

UNVEILING
THE
MYSTERY
OF
PRAYER



PASTOR JEFF SCHREVE

Unveiling the Mystery of Prayer

Nehemiah 1:4-28

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From His Heart Ministries

Unless otherwise specified, all Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Standard Version of the Bible.



Our Mission: To Reach the World

From His Heart Ministries is the broadcast ministry of Pastor Jeff Schreve. We began in 2005 with the mission to share real truth, real love and real hope from the loving heart of God. No matter how badly you may have messed up, God still loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. *From His Heart* exists to proclaim this Good News of Jesus with biblical preaching, practical teaching and encouragement for everyday living. Our prayer is that we will help you come to know Christ in a more personal way and grow in a deeper relationship with Him. As a viewer and listener supported ministry, your prayers and financial support to *From His Heart* are greatly appreciated.

FROM THE AUTHOR:

Prayer. It really does change things. And the reason why is because God answers prayer. David said, "I love the LORD, because He hears my voice and my supplications" (Psalm 116:1). When we are faithful to pray, God is faithful to answer.

Now the sad truth is that many of us don't know how to pray very well. Our prayers often lack effectiveness simply because we fail to understand what prayer is all about ... and how to pray in a way that truly connects with the heart of God.

The booklet you hold in your hands is written to encourage you in your prayer life. As you learn key principles of prayer and put them into practice, I believe your relationship with God will take on new meaning and fresh power. Remember, prayer can do anything that God can do ... and God can do anything.

May the Lord bless you richly as you join me in Unveiling the Mystery of Prayer.

Love,



Jeff Schreve, Pastor

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From His Heart Ministries

A pastor friend of mine was privileged to see Billy Graham at his home in Montreat, North Carolina. He had a private audience with Dr. Graham along with a couple of other people. And he asked Billy Graham this question: “Dr. Graham, in your ministry that God has used in such an incredible way, what has been the core? What has been the foundation? What has been the cornerstone of your success?” Dr. Graham answered without hesitation, “Prayer.”

Prayer is the core. Prayer is the cornerstone. Prayer is the foundation of all that God did and is still doing in and through the life and ministry of Billy Graham.

Now I think the greatest gift that God has given us is the gift of prayer. Prayer is the privilege given to every Christian that allows us to connect our nothingness with His almightiness. And the sad truth is many of us don't take advantage of that gift, that privilege. So many of us don't really take the time to pray.

Jesus' Example

When you read the gospels, it's interesting that little is said about Jesus pouring over the scriptures. You're not going to find in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John many references to Jesus

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slipping away with the scroll of Isaiah and studying that all night. Obviously, He spent time reading the Old Testament Scripture, for He quoted it often. But you'll find the Bible doesn't reference His study time much at all. What you do find, however, are references over and over and over again to the fact that Jesus would pray. He prayed and prayed and prayed. He prayed all night before He chose the twelve disciples. When Jesus was to be betrayed and arrested, where did they go to find Him? He was in the Garden of Gethsemane. What was He doing? He was praying, praying to His Father.

The disciples saw that aspect of Jesus' life, how important prayer was, and do you know what they said to Jesus? They didn't say, "Lord, teach us to preach. Lord, show us how to exegete a chapter in the book of Jeremiah." They said, "Lord, teach us to pray. Lord, we see how prayer is so central to Your life. Teach us to pray as John taught his disciples to pray."

What is Prayer?

Prayer is the key, but lots of us have misunderstandings and misconceptions about prayer. Now one of the things I want you to really get down in your heart is this truth: Prayer

is not what we do to get God to do what we want. A lot of people think that is what prayer is—bombarding heaven and beating on God until you wear Him out and get what you want. That’s not prayer.

Now prayer is, obviously, praying your needs to God. He wants you to do that. Jesus said, “*Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!*” (Matthew 7:9-11). God wants us to ask Him for the things we need.

But prayer is not getting God to do what you want. It’s not just beating on God until He caves to your wishes. That is a very warped and perverted view of prayer. This is what prayer really is: **Prayer is the means by which we fellowship with God so that we can know His heart and know and do His will.** That’s what prayer really is. It’s communion with God. Prayer is talking to God, sharing with Him, and hearing God share with you. It’s one-on-one time with God. That’s prayer. In time, your needs are met, but that is not the goal or purpose of prayer.

Discarding the Piñata

I think one of the ways to illustrate this is through a little thing that we're all familiar with—a piñata. This is the way we so often understand prayer. We erroneously see God as a piñata, and prayer as a baseball bat. God is in heaven, and little ol' you and me are on earth with a big prayer stick. And we think that if we keep swinging the prayer bat and keep battering God with request after request, then we'll finally get what we want. God, the piñata, will finally break, and out will come the desired answer, the candy so to speak.

But here is the big problem with a piñata view of prayer that so many of us seem to have: The focus is all on the goodies inside. And after you break the piñata and gather up the goodies, you are on your way and God is in your rearview mirror. You see, once the piñata is broken, all the focus is on the candy, and the piñata is discarded until the next birthday party, until the next need arises.

I have seen people who were facing a cancer scare or some other major issue like that. They prayed like they have never prayed before. They came to our weekly prayer service to seek the Lord with us. They took their big prayer stick out

and beat on God repeatedly saying, “God bring healing. God let the test come back negative. God provide that job. God save my marriage. God do this, that, and the other.” And God in His mercy and grace gave a favorable result. But what happened next? These same folks gathered up the goodies and left God in the dust. They said by their actions, “Hi-ho, Silver, see you later, God. I got what I wanted, and now I am down the road doing my own thing once again.”

When the Lord talks about revival hitting a nation, as He does in 2 Chronicles 7, the secret to prayer is seeking His face: “*[If] My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land*” (2 Chronicles 7:14). This is a critical point. Don’t seek His hand or the goodies He gives. Seek His face!

Nehemiah

The mystery of prayer is literally unveiled as we study Nehemiah’s prayer life. In this booklet, we are going to focus on a key passage from the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah led a coalition of people back to Jerusalem to repair the broken walls of the holy city, utterly destroyed

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in the siege of Babylon 141 years previously. He did something great and awesome that no one had done, but it was something that God wanted accomplished. God put that desire into the heart of Nehemiah, and Nehemiah prayed that desire back to Him. God did miracles as a result of his prayers and faithfulness.

Let me set the stage before we dig in to the first chapter of Nehemiah. The year is 444 B.C., and Nehemiah, the godly Jew, is living in the capital city of the Persian Empire, Susa (modern-day Iran). His job in the kingdom is cupbearer to the king of Persia. It's a really cool, plush job ... but it's kind of dangerous. When you're cupbearer to the king, you drink the king's wine before he does. And as long as nobody has poisoned the wine, it's good. You get to eat and drink like a king, and hang out in the presence of royalty. You get to enjoy all the luxury that surrounds the king. But, here is the downside: if someone is trying to kill the king by poisoning his food or drink, you are the one who dies. So there is an element of danger associated with the job.

In Nehemiah 1:2, Nehemiah inquires about the status of Jerusalem. The answer he receives in verse three breaks his heart, *“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 the gates are burned with fire.’ 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.”

Make no mistake about it: Nehemiah was a prayer warrior deluxe. You and I can learn so much about prayer from the life of this special servant of God. And as we begin, please know I did not write this booklet to discourage you. It’s given to encourage you and encourage me to effectively pray because God invites us to come to Him in prayer, and He wants our prayers to connect and be effective. So with that in mind, let’s look at seven wonderful insights to prayer from the life of Nehemiah.

INSIGHT #1:

Prayer should start with praise.

The walls of Jerusalem had been broken down since 586 B.C., and now it is 444 B.C. One hundred forty one years have passed, and the walls are still broken down. Now Nehemiah mourns upon receiving the news. It isn’t new news, but he receives it in a fresh, new way, and it breaks his heart as if it is the first time he has ever heard it. He is devastated by the fact

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that God's city, Jerusalem, is totally destroyed and broken down. It's like the pictures we see after a horrific earthquake or tsunami where buildings have collapsed and walls are broken and things are burning. That's what it was like in Jerusalem, God's holy city. To be sure, the temple was rebuilt in 515 B.C., but it was nothing in comparison to the glories of Solomon's Temple that was destroyed in 586. Things just aren't the same, and the city is in shambles.

The Bible says that Nehemiah sat down and wept. The word *sat down* is a picture of mourning in the ancient Near East where you put your elbows on your knees and you squat. And in this scene, he is squatted down, mourning and crying. When it says he wept, that word is also used in 1st Samuel chapter 1 when it talks about Hannah, who couldn't have any children, and she wept bitterly before the Lord. Her heart was shattered. Any woman who wants to have a child and is having difficulty knows that pain. This is the pain that Nehemiah felt for God's people and for God's city. He wept and mourned for days, and he was fasting and praying.

In the depth of his hurt, he begins to pray. And what does he pray? We read in Nehemiah chapter 1 verse 5: "*And 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. Let now thy ear be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant.”

In the midst of his brokenness and hurt, he starts off his prayer with praise. Amazing! He begins his prayer with praise! What does that teach us about prayer? Regardless of what is going on, prayer should always start with praise because God is worthy of our praise. Scripture says in Psalm 147:1, *“Praise the LORD! For it is good to sing praises to our God; for it is pleasant and praise is becoming.”*

The last psalm in the book of Psalms is all about praising the LORD. *“Let everything that has breath praise the LORD”* (Psalm 150:6). The Scripture says, *“From the rising of the sun to its setting, the name of the LORD is to be praised”* (Psalm 113:3).

When you pray, start off your prayers with praise because God inhabits the praises of His people. Do you know what praise does for you? It gets your eyes off your problems and gets them onto God. What does Nehemiah say about God? He says, “God, You are the great and awesome God. You’re the God who is able. I have a huge, gigantic problem, and You’re the God who is able. You’re the great and awesome God of heaven.”

And then Nehemiah talks about God's love: "...who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him..." Nehemiah was saying, "God, I love You, and You have love for me."

So start off your prayers with praise, and remember God is great and awesome and He loves you. Not only is He the King of the universe, He is your Dad who loves you with an everlasting love. Start off your prayers with praise.

INSIGHT #2:

Prayer must include confession.

Nehemiah goes on to say in this passage: "*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 of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father's house have sinned. 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*" (Nehemiah 1:6,7).

Nehemiah is a righteous guy. And he is heartbroken over the fact that Jerusalem has been destroyed. And why was the city destroyed? Because God's people had turned their back

on Him. They had forsaken God and foolishly, wickedly went “a whoring” (a really poignant King James description) after false idols. God was incredibly patient for a time, but His patience would eventually run out on His disobedient people. He told them that if they turned their back on Him and pursued other gods, He would remove them from the land. Obviously, the people didn’t really believe Him. And one of the things that bolstered their unbelief was the fact that God in His patience had not yet brought judgment for their sin. Because judgment was mercifully delayed, the people erroneously thought judgment was not coming.

There is a great verse in the book of Ecclesiastes that says, *“Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil”* (Ecclesiastes 8:11). When you don’t see God respond in judgment, you might think you can do whatever you want and nothing will happen to you. But as someone has well said, “The wheels of God’s justice grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine.” You can’t just blow God off and expect there to be no consequences for your actions. God basically told them, “Listen, if you will walk with Me, I’ll bless you. But if you disobey Me, and put Me in

your rearview mirror and go on down the road to worship other gods and follow after success and pleasure, you're going to have consequences, serious consequences."

And so, Nehemiah was praying about the consequences that befell the people. But he had not yet been born when all that happened 141 years previously. He had nothing to do with the destruction of Jerusalem. Yet he confesses his sin and the sins of his people. Do you know what that tells me about Nehemiah? He was sensitive to God and sensitive to the sin in his own life.

You will never get to first base in prayer with God if you don't confess your sin to Him. "*God is light,*" the Bible says, "*and in Him there is no darkness at all*" (1 John 1:5). If you think you can saunter up to the presence of God while holding on to the darkness of your sin and expect God to hear your prayer, you're sorely mistaken. The psalmist said, "*If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear*" (Psalm 66:18). If I'm walking in the darkness, and I'm not willing to confess my sin—whether it be pride, jealousy, bitterness, lust, or anything else that doesn't please Him—then He won't hear my prayer. I can't hold on to those wicked things and think I can walk into His presence for a chat. You have to confess those sins, cast them down and get

them out of your life.

Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector

Do you remember the story Jesus told about the Pharisee and the tax collector who went up to the temple to pray? The Pharisee prayed to himself and never confessed anything. He thanked God for not making him like the rotten tax collector. Little did he know that HE was the stinker! The Pharisee thought that doing “good” things—fasting twice a week, paying tithes—made him pleasing in God’s sight. No way! What pleased God was the heart of the tax collector, who realized his sin, fell on his knees and beat his breast in repentance and godly sorrow. He couldn’t even lift his eyes to heaven, but prayed, “*God, have mercy on me, the sinner*” (Luke 18:13). God heard that prayer because it was prayed from a humble, contrite heart.

If you need help with a prayer of confession, Psalm 139:23-24 is especially good to pray: “*Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my anxious thoughts. And see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way.*” As God reveals things in your life that are displeasing to Him, get those out in the open and under His blood. He really

is “good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in lovingkindness to all who call” upon Him (Psalm 86:5).

INSIGHT #3:

Prayer incorporates the Word of God.

Nehemiah has praised the Lord, confessed his sin, and now in verse 8 of this same chapter he says, “Remember the word which You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples; 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.’ And they are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your power and by Your strong hand” (Nehemiah 1:8-10).

Do you see it? Nehemiah reminds God of what He said and promised. That is a critical aspect of effective prayer.

Knowing God's Word

Oftentimes I hear people talk about the difficulty they have with prayer. "I don't really know what to say to God," they will lament. Let me ask you: How can we know what to pray? How can we pray without our prayers sounding mundane, routine and repetitive? The answer is to incorporate the Word of God in your prayers.

Nehemiah knew God's promises. He knew from the book of Deuteronomy that God said, "*Return to the LORD your God and obey Him with all your heart and soul according to all that I command you today, you and your sons, then the LORD your God will restore you from captivity, and have compassion on you, and will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you*" (Deuteronomy 30:2,3). Nehemiah simply prayed God's Word back to Him. He said to God, "Lord, remember what You said, remember what You promised?" God loves it when we do that.

Now, just to be clear, don't ever get the idea that God needs to be reminded because He has forgotten. He hasn't. He knows everything about everything. But God loves it when we remind Him of what He has said. He loves it when you and I take one of His promises and cling to it.

The Bible says in Acts chapter 2, verse 39: “*For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.*” The Bible is filled with God’s promises ... and they are for you! God wants you to cling to those promises and pray them back to Him.

Name It and Claim It?

Have you ever heard the Christian phrase “name it and claim it”? It is often used when discussing the issue of prayer. Some Christians believe that if you have enough faith, you can name your blessing and claim your blessing. You can pray for what your heart desires, claim it in Jesus’ name ... and it’s yours! Does the Bible teach “name it and claim it”? No. Prayer is not the means by which our will gets accomplished. Prayer is rooted in the will of God. Now don’t miss this point! The Bible doesn’t teach “name it and claim it.” The Bible teaches “find it and claim it.” Find a promise in the Word of God—something that God has clearly named—and claim that promise.

In my Bible, I have specific dates written by certain verses. That notation is there to remind me that on that date, God spoke that promise to

me and said, “Jeff, this is for you, for your life, for your family, for your church, for your ministry.” And I would begin to claim that promise and pray, “Lord, You promised such and such ... and I am trusting You to be faithful to Your Word.”

Back Side of Nowhere Baptist Church

When I was in seminary in North Carolina, I was privileged to pastor an old country church. It was the first church that I ever pastored ... and it was a very small church, averaging around fifteen in attendance each Sunday. For a city boy like me, coming from a church in Houston that had 10,000 members, this was church culture shock deluxe. On one of my first Sundays, there were eleven people present. Eleven. I thought about saying, “*Hey, I have an idea. Let’s all get in my van and go to another church ... where there are people!*” While a sweet fellowship, the church was basically just hanging on. They hadn’t had a baptism there in several years.

Now, don’t get me wrong. I praise God for the opportunity He afforded me in that little church. Those people were good to me, and my time there allowed me to grow in my preaching and pastoral skills. They paid me a small salary each week which really helped as I worked my

way through seminary.

What I remember most about my experience as pastor of that tiny congregation was the verse God gave me from Proverbs 22:29, “*Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will stand before kings. He will not stand before obscure men.*” As God impressed that verse upon my heart, I claimed it and said, “God, I’m going to do all I can to skill myself in Your Word, in preaching, teaching and knowing Scripture. I’m going to claim that You will open doors for me so that I’ll have an opportunity to speak into the lives of kings and leaders, to make a difference for the kingdom of God in a big way.” And the Lord began to open doors. Within six months of being named as pastor of that little church in North Carolina, I was called to the staff of a large church in Houston, preaching to thousands and being mentored by a great man of God.

My friend, spend time clinging to God’s promises and praying God’s promises back to Him. Say to Him, “Lord, You remember when You promised such and such. Lord, I believe You, and I trust You to bring it to pass.” God loves it when we pray His Word back to Him. Remember this truth ... find a promise in the Word of God—something that God has clearly named—and claim that promise!

INSIGHT #4:**Prayer asks God for great things.**

Nehemiah is praying, but he hasn't asked God for anything yet. Up until now in his prayer, he has: praised Him, confessed sin, and reminded God what He had promised. And then Nehemiah says in verse 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 to revere Your name, and [here is his request] make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion [favor] before this man*" (Nehemiah 1:10). "This man" that he referred to was King Artaxerxes, the potentate of Persia for whom he served as a cupbearer. Nehemiah's request was that God would grant him success, advance him, prosper him, and help him find favor and compassion in the eyes of his boss, the king.

The Hebrew word for *compassion* (*racham*) comes from a root which literally means "womb." Interesting. Here is Nehemiah's prayer in the PJV (Pastor Jeff Version): "Lord, that You would help King Artaxerxes to see me the way a mother would see the son or daughter of her womb. Grant me that kind of compassion before this man."

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Nehemiah desperately needs Artaxerxes' favor in order to do what God had put into his heart to do—to go back to Jerusalem, rebuild the walls, and restore the gates. He can't do that without the power and authority of the king, allowing him to go, and opening doors for him along the way. Unless God gives Nehemiah compassion before Artaxerxes, the rebuilding of the wall project is not going to get to first base.

Remember that Nehemiah is a Jewish slave who was working, basically, as a butler for the king. As I mentioned earlier, it was a good job with lots of perks: great food, royal accommodations and, the most strategic part, access to the king—albeit as a servant/master relationship, but access nonetheless. And Nehemiah is praying that God does a big miracle and grants him tremendous favor in the eyes of Artaxerxes so that the costly things Nehemiah needs will be approved and granted.

On paper, it looked impossible—a pagan king helping a Jewish slave, at great kingdom expense, to rebuild the broken walls of a destroyed city the Persians couldn't give a rip about. But Nehemiah knew that God is the God of the impossible ... so he prays big, really big!

Do you know what that says to you and me? Pray big too! God is a big God, so pray great big

prayers!

William Carey, the renowned missionary who started a mission work in India in the late 1700s, is famous for this statement: “Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.” Don’t you just love that?

Don’t pray little prayers, and don’t attempt little things. Attempt big things and have big dreams ... because God is a big God. One of my favorite Scriptures in the Bible says, “*Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory*” (Ephesians 3:20-21). God can do more than you ask and more than you think, so ask big and pray big. Why? Because nothing is big to the God who created the universe. Nothing.

A poem I like says this: “Got any rivers you think are uncrossable? Got any mountains you can’t tunnel through? God specializes in things thought impossible. He does the things others can’t do.” The greater the problem, the greater the opportunity for God to do an awesome miracle.

The greatest miracle Jesus ever performed, other than His own resurrection, was when He raised Lazarus from the grave. No one thought it could be done because Lazarus had been dead

for four days. He was already starting to decay and stink in the tomb. But the Lord raised him up. The Lord did the impossible. And If He can speak to four-day-old dead Lazarus and raise him from the grave, think what He can do in your life, in your situation. Nehemiah prayed big when he asked God to grant him compassion before the king and create a scenario in which Nehemiah could ask Artaxerxes for the moon. So pray big!

INSIGHT #5: Prayer doesn't give up.

Continuing in Nehemiah chapter 2:1, we read these words, *“And it came about in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes ...”* The month Nisan is April (about 445 B.C.). In chapter one, Nehemiah had said it was the month Chislev. Chislev is the month we know as December. And now it is April. Months have gone by, and nothing has happened. Nehemiah has been fasting, mourning, and praying day and night, but nothing has happened! But he keeps praying and praying. “Lord, I heard the news in December, and I was weeping my eyes out and fasting, mourning, and praying day and night. And now it’s April, and I haven’t seen anything change. I’ve been praying that You would grant

me favor in the heart of the king, but I haven't seen any change." But he kept praying. Aren't you glad he didn't give up in March and say, "Obviously, this isn't going to happen. God is not going to answer this prayer. This is futile ... and I quit!"

Ask, Seek, Knock

In Luke 18, Jesus exhorted his disciples to always pray and never give up. When you and I are praying hard but seeing no results, the great tendency is for us to quit in discouragement and frustration. We often say, "What's the use? Nothing is happening. I'm just wasting my time by continuing to pray!" No, you're not! When the going gets hard in prayer, keep praying. When you can't see any progress, keep praying! Jesus said, "*Ask and keep on asking and it shall be given to you; seek and keep on seeking and you shall find; knock and keep on knocking and the door shall be opened to you*" (Luke 11:9 AMP). Persistence in prayer pays! If you ask and keep asking, there will be an answer at the proper time. If you seek and keep seeking, that door is going to open. If you knock and keep knocking, God will respond. He promises to do so.

Don't Give Up!

The late Dr. Jerry Falwell was famous for saying, "It's always too early to quit." I don't know what you're praying for right now. Maybe you've been praying for a mate, but you don't see a mate on the horizon, and it doesn't seem like God is doing anything in your situation. Keep praying! If you sense that it's in God's heart to give you a mate, then keep praying. "*Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart*" (Psalm 37:4). Are you delighting yourself in the Lord? Are you making yourself soft and pliable in God's hands? (That is what the word *delight* really means.) If you are doing those things, and the desire of your heart is to have a mate, keep praying because God has someone out there for you.

If you want a child, but you don't see how you're going to have one, and you're just ready to give up, keep praying! Don't give up! It's always too early to quit.

Maybe you have a dream in your heart to do something great for God, but you don't see doors opening ... keep praying! You might be at a place that seems like the Back Side of Nowhere Baptist Church with eleven people, as I was, and you have this dream to make a HUGE impact

for God. Remember God's promise to me: "*Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will stand before kings; He will not stand before obscure men*" (Proverbs 22:29). I was trusting God and believing His promises. I didn't know how He was going to do it. I chose to believe Him for something big, even when I didn't see it ... even when my prayers didn't seem to be getting through. And God answered at the proper time, just like He promised.

While Nehemiah was praying for favor and compassion before Artaxerxes, God was at work. He was softening and preparing Artaxerxes' heart. Could Nehemiah see any of that? No. God was working in direct response to Nehemiah's prayer, but all the work was done in secret, behind the scenes. Nehemiah wasn't privy to the progress. He just knew to pray and not quit.

If Only God Sent Text Messages

Have you ever prayed for God to reveal His specific will for you? Maybe you have a job opportunity in two different cities, or you are wondering if you should marry the person you are dating. You desire to know God's will and do His will, so you pray and ask Him to give

you wisdom and guidance. Yet, His answer regarding what you are supposed to do seems to get delayed. What's up with that? Wouldn't it be great if you prayed and instantly received a text message from God that said, "Take the job in this city ... don't marry this guy/girl." Wouldn't that be great, an instant text message from God, so you could always know His will and do it? That sounds like a good plan, but the truth of the matter is that God doesn't work that way. Why not?

God doesn't reveal His will that way because that would bypass the real purpose of prayer: **to spend time with God**. God's goal is not to give you goodies; it's to build an intimate relationship with you. God wants you to spend time with Him, share your heart, hear from Him, and marinate in His presence. And even when you are doing those things, He often doesn't tell you the answer right away. Why? Because He wants you to grow. As you spend time with God, you get close to Him. "As for me," the psalmist said, "*the nearness of God is my good ...*" (Psalm 73:28).

So remember when you're praying for something and it hasn't happened yet, don't get frustrated and throw in the towel. Just realize that God is working in ways you cannot see. He wants you to keep coming to Him because He

loves you and desires to spend time with you. Don't give up. Keep praying and seeking Him. It's always too early to quit!

The Time is Right

Nehemiah chapter 2: *"It came about in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, that wine was before him, and I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. So the king said to me, 'Why is your face sad, though you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart.' Then I was very much afraid"* (Nehemiah 2:1-2).

It was a serious breach of etiquette to show a sad face before the king. He did not allow his servants to cast a negative, blue mood on his palace gaiety. If you were a butler who rained on the king's parade, you would probably need to prepare your last will and testament. So, when Artaxerxes said, *"Why is your face sad, though you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart,"* Nehemiah was greatly afraid. Artaxerxes could have killed him for being sad in his presence.

This is just a side note, but isn't it encouraging that even a man of God like Nehemiah, who did great and awesome things for the Lord, got afraid? If you get afraid, you are not alone. Fear

is something we all face, no matter how godly we may be. Do you know why the Bible has so many “Fear nots” in it? God says, “Fear not,” over and over again because we are afraid so often, even though there is no need to fear when you are walking with Jesus.

Nehemiah was afraid, and he responds to the king in verse 3: *“I said to the king, ‘Let the king live forever.’”* He wanted the king to know his sadness was not about him. Nehemiah liked his job and his boss ... and his life! *“Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my fathers’ tombs lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?”* Then the king said to me, *‘What would you request?’*” (Nehemiah 2:3-4).

See, God has been working on the king. Proverbs tells us that *“The king’s heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord. He turns it wherever He wishes”* (Proverbs 21:1). Nehemiah was praying to the God who could change the king’s heart. And the king asked him, “What would you request?” Artaxerxes is not going to kill him for being sad; he is going to hear him out. God has ordained the proper time for Nehemiah to share his needs with the king ... and the time is now. Verse 4 says, *“So I prayed to the God of heaven.”*

INSIGHT #6:
**Prayer can be short at times,
if it is not short every time.**

Nehemiah prayed in response to the king's question. Now how do you think he prayed to the God of heaven? Do you think he said, "Hold on, king. I'm going over to my prayer closet to pray. I'll be back in thirty minutes to give you my answer." No! He prayed right then. I think he prayed something like, "God, help me!" Have you ever prayed that prayer? "God, help me!" It's a short, right-to-the-point type of prayer. It doesn't take thirty minutes. It barely takes three seconds.

Is it okay to pray short prayers? According to Nehemiah it is.

It's Go Time!

In 1988, I was interviewing for a technical sales position with Nalco Chemical Company. I was thinking, "If I can just land this job, I'll get a huge salary increase and I'll be on a much better career path for my family and me ... and we'll be set." So, I flew from Houston to Chicago for my final interview, and I had been praying and praying for this important day. When they called

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my name to go to the regional manager's office for my interview, I prayed this short, sincere prayer as I walked in: "God, I'm so nervous I think I could vomit on this guy's desk. Please help me." And He did! I kept down my breakfast, answered all the questions to his satisfaction, and got the job.

Here is the truth to remember: It's okay to pray short prayers ... as long as that's not the extent of your prayer life. You can pray short prayers with effectiveness, but you can't live on short prayers. If your prayer life consists only of emergency, 911, "help me" prayers to God, there is nothing in the prayer bank to back up that short prayer.

Nehemiah had been praying night and day and day and night for months, and there was lots in the prayer bank that he had deposited in heaven. So at the crucial moment, he could just whisper a short prayer ... and it had power.

You and I need to spend time marinating in prayer, talking with God from the depths of our heart over those things that are weighing heavy upon us. And then, when the situation arises where you need God to show up and show out, you can pray with confidence, "God, help me! God, show me what to do! Show me what to say." It might be a really quick, short prayer, but it will

have strength. That is how Nehemiah prayed.

At the end of verse 4 where it says, *“Then the king said to me, ‘What would you request?’ So I prayed to the God of heaven...”* I wrote in my Bible, “It’s go time!”

All that Nehemiah had been praying for was about to be realized. “God, Artaxerxes is giving me an open door to share. You can open up this situation for me to go back to Jerusalem or shut it right now. God, it’s go time. It’s my interview with the king. It is what I have been praying about for months. This is my opportunity. And it’s either going to be yes or no. So, God, please help me!”

The Big Ask

Verse 5: *“And I said to the king, ‘If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor before you, send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers’ tombs, that I may rebuild it”* (Nehemiah 2:5).

Nehemiah starts his big “ask.” One of the things that he did was to ask if he had found favor in the king’s sight. King, have I been a good worker? Have you been impressed with my work ethic? Nehemiah had a testimony on the job to back up the request that he was about to make, an amazing request to the king.

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He says, “...send me to Judah (remember, king, that place you don’t like?) to the city of my fathers’ tombs, that I may rebuilt it” (Nehemiah 2:5)

Now what makes this amazing is that thirteen years earlier, we find out in the book of Ezra that King Artaxerxes had set a decree to not rebuild the walls in Jerusalem. So Nehemiah is basically saying, “This is what I want you to do. I want you to send me to Judah, and I want you to reverse your Middle-Eastern policy about not rebuilding the walls, and let me rebuild them.” Don’t forget: this is the lowly butler asking of the mighty king. It’s a huge request.

Then we see in verse 6: “*The king said to him, the queen sitting beside him, ‘How long will your journey be, and when will you return?’ So it pleased the king to send me, and I gave him a definite time. And I said to the king, ‘If it pleases the king, let letters be given me, for the governors of the provinces beyond the river, that they may allow me to pass through until I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king’s forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress which is by the temple, for the wall of the city, and for the house to which I will go’*” (Nehemiah 2:6-8).

What is Nehemiah asking for? Remember

I told you he needs great things. “Hey, king, I want you to reverse your Middle-Eastern policy and let me rebuild, and I want you to let me go.” Do you know how long he was gone? Twelve years! Can you imagine telling your boss that you need twelve years off from work? That’s pretty amazing, isn’t it? He rebuilt the wall in fifty two days, but then he served as governor there in Jerusalem for twelve years. He was gone for a long time.

And then Nehemiah says, “Oh, and one other thing. I need you to pay for it all because I don’t have any money.” That’s what he asked the king. “Reverse your policy. Let me be gone for twelve years. And underwrite all this stuff. That’s my request.” Wow! You can see why I call it “the big ask.”

INSIGHT #7:

Prayer needs to be coupled with plans.

Nehemiah didn’t just pray. He prayed and planned together. He asked God, “Show me. Lord, work things out and show me what to say and do.” When the king asked him specific questions, he was able to answer. “What do you want me to do for you?” “Boom, this is what I want you to do.” “How long are you going to be

gone?” “Boom, this is how long I’m going to be gone.” “And, by the way, king, I need this and this and this.” He was planned out.

Have you ever met people who pray a lot, but they have no plan? They don’t know what they’re doing. It’s hard to get someone to be excited about what they’re praying for when there is no plan to see come to pass.

Nehemiah was a great leader because he prayed with a pen. And as he prayed, God would put things on his heart. No doubt God said, “Hey, you know, you’re going to need some timber. Find out who runs the king’s forest.” So he found out the guy’s name, Asaph. He could call him by name. That surely impressed the king. The king is thinking, *How does my butler know about Asaph?* Nehemiah did his homework. He knew what he needed.

What is really cool is that he asked for those huge things, and the king not only gave him the letters he needed, but he also gave him “*officers of the army and horsemen*” (verse 9). He gave him even more than what he asked for ... and he asked for a lot! Nehemiah didn’t even ask for the soldiers’ protection, but God put it in Artaxerxes’ mind to provide them for him. Isn’t that just the way God is? If you ask Him for big things, He gives you even more because He’s a great and

awesome God. *“Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all we ask or think, according to the power that works within us”* (Ephesians 3:20).

God is Good

Why did Artaxerxes grant Nehemiah’s request? What was the secret? Nehemiah 2:8 tells us: *“And the king granted them to me because the good hand of my God was on me.”* God’s favor was on Nehemiah. God was working on King Artaxerxes’ heart because His good hand was on this faithful, praying butler.

Never forget that God has a good hand. He is a good God who is worthy to be praised and trusted. And as a good God and Father, He longs to spend time with you and work miracles in and through you as you pray.

Spending Time with Coach Mack Brown

About two years ago, my daughter Amy was in her last semester of high school. And she was trying to decide which college she was going to attend. She wanted to go to a big school. That was her only requirement. She told me it had to be a big school that plays football on TV, and she wanted to stay in Texas.

There were really only two schools she was considering—Texas A&M University and the University of Texas. My wife, Debbie, is a graduate of Texas A&M, so she was partial toward the Aggies. I went to the University of Texas, so I was all for her becoming a Longhorn. Debbie and I both agreed, however, that Amy should go where she felt led of the Lord. We said, “Amy, wherever you want to go is fine with us. You just pray and decide.”

So she toured Texas A&M University, and it was nice. A few weeks later, she was ready for us to take her to UT to tour the campus in Austin. A couple of days before we left, I called a friend of mine who knows the head football coach at the University of Texas, and asked if he could get us two minutes with Coach Mack Brown so that Amy could meet him. My friend made a call and graciously arranged a meeting on the day we were on campus.

Amy was excited, but I was beside myself, as Coach Brown and the Longhorn football team are near and dear to my heart. So Debbie, Amy, and I went to Mack Brown’s office ... and he was so gracious, kind and welcoming. I had asked for two minutes, and he gave us twenty five. He showed Amy around and even let her try on his National Championship ring. We took pictures

and had a memorable meeting.

What's the point of that story? As excited as I was to be able to spend time with Mack Brown that day (and make no mistake about it, it was a thrill for me), it is nothing compared to the King of the universe who invites me into His office, His throne room, every single day to spend time with Him. He knows all my needs and can meet them all in a blink, but those needs are secondary (like candy in the piñata) compared to spending time with Him and getting to know Him.

God wants to spend time with you. He is calling you to the throne room to hang out with Him. He will spend as much time with you as you want ... no time limit. He wants you to get to know Him better and better. How do you do that? You do that through prayer!

The Mystery Unveiled

The mystery of prayer is really not a mystery. As we have learned from the life of Nehemiah, prayer is the means by which we fellowship with God so that we can know His heart and know and do His will. It is the means by which we communicate with Him, sharing our needs, our heart, our all. Don't forget. God is a good God and He only wants the best for us ... in His

timing.

My hope and prayer is that you will now pray big and expect God to grant you the desires of your heart, as you surrender your heart to His will. When you do that, you will grow in your relationship with Jesus, and you will see Him do amazing things, just like He said He would. *“Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know”* (Jeremiah 33:3, NKJ).

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Back on Track
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Bad Boys of the Bible
Basic Training
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