers indwelt by God the Holy Spirit. But if we do not maintain a wall of separation from the world; or if we allow certain gates to remain open to ungodly influences; then we are in grave danger from spiritual enemies. This book is a call to constantly rebuild our spiritual lives.

Jerusalem was in desperate need of assistance. Look around at our world: Is it in desperate need of assistance? *Of course it is!*

Nehemiah was a godly man who had a comfortable and successful life in Persia. In the palace, no less. But when he understood the true desperation of Jerusalem, he knew he had to do something.

We are godly individuals who, for the most part, have carved-out a comfortable life in Kings County. **We must understand the true desperation of the world outside; we must be moved to do something.**

What Nehemiah did was pray:

Nehemiah 1:4 So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned *for many days*; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

When you compare the date given in verse one with the date given at the beginning of chapter two, you find that Nehemiah prayed like this for about **one hundred days straight!**

He was deeply affected. Though he went about his duties in the palace, his life was now all about praying for Jerusalem. On-and-off, for one hundred days, he **wept**... he **mourned**... and he **fasted**. It was what he thought about; it consumed him; it was like an obsession. It even affected the way he looked to others.

I encourage you to discover a passion for something godly; for a ministry or area of service to God. We do it for other things – like hobbies or recreations; why not for God?

Since Nehemiah prayed for one hundred days, I think it's safe to say that the rest of the chapter is not the record of a single prayer but an

overview of his praying. In it we can see at least three things by which to gauge whether or not prayer is affecting us.

The first gauge you want to monitor is your understanding that there is a plan for your life:

Nehemiah 1:5 And I said: "I pray, LORD God of heaven, O great and awesome God, You who keep Your covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments,

The Lord God of heaven has revealed Himself to us. He has made a covenant with mankind by which we can know Him. We can love Him and are assured of His mercy as we observe His commandments.

God took the initiative to save us, and He is more than able to keep us safe. He has a plan for our lives – both individually and corporately. Prayer is affecting me when I rest in the assurance that God has a plan, and when I desire to discover that plan.

The next gauge you want to monitor, to see if prayer is affecting you, is your compassion for others:

Nehemiah 1:6 please let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, that You may hear the prayer of Your servant which I pray before You now, day and night, for the children of Israel Your servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against You. Both my father's house and I have sinned.

Nehemiah 1:7 We have acted very corruptly against You, and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.

I confess that I always struggle with this idea of identifying myself with the sins of others. Yet, because so many men of God in Scripture do just that, it must be biblical.

Perhaps one reason they did so was to remind us that God sometimes deals with us as a community of believers and not just as individuals. I look around and see believers I am in community with living half-hearted lives. They are headed for spiritual trouble; and it's their own fault when they fall. Still, I should have compassion for them. *"But for the grace of God, there go I."* Prayer is affecting me

when I have compassion for my brothers and sisters and want to do something to help them.

Another gauge to see if your praying is affecting you is your confidence in God's Word:

Nehemiah 1:8 Remember, I pray, the word that You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations; Nehemiah 1:9 but if you return to Me, and keep My commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I will gather them from there, and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for My name.'
Nehemiah 1:10 Now these are Your servants and Your people, whom You have redeemed by Your great power, and by Your strong hand.

In conjunction with his praying, Nehemiah searched out the Bible in order to try to get a grip on what was happening. He saw clearly the principles and promises God had laid down about dealing with His chosen nation. He was confident God would fulfill His Word to them.

Praying is affecting me when I have real confidence God will fulfill His Word.

As we near the end of this chapter, we're near the end of the one hundred days of praying. Nehemiah knew God had a plan for both he and his countrymen; Nehemiah had compassion for his countrymen; and he was confident God's Word would not and could not fail.

Now we are ready to see the final profound affect of his praying:

Nehemiah 1:11 O Lord, I pray, please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name; and let Your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man." For I was the king's cupbearer.

He was more than a butler. The king's cupbearer was an important royal position. The cupbearer poured the wine for the king, making sure it was safe to drink and not poisoned. When the king was not dining, the cupbearer's duties included deciding who could see the king. He was a trusted person with remarkable access to the throne.

Look carefully at this final prayer of Nehemiah. It was that he would prosper by being granted mercy in the sight of King Artaxerxes. Why did he need this? Why would he ask for this?

The reason he needed and asked for mercy from the king is revealed in the next chapter: ***Because he wanted permission from the king to let him go to Jerusalem to rebuild its walls.***

Nehemiah prayed for one hundred days. God would answer Nehemiah by sending him to Jerusalem. As he prayed, **Nehemiah realized that he was the answer to his own prayers!**

Not always, but I think more often than you realize – **You** are the answer to what you are praying for.

One obstacle to seeing ourselves as the answer to prayer is that we think ourselves unqualified. How qualified was a **cupbearer** to lead a massive construction project?

He was as qualified as you are! God wants to use you, to send you, to accomplish His purposes. He has a plan for your life, to use you to help others according to the principles, precepts, and promises revealed in the Word of God.

Maybe your prayers aren't effective because you are not allowing them to affect you to be the answer, or at least part of the answer.

#2 Expect The Effect Of Your Prayers (2:1-8)

I hope to show that Nehemiah expected his praying to have some effect on King Artaxerxes. I think he was surprised exactly how it came about; but he was ready when it did.

Nehemiah 2:1 And it came to pass in the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, *when wine was before him*, that I took the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had never been sad in his presence before.

Nehemiah 2:2 Therefore the king said to me, "Why *is* your face sad, since you *are* not sick? This *is* nothing but sorrow of heart." So I became dreadfully afraid,

Maybe Nehemiah had pulled an all-nighter in prayer. The king noticed a sadness about him. This was something to be feared because you were not allowed to be sad in the presence of the king! Part of your job description was to act as though everything was wonderful.

Nehemiah 2:3 [Nehemiah] said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire?"

His passion, born from his praying, was on the tip of his tongue. He did not hesitate to speak. It's as if he had expected, some way or another, that God would answer his prayers and give him at least the opening to ask the king to prosper him.

Nehemiah 2:4 Then the king said to me, "What do you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven.

Nehemiah 2:5 And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it."

Nehemiah 2:6 Then the king said to me (the queen also sitting beside him), "How long will your journey be? And when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time.

What did Nehemiah pray for right then? I'm sure that, in that brief moment, his heart was full of thanksgiving; and the desire for boldness; and the need for wisdom. There were dozens or hundreds of things he might have prayed for – all of them interpreted by the Holy Spirit in a fleeting moment as Nehemiah shot up a quick prayer.

You can pray as much in a moment as you can in one hundred days... ***If you've prayed for one hundred days!*** Praying much prepares you to pray without ceasing. It keeps your heart in the state of praying always and without ceasing.

Nehemiah 2:7 Furthermore I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, let letters be given to me for the governors of the region beyond the River, that they must permit me to pass through till I come to Judah,

Nehemiah 2:8 and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he must give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel which pertains to the temple, for the city wall, and for the house that I will occupy." And the king granted them to me according to the good hand of my God upon me.

Nehemiah had a plan; it was a very specific plan. These were the ways the king could prosper him.

This, too, indicates he expected his praying to be effective. He was expecting God to cause King Artaxerxes to show him mercy; and he was ready when he did.

Keep in mind that Nehemiah had come to see that he was a big part of the plan. **Our** praying will be more effective when we are first affected by it to say, *“Here am I, Lord. Send me!”*

Applying the Word...

There are at least two errors we might make in seeking to apply these principles of *affective* and *effective* prayer:

1. One error is to think that anything I might have on my heart to do for God is something I should immediately step-out and do. I've seen people without God's gifting and without any real calling or confirmation establish something just because they want to do it. It's usually something comfortable and convenient and independent of oversight. That is not the spirit of Nehemiah. He was called to real sacrifice in order to meet a genuine need.
2. The other error is to think that we are only talking about things that might be considered great endeavors for God. For you, a great endeavor might be going into full-time ministry; or it might be going on a short-term mission; or it might be teaching a Children's Ministry class; or it might be volunteering in some other capacity at the Church. It might be carrying your Bible to work tomorrow; or getting together with other believers at lunch and praying with them; or with your fellow students. Your endeavors are great because they are for God.

There is one other application for us as a community of believers. We are coming up on our annual **24Hours of Prayer**. It is some gauge of the passion of our fellowship to see how that goes, is it not?

If you are not yet a believer: You are trying to build a life apart from God. The problem is, anything you build apart from God is on a poor

foundation that cannot withstand the storms of life. It's like building directly on sand, right on the shoreline. Sooner or later, it will be washed away and ruined.

Jesus is the only rock-solid foundation to build your life upon.

