

# A Mile in his Shoes: Nehemiah's Story



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## A Mountain-Moving Prayer

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Package song: "Pressing On" by: Relient K

I first heard the song "Pressing On" in high school before I became a Christian. I really liked that it was catchy and upbeat and I'd listen to it and think, "Yes, I CAN overcome whatever obstacle is facing me right now! Being fourteen is hard, but I am definitely pressing on!" (Not exactly, but you get the picture.) I took it as a simple encouragement and energizer; it didn't even occur to me that what they were singing about might refer to God.

I thought, I'm pressing on.

I won't sit back and take this anymore.

I'm done with that.

I've got one foot out the door.

I. I. I. I.

It would seem that I had missed all of the times the pronoun changed from "I" to "we".

The team effort is clear in the verse when it says:

"I think we're going somewhere,  
we're onto something good here.  
Adversity, we get around it."

This is not one person flying solo. It's not all about me.

I am not going somewhere. We are.

I'm not onto something good here. We are.

I don't get around adversity. We do.

And this attitude is worth noting.

Because we love stories of people who overcome adversity. People who don't give up. People who overcome the odds to achieve their goals. People who believe strongly enough in their cause to move beyond their fears, hesitations, weaknesses, and insecurities and take action.

Nehemiah was someone who embodied this idea completely. He was facing struggles that we could easily identify with because we all have times when we can plainly see the challenges ahead of us. And he was able to overcome multiple obstacles that were put in his way. And there was a specific aspect of his life that enabled him to persevere, to press on, even though the odds constantly appeared to be stacked against him.

One hundred forty-one years prior to Nehemiah's story, the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem and left the city in ruins as they carried off thousands of Jews into exile and killed others. [SCRIPTURE]

Nehemiah 1:2-4

<sup>2</sup> Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

<sup>3</sup> They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."

<sup>4</sup> When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

So, this conversation is happening 141 years after the city was taken under siege. **One hundred forty-one.** And still Nehemiah, for some reason, is utterly overwhelmed. He's heartbroken, and his response is raw emotion. He begins to weep and spends time in mourning, prayer, and fasting. He is completely crushed by the news that the wall of Jerusalem is still in a heap of ruins, the gates burned to the ground, and the city is simply lying there in disgrace.

It's hard to imagine the magnitude of the devastation that must have existed in Jerusalem. Buildings lying in rubble, people dead or taken captive, and no one having done anything for 141 years to try and clean it up.

Can you imagine a city being left in complete disgrace and not one person showing up to try and fix it? THIS is what broke Nehemiah's heart. He didn't have personal relationships with the people who had lived in Jerusalem when it was destroyed. He had never lived there. All he knew was that it was the land of his ancestors and, for whatever reason, it had been lying there, desolate, a mere skeleton of the thriving city it had once been, for 141 years.

The level of destruction that Jerusalem suffered was comparable to the effects of natural disasters we've seen in the past few years.

August 2005 we watched the news as Hurricane Katrina ripped through the southeastern United States. It destroyed New Orleans and took the lives of over 1,800 people in and around that area. It was absolutely terrible. And now, 4 ½ years later, reconstruction is still underway. People are still living in neighboring states in trailers as they await their opportunity to return home. And the emergency response, as compared to Nehemiah's situation, was almost immediate.

Just three weeks ago the world watched, horrified, as a magnitude 7 earthquake tore apart Haiti and left the nation devastated. There are thousands of people who have been mobilized to help dig through the rubble looking for survivors and providing medical care for those who need it and shelter for those whose homes have been destroyed. And still, there is a huge need for both manpower and resources to aid those who have survived.

Now, the heartbreaking situation in Haiti is certainly different from the situation that existed in Jerusalem in terms of causality, but the fact that the entire area has been ruined, people's lives ravaged, that is the same. So think about it. What would happen if after the earthquake in Haiti, *no one touched Port-au-Prince for 141 years*. What would it look like for the city to sit there, completely demolished, rotting for 141 years. That means that if we waited for someone like Nehemiah to come along and have a vision for fixing Haiti, ***he would not realize the situation until the year 2151***. Praise God that is not the case. We did not waste any time in beginning to restore Haiti. And we certainly could not conceive of a situation in which the world would ignore such a huge tragedy and simply stand by and watch. Even the thought of it should be *sickening* to us.

And that was why Nehemiah reacted the way he did when he found out that for 141 years, Jerusalem had just sat there, completely obliterated, and no one had done anything. He was appalled at the situation. He was shocked that somehow the completely destroyed city had escaped everyone's attention. He couldn't believe there weren't people, *at some point in the past 141 years*, who had been willing to help.

Nehemiah wasn't in a particularly powerful position to do anything about Jerusalem. He wasn't a king or a governor or royalty at all. He was a Jew working as a cupbearer to the Persian King Artaxerxes. He wasn't in charge of much. But he was overcome with a passion and a vision he could not ignore. And his position, really his lack of status and power, these things were irrelevant when he felt God calling him to do something radical.

Next week we'll discuss a little bit more about what his job meant exactly, but the important thing to know today is that he had to be trusted by the king to be in this position. His whole job was to taste the king's drinks beforehand to make sure they were not poisoned. Essentially, if someone were able to influence the cupbearer, they could easily kill the king. If someone had in fact tried to poison the king, the plot would be discovered when Nehemiah took a drink and fell over dead. He was living on the edge with the day-to-day dangers of his occupation. But because of his occupation, he had contact with the one person through whom he could maybe change the situation in Jerusalem.

And so he prayed.

I'm sure you're thinking, "Well, duh he prayed, he's Nehemiah. He's in the Bible." But let's seriously think about this. He is overwhelmed with emotion because Jerusalem has been abandoned and perishing for well over a hundred years. He is furious and distraught all at once, simply in disbelief that people have allowed the deterioration to continue. He has this fire built up in him to do something about it. He knows he can't just let it go. And so he's building up all of this emotion and energy to get out there and make a difference...

AND...

He prays.

In hindsight, we can clearly see that prayer was necessary. The odds were against him to rebuild a city, or even get permission to do so; he obviously needed some help, and he recognized that.

But would this response have a place in our own lives? Really think about that for a second. **My answer is no.** I am much better at panicking than I am at sitting down to pray. Or if I do sit down to pray in the midst of a crisis situation, I can't seem to organize my thoughts

enough to say anything coherent besides, “God, I need this to happen. Help me make it happen. Let’s go!”

But Nehemiah really prayed. He prayed expectantly, having full faith that God would answer him.

And it was an awesome prayer.

Nehemiah 1:5-11

<sup>5</sup> Then I said:

"O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, <sup>6</sup> let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. <sup>7</sup> We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

<sup>8</sup> "Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, <sup>9</sup> but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.'

<sup>10</sup> "They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. <sup>11</sup> O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man."

His prayer is powerful.

And it begins with worship (v. 5-6a). Even though he is in mourning, even though his heart is broken, his first statement centers on the awesomeness of God. He starts from a place of humility, knowing that God is bigger than any devastation that has come upon Jerusalem, bigger than any sorrow that is burdening his heart. God, before anything else, is good, and He is worthy of Nehemiah's worship.

He then transitions into a confession for him and his people (v. 6b-7). He is acknowledging that they are sinful and imperfect, taking responsibility for the actions that ultimately led to the destruction of Jerusalem when the Babylonians invaded in the first place.

He knows the people don't deserve God's favor. He knows they haven't earned it. But he remembers God's promise to Moses, the promise to gather his people back together even if they have been exiled (v. 8-9). And it is only at this point that he makes a request for God to help him (v. 10-11).

Nehemiah prayed this prayer knowing that he was going to be forced to take action, but unwilling to do so until he had talked to God about it. In chapter 2 (v. 2) we see that after he found out about Jerusalem, when he brought wine to the king, he seemed sad, so much so that the king actually asked him what was wrong. Nehemiah told him about how Jerusalem was lying in ruins and the wall had been broken down, and the king asked him what exactly he wanted. Though this dialogue displays a closeness in his relationship with the king, he was still a servant. And the request he was about to make was pretty far-fetched.

Nehemiah, obviously, wanted to go to Jerusalem. He wanted to see it rebuilt. He wanted to reconstruct the wall and recreate the beautiful city that had once existed there. For multiple reasons, this was a ridiculous request:

- He was asking to be excused from work for an extended period of time.
- Meaning the king would be risking his own safety in the absence of his trusted cupbearer.
- Previous efforts at rebuilding had failed. Repeatedly.
- And this specific request had ALREADY been denied in a former attempt at rebuilding Jerusalem (Ezra 4).

This was definitely a bold request coming from a servant, someone who had no political power whatsoever.

But these reasons, these disadvantages, had no bearing on Nehemiah's desire to rebuild the city. There was a fire in him and he knew what he had to do. God had placed such a heavy burden on his heart about Jerusalem, that he couldn't see another way.

Before he presented his request to the king, he prayed to the Lord (2:4). And scripture tells us that the king was pleased to send him (2:6). And not only was the king pleased to send him, he sent with him a handful of helpful things, such as letters to the rulers of the areas he would travel through on his journey, so that he might be safe.

In short, his petition to the king was more successful than he could have imagined. And I think a lot of that can be contributed to his prayers.

The prayers of Nehemiah were consistent. He is a glowing example of what Paul was saying to the Thessalonians when he urged them to "pray continually" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). It sounds so simple, but it is so difficult to put into practice.

I know this is something I used to be good at. I used to have a small enough number of things to think about on a day-to-day basis that taking time to pray throughout my day was easy. I had time, I was thinking about it, and so I did it. And that's definitely not the case anymore. Though I believe prayer is important, and it is crucial in my relationship with God to talk to him, every time I think to set aside time to talk to him, I'm either on the run or so exhausted from a day of being on the run that my inclination is simply to go to sleep and "pray tomorrow".

**Nehemiah was not a "pray tomorrow" kind of a guy.** He was a "pray right here, right now, before I do anything else" kind of a guy. Throughout his book, he prays as soon as something happens. There's no hesitation or delay where he says, "Man, that's terrible, I should remember to pray for that later." When he finds out about the devastation of Jerusalem, he stops what he's doing and goes immediately into a time of mourning and prayer. He's faced with a challenge, and he prays until he gets a response. He knows the situation requires a team effort. And so he prays until he hears God speak. He prays until he gets clarity on what exactly he's supposed to do to confront the problem. And when he listens, he doesn't ignore or dismiss what God has called him to.

**Nehemiah's prayers entailed obedience.** He only prayed as he was ready to act on God's response. He didn't see prayer as a one-way conversation in which he would pour out his heart in an emotional response to something that was happening and then walk away expecting God to do something apart from him. He knew that when he prayed, he needed to be sincere. Not in the way that sincerity means he sympathized with the situation, but that he empathized to the point that he would join in and participate in being a part of the solution. He needed to really be prepared to do something. And he needed to be relying on God to sustain the course set before him. And that's what he consistently did. The whole book is about what he did as he listened to God through his prayers.

So ask yourself, **is that how I pray?** I'd like to let myself think I listen to God a lot of the time, but I know that's not true. I know that I don't pray sincerely, with my whole heart, very often. I know that most of the time I don't pray in genuine expectation and preparation of a response. And I'd be willing to bet that's the case for a lot of us. And we need desperately to break out of that rut. Prayer is not a one-way conversation. Prayer is not us unloading our emotional baggage and then leaving it with God, walking away, filling up again, and repeating the cycle. Prayer is meant to be a dialogue. If we are truly praying about things that matter to us, we can't quit after the first half.

**Nehemiah was praying about things he was passionate about.** There was a passion in his soul to go to Jerusalem and see the city rebuilt. He couldn't envision a path which did not lead him there to do God's work. It wasn't enough for him to "pray for the city" and hope something good happened. He needed to be involved. And he was willing to do so.

How often do we tell people "**I'll pray for you**" and then either A. not do it because we forget or B. if we do it, leave it at that and fail to do more to help them. How can that be our usual attempt at prayer? Prayer was designed to be something so exciting and dynamic, something that allowed us to communicate with the Creator of the universe, because he WANTS a relationship with us! And yet somehow, it has been reduced to a phrase that simply means, "**I hope you feel better soon**". Telling someone we are sorry for them, or simply hoping a situation fixes itself, doesn't do much to improve the world. Prayer without intentional effort, without a willingness to act, is simply a thought. It might be an encouraging thought, or a hopeful thought, but it is not the vibrant, relational, wonderful avenue of communication with God that it has the potential to be.

What is the use of praying about something if we are unwilling to act? I will say that being unable to act is one thing, praying about something you are passionate about but are unable to personally affect, that is a separate situation. And I do not believe everyone is called to take action in the missions field... because we definitely need supporters for the "go-ers" and "do-ers". What we're talking about here is praying because you don't feel like, or don't want to, do anything else. And that is not what God intends prayer to be in our lives. It is not the example we see from Nehemiah. Nehemiah clearly shows us that praying in the face of adversity, and **persevering** through rough patches begins with prayer and requires us to follow through.

It really is amazing that his response to any conflict was prayer. That is a world of difference from my response to conflict. When faced with serious conflict, I tend to shy away from it at all costs. Conflict is not something I enjoy, and I will do everything I can to keep the peace and not rock the boat if those are possibilities. **When things got complicated or went wrong, and it seemed like they wouldn't get better, Nehemiah prayed.** Which is truly a remarkable knee-jerk reaction kind of a response, because for a lot of us, when things get complicated or go wrong and it seems like they won't get better, we panic. And our panic is indicative of the fact that we have so much trouble remembering that it's not an "I" situation. It's a "we" situation.

I am not facing things alone. It is not my job to press on without any help, God wants to be part of the situation. He wants me to call out to him in prayer, the same way Nehemiah did, and be ready to work with him to make things better. He has given me every resource, every tool, that I need to connect with him and really engage in a relationship with him. And given that we all have these options before us, why wouldn't we utilize them?

The truth is, people who are connected to God in prayer can do amazing things. Paul wrote to the Philippians that he could "do all things through Christ who strengthens [him]" (4:13). Again, it is a "we" situation. It is not an "I" situation. Paul only accomplished

what he did for the church, for the kingdom, because he knew that God was with him. He would not have survived constant imprisonment or persecution if he only had his own two feet to stand on. He just wouldn't. And he was totally aware of that. He knew that his ability to do great things relied totally on God. Nehemiah was the same way.

And while we said that Nehemiah's response to conflict was prayer, **when his prayers were answered, he glorified God.** He said that "because the gracious hand of [his] God was upon [him], the king granted [his] requests" (2:8). Sometimes when our prayers are answered, we try and remember to say thank you, but sometimes we just heave a sigh of relief because we're so glad the trouble or danger has passed. It's like we forget that we asked for help, and that the aid arriving might be a response to our petitions.

**Nehemiah wasn't a particularly gifted individual.** He was a regular guy who knew what he was passionate about and what was worth fighting for. Ronald Reagan said, "A leader, once convinced that a particular course of action is the right one, must... be undaunted when the going gets tough." This was only possible for Nehemiah because of his relationship with God, and that relationship was strengthened and sustained by simple prayer. Because it wasn't Nehemiah alone who was able to do amazing things, as we'll hear about over the next couple of weeks in this series, it was his faith in God's ability to do things through him. **God strengthened the man so the man could build the city.** It was a "we" situation. And Nehemiah knew that.

We can change the world with God. Even in the face of devastation and tragedy, we have available to us a way to communicate with the One who gives us life. It isn't just that we don't pray frequently enough or that if we follow four simple steps our prayers will be better heard by God. It's that if we would just pray, with our whole hearts, having faith that God would respond, things really could be different. If we could just make it a priority, and work on making prayer our knee-jerk reaction to conflict, we might find ourselves far more encouraged and empowered to do something about the things we pray about. **God is ready to act.** The question is always whether or not we are ready to act with him.

I've learned, as I'm sure many of you have, that you shouldn't pray for things when you are not ready for a response. I used to pray for things like patience, and when I realized that God is in fact not a genie, and his main method of teaching me things like patience was to put me into situations the required massive amounts of it, I became slightly more discerning in my prayers. It is difficult to pray about things that matter to us when we know that prayer can and should lead to action. It is difficult to commit to a prayer knowing that your involvement can't stop there. Praying about things that are important to us is a difficult task. But it is worthwhile. And God wants us to be able to talk to Him about what breaks our heart and what we care about. But the flip side of that conversation is him guiding us in what we can do next.

Easy? No. Necessary? Only if we really want to see the world changed.

So we need to remember that adversity, we get around it. I don't. I am unable to solve my problems and accomplish amazing things without God's help. I am unable to be an effective member of the Kingdom without listening to what he has to say. I am unable to follow his guidance if I don't know what he is asking of me. And while it would be easy to become discouraged by our own limitations, the realization that being totally independent is ineffective at best, that humility should turn us right back to God. Because he offers us everything we need to lead the most extraordinary lives possible. And that is an exciting opportunity, one we won't want to miss.

Nehemiah got it right—and it all started with prayer.

So let's pray together.