

## **Building the Builder Part 3**

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Work in Progress / Nehemiah 1:1–11

In Nehemiah chapter 1, verses 8 through 11, we hear a prayer that knows where it's going. After months of grief and confession, Nehemiah begins to pray with purpose, anchoring his requests in God's promises and asking boldly for what is needed. This week, Pastor Brian explores how intentional, Scripture-shaped prayer helps us move from vague spiritual longing to clear, faithful dependence on God, and offers practical encouragement for praying with direction in our everyday lives.

### **Introduction**

- In December of 1944, the Third Army was advancing across Europe under the command of General George S. Patton.
  - The men were disciplined, experienced, and committed to the mission.
  - They were also exhausted.
  - Winter rain soaked uniforms, turned roads into mud, and slowed every movement forward.
  - Thick cloud cover grounded aircraft and limited visibility.
  - The conditions shaped the pace of the campaign as much as the enemy did.
- Patton paid close attention to that reality.
  - He understood that progress depended on factors beyond strategy and manpower.
  - Weather shaped momentum.
  - Visibility shaped timing.
  - Conditions shaped outcomes.
  - So Patton turned to one of the most overlooked resources in his command.
- He called for his chief chaplain, Colonel James H. O'Neill.

- “Do you have a good prayer for weather?” Patton asked. “We must do something about these rains if we are to win the war.”
  - It wasn’t a typical request from a battlefield commander.
  - Lord knows generals talk strategy and logistics all day long, but Patton wanted prayer — concrete, direct prayer — *because he believed prayer had power to shape what was ahead.*
  - He didn’t want something vague or flowery.
  - He wanted something purposeful, something specific to the exact need facing his army .
- He searched the prayer books available to him.
  - He found prayers for comfort, courage, and endurance.
  - He found words suited for grief and uncertainty.
  - He did not find a prayer that addressed the conditions facing the Third Army in that moment.
- So the chaplain took out a card and wrote one...

*Almighty and most merciful Father, we humbly beseech Thee, of Thy great goodness, to restrain these immoderate rains with which we have had to contend. Grant us fair weather for Battle. Graciously hearken to us as soldiers who call upon Thee that, armed with Thy power, we may advance from victory to victory, and crush the oppression and wickedness of our enemies and establish Thy justice among men and nations. Amen.*

- Once he finished, O’Neill pulled on his overcoat, walked across the barracks and then stood before Patton.
  - O’Neill held out the card.
  - Patton took the card and examined it. The General was pleased.
  - “Have 250,000 copies printed,” he said, “and see to it that every man in the Third Army gets one.”

- The conversation continued...
- “Chaplain, sit down for a moment; I want to talk to you about this business of prayer.”
- O’Neill took his seat.
- “Chaplain, how much praying is being done in the Third Army?” asked Patton.
- “Does the General mean by chaplains, or by the men?”
- “By everybody.”
- “I am afraid to admit it, but I do not believe that much praying is going on. When there is fighting, everyone prays, but now with this constant rain - when things are quiet, dangerously quiet, men just sit and wait for things to happen.”
- “Up to now, in the Third Army, God has been very good to us,” said Patton. “We have never retreated; we have suffered no defeats...This is because a lot of people back home are praying for us. We were lucky in Africa, in Sicily, and in Italy. Simply because people prayed. But we have to pray for ourselves, too.”
- O’Neill returned to his quarters and issued a directive, in Patton’s name, which would be distributed to the Third Army’s 486 chaplains, representing thirty-two denominations, and senior officers in more than twenty divisions:
- The order stated: “Pray when driving. Pray when fighting. Pray alone. Pray with others. Pray by night and pray by day. Pray for the cessation of immoderate rains, for good weather for Battle...Pray for victory. Pray for our Army, and Pray for Peace.”
- What happened next became part of legend.
  - In the dead of winter, with rain and mud choking movement and blocking air support, the skies cleared.

- Patton wrote a note in his journal, “What a glorious day for killing Germans!”
- Allied air forces took to the skies, ground forces advanced, and the tide began turning in a pivotal battle.
- Winston Churchill described the outcome, “This is undoubtedly the greatest American battle of the war and will, I believe, be regarded as an ever famous American victory.”
- Patton didn’t forget to thank his Chaplain for his prayer. Ironically, taking the Lord’s name in vain, Patton said, “That O’Neill sure did some potent praying. Get him up here, I want to pin a medal on him.”
- Patton then awarded Chaplain O’Neill a Bronze Star for composing that prayer — the only person in that war known to receive a medal for praying.
- What makes this story so compelling is not just that a general asked for a weather prayer.
  - It’s that he *expected a prayer to be precise*, connected to the real need facing his troops, and he directed that it be prayed again and again in specific circumstances.
  - It was intentional. It was concrete. It was purpose-driven.
- That’s a far cry from the kind of prayer that goes, “Lord, you know... do something.”
  - Or, “Help us somehow.”
  - The Third Army wasn’t encouraged to pray *if the spirit moved them*.
  - They were instructed to pray *about real conditions* that affected their mission, their lives, and their ability to serve.
- And when we come to [Nehemiah 1:8–11](#), we see this same pattern: prayer that is purposeful, deliberate, intentional.

- Prayer that names the situation honestly, that anchors itself in God’s promises, and that asks for *specific outcomes* in line with God’s purposes.
- Over the last two weeks, we’ve been taking a hard look at Nehemiah’s prayer.
  - We’ve seen how he prayed with consistency and zeal once he learned about the fate of Jerusalem’s walls.
  - We’ve seen how he took seriously the role of confession of sin as he prayed.
  - Today, we will seek to understand how we can pray with intention and purpose.
  - Prayer that engages God with *where we actually are and what we truly need*.

### **Scripture Reading**

#### **Nehemiah 1:1–4 ESV**

<sup>1</sup> The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel,

<sup>2</sup> that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem.

<sup>3</sup> And they said to me, “The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.”

<sup>4</sup> As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

#### **Nehemiah 1:8–11 ESV**

<sup>8</sup> Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples,

<sup>9</sup> but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.’

<sup>10</sup> They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.

<sup>11</sup> O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.” Now I was cupbearer to the king.

- As we listen to Nehemiah’s prayer, one thing becomes clear almost immediately: this is not a prayer spoken on impulse.
  - His words are measured.
  - His requests are deliberate.
  - And the language he uses sounds familiar.
- The reason for that is simple: Nehemiah prays like someone who has been shaped by Scripture.
  - He reaches back to promises God has already made.
  - He uses covenant language.
  - He anchors what he’s asking God to do in what God has already said He would do.
- That observation raises an important question for us.
  - What gives prayer that kind of clarity and direction?
  - And that leads us to our first truth this morning:

**The Intentionality of our prayer life is enhanced by our understanding of the Word of God. (vv. 8-9)**

- Nehemiah calls on the LORD to remember.

- God doesn't need help remembering anything.
- He's not like Darius back in [Ezra 6](#) who had to go search the archives to verify what Cyrus had already said.
- None of his promises have ever been forgotten, so there's no way Nehemiah is asking God to recall forgotten information.
- Instead, when Nehemiah says "remember" he is anchoring his prayer in something that God has already promised.
- The word has the sense of "draw attention to."
- Like an attorney in a trial might draw attention to a piece of evidence. The evidence was there all along, but by doing so he is anchoring his argument in truth that is already known.
- But here's the deal - we can't draw attention to that with which we are unfamiliar.
  - I was in a meeting with a guy this week who trains pastors and church leaders in Africa.
  - He told us about one of the pastors who only had one page of the Bible from which to preach.
  - While I bet he knew that page like the back of his hand, his mind was going to be blown once he got a hold of the whole thing!
- Nehemiah was calling attention to God's promises - in particular he's drawing attention to [Deuteronomy 28-30](#).
  - There, God specifically promised that disobedience would lead to scattering
  - And repentance would lead to restoration.
  - Nehemiah recognized that he was living on the cusp of that transition from scattering to restoration.
  - He saw, first hand, how devastating it was to be scattered.

- But he knew that God was faithful and would keep every one of his promises.
- We need to have the kind of relationship with the Word of God that allows it to saturate our prayers.
- One of the best ways to make that happen is through Bible memorization.
  - There are all kinds of resources available on the internet to help you with that.
  - There are apps that specialize in helping us memorize scripture.
  - I'm more of an auditory learner...so I learn best by hearing things. I recently learned about a podcast called "His Word Abiding In You" which is a bi-weekly podcast that helps you memorize verses throughout the week.
  - I'll include a link in the TapTag if you'd like to take a look at some options.
  - At risk of sounding old fashioned - index cards and handwritten flash cards are still pretty effective at engaging the noggin in the process of memorization since you're not only reading/reciting, you're also writing.
- If you struggle with memorization...
  - 1 - Ask God to help you hide his word in your heart.
  - 2 - Don't just read the bible for content sake or to check a box off your reading plan.
    - As you read the bible, let your prayers be influenced directly by what you're reading.
    - I'm not going to tell you that's always easy.
    - If you're in the middle of the finer points of Levitical law or slogging it out with some obscure text in Ezekiel, it's going to

be more difficult than if you're reading the Sermon on the Mount.

- It isn't that those texts are less-inspired, or less-important - they're just harder to understand and find application.
- 3 - Even if you can't quote chapter and verse, you can allow the principles and concepts you learn from the bible inform your prayers.
  - Nehemiah's prayer is more broadly based on a couple of chapters.
  - We can certainly find reference points, but his prayer is more of a summary than a recitation.
  - It is still informed by the scriptures, however.
- Why does this matter?
- Well, that takes us to v. 11 (and let me caution my notetakers that v. 11 packs a punch)

**Purposeful prayer seeks to align itself with the heart of God. (v. 11)**

- I remember when I was a child that I would pray and my prayers came across as more of a wish list.
  - There were things I wanted that I didn't have.
  - And all I knew to do was go to God because I believed he could give me those things.
  - It's not that I was wrong - I just didn't understand the whole picture.
  - I had not yet grasped the prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of his betrayal.
    - It is one of the most human moments we see from Jesus.
    - [Matthew 26:39](#) records it this way: "And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let

this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.””

- What a profound prayer.
- In it, we see recognition from Jesus that he was about to face an unimaginably difficult ordeal.
- Jesus wasn't skipping to the cross with a song of happiness in his heart.
- He felt every lashing, every drop of spit that hit his face, he felt every pound of the cross he was forced to carry, every agonizing footstep down the Via Dolorosa.
- He could hear the clang of hammer on nail as it pierced his hands and his feet.
- Jesus prayed out of his experience of dread and anguish...but he was not governed by those emotions.
- Instead, in his prayer, he made sure that his heart was aligned with God's purposes.
- The apostles would later explain that purpose...

**1 Peter 2:24 ESV**

<sup>24</sup> He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

**Romans 8:3–4 ESV**

<sup>3</sup> For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,

<sup>4</sup> in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

- Back to me in my youth...

- I wasn't interested in praying like Jesus.
  - I was only interested in praying like Brian.
  - So it would frustrate me when I wouldn't get what I wanted.
  - But I wasn't at all interested in aligning my heart with God's
- Now as someone who has matured a little since the days of my youth, I've come to recognize that God's purposes for me are ALWAYS better than my purposes for me.
    - That doesn't necessarily change how I feel about situations.
    - I'd be lying to you if I said I understand what God is doing 100% of the time.
    - But even if I don't understand his plan and his purposes, I still trust that his vision is better than mine.
- Part of praying with purpose is actually working to understand what God's purposes are.
    - This is the hard work of prayer.
      - This is the "wake you up in the middle of the night to pray" kind of work.
      - This is the complete and total submission to God kind of work.
      - This is the tear-stained bible kind of work.
  - It isn't hard to go through the list of people who have medical problems.
    - Sadly, for too many Christians, that's the extent of our prayer life.
    - We pray for everything from Aunt Bessie's ingrown toenail to the heavier matters that our friends and loved ones might be facing.
    - I'm not saying that we shouldn't be praying for those things - it is always an encouragement to know that people are praying for you when you're facing something.

- But purposeful prayer takes us beyond the “prayer list.”
- When Nehemiah prays in ch. 1, he does so after months of seeking the Lord’s will in prayer and fasting (remember, we’re only seeing the summary/conclusion of that season recorded for us in ch. 1).
- I believe that during this time of seeking that he gained a clear sense of his calling.
- And when he prays, “give me mercy in the sight of this man” he’s praying something that is perfectly aligned with the plans and purposes of God.

**Purposeful prayer is about God working in us (v. 11)**

- As we have taken a deep dive into this chapter, the theme that has guided us is “Building the Builder.”
  - God is doing a work in Nehemiah before Nehemiah can do a work for God.
  - That’s perhaps the greatest purpose in prayer.
- Going back to young Brian, I wrongly believed that my prayers were somehow going to unlock the heavenly prize vault.
  - If I just prayed hard enough, used the right combination of words, said it enough times in repetition.
  - At some point, God was going to open the vault and dump out my heart’s desires.
  - But prayer isn’t about finding the magic key to God’s abundance.
- No, prayer is about moving the needle in my heart.
  - God is perfect - I am not.
  - God doesn’t need to be brought into alignment with my wants.
  - I need to be brought into alignment with what He wants.

- God is the standard...I'm the janky old car that keeps getting ran into the curb.
- Just when I think everything is fine - bang...I'm bouncing off the curb and I'm completely out of alignment again.
- The only way I keep my heart in alignment is by regularly reminding myself of what God has made known in his word and by routinely seeking his good plans and purposes for me.
  - I am the one who needs to be conformed into the image of Christ.
  - It's not the other way around.
  - And because purposeful prayer is about shaping our hearts, that means something very important.
- We should be mindful of this because as God shapes us, he isn't just doing it because he wants to do us a solid.
- As we see in Nehemiah, he actually ends up being part of the answer to his own prayers.
  - Nehemiah doesn't pray, "Call Ezra to rebuild the walls."
  - He doesn't pray, "Call a building committee."
  - He prays, "Give me favor."
- God may have laid on your heart some lost loved one or coworker.
  - And you are absolutely right to pray for their soul.
  - That's a prayer that aligns with God's plans and purposes.
  - A very purposeful prayer for that soul might be, "Lord, remember your word when you said that you are patient toward us, not wishing that any of us should perish but that all should reach repentance. (That's a loose summary of [2 Peter 3:9](#)) So God in accordance with your promise, would you draw my friend to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ."
  - That is a very Christ-honoring, purposeful prayer.

- But you need to know that if God has laid your friend on your heart and you are praying for your friend...the work that God may be doing isn't first on your friend's heart but on yours!
- If you're praying, "Let Pastor Brian have an opportunity to share the Gospel with my friend" then it may be that you have misunderstood the assignment.

### **Conclusion - The Purposeful Praying Power of the People of God**

- There is one small blurb that is easy to overlook in v. 11.
  - Part of Nehemiah's prayer is that God would be attentive to his prayers.
  - But right after that, he also asks that God would be attentive to "the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name."
- What a precious gift we are given here by reminding us about the significance of community.
  - Prayer is certainly a private discipline.
  - It happens in the early hours when no one is stirring, or in the late evenings when everyone else is asleep.
  - Sometimes it wakes us at 3 in the morning.
- But it's also a privilege that we can do it with our brothers and sisters in Christ as well.
  - One of my favorite times during the week is when we as a staff come together on Thursday mornings to pray together.
  - Where we give thanks for what God is doing and seek to align ourselves with his plans and purposes.
- Nehemiah never imagined himself praying alone.
  - He understood that God forms His people together.
  - That shared dependence, shared humility, and shared longing for God's purposes is part of how God builds His people.

- Purposeful prayer does not isolate us.
- It draws us together.
- As we've seen throughout this chapter, God was doing a work in Nehemiah long before Nehemiah ever lifted a stone to rebuild the wall.
  - God was shaping his heart through Scripture, confession, intentionality, and dependence.
  - And in time, Nehemiah himself would become part of the answer to the prayers he prayed.
- That's often how God works.
  - Prayer is not a mechanism for unlocking blessings.
  - Prayer is the means by which God aligns us with His will.
  - Prayer is how God builds the builder.
- So since we know praying doesn't come naturally, we can absolutely apply the lessons of [Nehemiah 1](#) in our understanding.
  - Pray with intention.
  - Let Scripture shape your requests.
  - Seek God's purposes above your own.
  - But don't carry the weight alone.
- God is at work in His people, and He delights to hear the prayers of those who fear His name.
  - Let's be a people who pray with purpose — together.