

“Stop, Drop and Pray”

Nehemiah 1-3

Series: Rising from the Ruins Week 4. How to Build a Life of Prayer

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hogle

Woodside Church

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“When will we start building?” That was the question on everyone’s lips at Woodside in 2008. In May we celebrated a groundbreaking ceremony for our major expansion. In June we received “final” approval from the township supervisors. All that remained is the approval of a building permit and this, I was assured, is a slam dunk.

But it felt like we were both slammed and dunked. Nothing happened all summer. Finally, on August 21 they said, “You should have your permit by Friday. Monday at the latest.” Friday passed. Then Monday, Tuesday. By Wednesday the contractor asked me to go to the township office and see what’s up. I walked in and asked if they received everything they need to finish the building permit. The staff at the desk said, “We are busy, I can’t help you right now. Please put your request in writing and you will receive a response in 24 to 48 hours.” I pressed, “But we were told we would have the permit by Monday at the latest.” She went to the back room, talked to her boss, came back and said, “I can’t help you right now. We are busy. Please put your request in writing and we’ll get back to you in 24 to 48 hours.” Now I started to become unpastoral. “What is the hold up? We were told it was almost done?” Finally the person from the back office called “The Code Enforcer” came to the door and said from the other side of the room, “I’m sorry we can’t help you. Can’t you see we are very busy? Put your request in writing and we’ll get back to you in 24 to 48 hours.” So what did I do? I put it in writing and walked out.

Now brothers and sisters in Christ, this is not new. There are difficult construction stories in Scripture. The troubles and opposition these Biblical builders faced make our situation seem like a breeze.

Today we start the second phase of our series *Rising from the Ruins*. We will explore the question, “**What Kind of Life Am I Building?**” The architect and contractor for our spiritual building project will be a master builder of the Bible named Nehemiah. He did not have the glamorous task of constructing God’s Temple. God selected Nehemiah to build the walls around Jerusalem. That doesn’t sound very thrilling. Yet Nehemiah is amazing because he also rebuilds the people of God. Over the next 3 Sundays, we will dig deeply into Nehemiah’s personal journal. If you want to build your life God’s way, I invite you to learn some lessons from Nehemiah’s blueprints.

The book of Nehemiah is the sequel to the story in Ezra. In fact, the two books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book. By the end of Ezra, the Altar and Temple are rebuilt and God’s people are reestablished on the foundation of God’s Law and Covenant. For the first time in a 130 years they celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem.

Now move forward to 444 BC. The House of the Lord is complete but the city is defenseless. The Jews are caught in the vise grip of the surrounding tribes and nations. Without the security of walls and gates, their enemies can easily sweep in and reduce everything they've built back to rubble. Hanani, one of the leading men of the city, volunteers to lead a delegation to the Persian winter palace of Susa. His brother, Nehemiah, is a highly placed official in the court of King Artaxerxes I.

After the long and arduous journey, Nehemiah welcomes his brother Hanani with a warm embrace. "Tell me brother, How fair our people in Judah and what about the reconstruction of Jerusalem?" Then Nehemiah watches his brother's face fall.

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. Nehemiah 1:3.

'Our every attempt to rebuild the walls is frustrated by the local Samaritan rulers and their allies. Nehemiah, is there anything you can do for our people? Can you ask King Artaxerxes for permission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem?' Notice Nehemiah's reaction to the news.

When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. Nehemiah 1:4.

He is stricken, devastated. Grief overwhelms him. He sits down with shoulders shaking, head in hands, tears flowing. You expect such a shock to propel him to action. Yet he does not establish a plan of attack, draw up blueprints, consult market analysis or public opinion polls. He does not call in political favors or engage in closed door deals. Most of all, he does not march into the throne room and lay his demands before the king. Instead, Nehemiah does what few of us ever do. *He goes before the throne of heaven in prayer first.* He stops, drops and prays. For days, weeks, perhaps as long as four months, he mourns and fasts and prays before the God of heaven. Make no mistake, Nehemiah is a man of action. The rest of this book will prove it. But he understands what we fail to see: the first and most important action is prayer.

In our fast-pace, task-oriented, constantly moving culture, sitting quietly in prayer seems like a waste of precious time. Those who disregard prayer complain there is little, if any, return for your investment. For many Christians, prayer is not their first reaction but their last resort. Prayer is limited to an occasional mealtime grace, a bedtime ritual, and a few requests and concerns here in worship. But brothers and sisters, prayer is so much more than that. It is the great untapped source of power for living the Christian life. How long can you live if you hold your breath? A few minutes. Yet we fail to see prayer as the way our spirits breathe and live.

Why did Nehemiah first go to God in prayer? It makes sense when you think about it. Why fool around with middle managers? Why not go straight to the top? Sure, King Artaxerxes is an impressive man. He is the unchallenged ruler of the only Superpower of that age. But he is still just a man. Nehemiah takes his case before "The

Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God.” (Nehemiah 1:5) What follows is one of the great prayers of the Bible. It is a treasury of riches on how to talk with God. Let me point out three movements in this prayer. If you put these into practice, it will dramatically impact your prayer life.

First, ***Honor God***. Nehemiah begins his prayer,

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, let your ears 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” Nehemiah 5-6a.

Nehemiah begins by honoring God. Some may call this praise or adoration. Instead of launching into a list of requests or complaints, he pauses and lets his mind take in the majesty, the grandeur, the tenderness, the love of God. When you pray, take the time to pause and let the presence and power of God overwhelm you. Honoring and praising God not only lets the Lord know how much you love Him, it also helps you know to whom you are speaking. He is not some tiny handmade idol nor even a powerful earthly king. The Lord is greater than our nation, our world, our universe. And He is greater than any problem you bring to Him. He can handle it.

Second, be ***Honest to God***. Praising God drives Nehemiah to confession of sin.

I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses. Nehemiah 6b-7.

Do you hear how Nehemiah includes himself among those who sin before God? Today, it is popular to deny responsibility for your actions. Even our leaders do not admit their guilt when they are caught. We blame society, our parents, the school system, the job market, the government, the culture, the pandemic. But look at Nehemiah. He actually accepts personal responsibility for the sins of his parents, grandparents and nation.

Why is confession good for the soul? Sin lodges in your heart and soul like an infection, like a fungus. It loves darkness. It wants to be left alone so it can fester and spread. But when the infection is treated, when the fungus or mold is brought to the light, it dies. Then the healing can begin. In 1998, a famous world leader stood in a grand cathedral before God and his nation and said,

We want to expiate the sins of our ancestors. Guilty are those who committed this heinous crime, and those who have been justifying it for decades – all of us.

Those words were uttered by Boris Yeltsin when he was President of Russia. He confessed them at the funeral of Tsar Nicholas II who was buried 80 years after he and

his family were murdered by Bolshevik revolutionaries.¹ Yeltsin's confession was an important step in the healing of a nation.

After honoring God and being honest to God, comes the moment to *Ask God*. Even here, Nehemiah's approach is different from ours. We sometimes think of prayer as bending God to our will. But Nehemiah's request is *based* on God's will. How can you know God's will? It's published in His Word. Nehemiah quotes Scripture:

Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, 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.' Nehemiah 1:8-9; see Deuteronomy 30:1-5.

Our prayer requests are more powerful when they are based on the promises of Scripture. The greatest request we can make of God is simply Jesus' prayer in the garden: "Not my will, but Thine, be done." At the end of his prayer, Nehemiah makes one simple request,

Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man. Nehemiah 1:11.

What happens when Nehemiah goes before the king? You'll have to wait until next week to find that out.

What happened with our building permit? I put it in writing on Wednesday. By Friday, 48 hours later, we had it – but not because of me. Our Nehemiah, Bruce Jones, worked everything out with the township. But the story isn't over. I really did not feel right about my trip to the Township. I was in prayer to the God of heaven when I felt convicted. I needed to go and apologize. On Friday, I walked into the office and asked to see the person in charge of permits. She came out of her office but this time, instead of standing on the other side of the room she walked up to the desk. "I want to apologize to you and your staff for what I said. You obviously were very busy. And in all honesty you've been very cooperative through the whole process." She smiled and said, "Thank you. That really means a lot." Then she added, "You know I'm Presbyterian and I was afraid you were going to excommunicate me." "If I thought I had that power," I said with a smile, "I'd have used it long ago. When the building is done I hope you will come see it." "Thank you. I will."

Have a big challenge ahead of you? Before you do anything, stop, drop and pray.

¹ Quoted in Newsweek, July 27, 1998 issue, P. 15.