

Prayer Strategy for Ministry

By Dave Butts

All too often we look at prayer as a “quick fix” to a difficult situation. Have you ever said, “I’ve tried everything else—I might as well pray! Often we only have “time” to offer a few quick prayers hoping to bring God into the situation so that everything will be fine. Sometimes this proves to be the case (although probably more because of God’s great love for us than from the power of our prayers).

If you are involved in a work of God, and hopefully we are all active in a ministry of some sort. you need to look at prayer not as a quick petition, but rather as part of the longterm strategy for accomplishing the work that God has called you to. It involves a commitment to pray and work until you see completion. An illustration from the sports realm might be helpful. Many would liken prayer to a series of sprints while instead, we would be better served to see prayer as a long-distance runner would view the course before him.

Nehemiah saw prayer this way. In Nehemiah 1, we see that he had a difficult task ahead of him. After hearing a report of the poor condition of Jerusalem and its inhabitants he believed that God called him to travel to Jerusalem and take the lead in seeing the walls of the city rebuilt. As you look at this story, please note how prayer is an integral part of this mighty work of God . . . not as a quick fix. but as a continued dependence upon God for help and direction.

As an important government official in Babylon, Nehemiah received word of the demoralized Jewish remnant in Jerusalem and the sad condition of Jerusalem’s walls. His response was to weep and pray: “For some days I mourned and fasted and

prayed before the God of heaven” (Neh. 1:4). Out of this time of mourning comes this powerful prayer, recorded in Neh 1:5-11, “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 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. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

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.’

They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. 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.”

Nehemiah’s prayer was not an act of devotion wedged into an already busy schedule. He stopped what he was doing and gave himself fully to God in prayer. The task ahead was too daunting for anyone but God Himself. Nehemiah’s example reflects some important issues in prayer that we should follow when interceding:

RESPONDING IN OBEDIENCE

(Nehemiah 2:12). Although it is not mentioned in the passage from the first chapter of Nehemiah, we learn later on that God had placed the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls upon Nehemiah’s heart (“I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart

to do for Jerusalem"). Nehemiah simply was aware of what God desired to accomplish, and made himself available to be used in a powerful way to fulfill God's plan.

HAVING AN ATTITUDE OF WORSHIP

(Nehemiah 1:5). Nehemiah did not enter lightly into God's presence. He reverently acknowledged the awesomeness of the God of heaven, asking for His divine attention.

PERSISTING IN PRAYER

(Nehemiah 1:6). Nehemiah refers to the fact that he is praying day and night for this particular issue.

PRAYING IN HUMILITY

(Nehemiah 1:6-7). He approached God with humility, confessing his sin and the sin of his people. He repentantly accepted God's judgment upon them as right and just . . . no excuses . . . no whining! He simply humbled himself before God and stated his case.

CLAIMING GOD'S PROMISES IN SCRIPTURE

(Nehemiah 1:8-9). Nehemiah recalled God's promises to Israel that if they fell through disobedience and were exiled, but would repent and turn back to Him, He would bring them back from the most distant places: "and when you and your children return to the Lord your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you and bring you back." (Deuteronomy 30:2-4) Praying God's Word back to Him is powerful!

PRAYING WITH CONFIDENCE AND BOLDNESS

(Nehemiah 1:10-11). Knowing then. that what he was asking for was according to God's Word, Nehemiah prayed that God would

provide the necessary resources to restore the fortunes of Jerusalem.

PRAYING SPECIFICALLY

(Nehemiah 1:11; 2:4-5). The particular resource that Nehemiah wanted needed to come from King Artaxerxes. Therefore, he asked God for favor in the presence of the king as he went to make his request known. He didn't expect or ask for a mystical sort of provision. but instead asked specifically that God would give him favor with the man who could help. when the king asked him what he wanted, he prayed once again, and then very specifically said, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it."

TAKING A STEP OF ACTION

(Nehemiah 2:1-9). Nehemiah knew that he was the man whom God expected to rebuild the city of Jerusalem. His strategy was prayer. He first asked God to prepare the way for him to receive favor from the king. But then, he knew that he must ASK the king for his help. Having confidence in the Lord's plan and provision, he did just that, even though he was afraid. How many of us pray, but then don't continue on in faith to be the answer to our own prayers? Do you wonder how many prayers God might have answered differently if we had just been obedient in our actions? Sometimes God desires (and requires) the next step beyond obedience to intercede, the obedience to act on behalf of the person or situation for whom or for which we are interceding. An interesting note; Nehemiah breathed a prayer to God just before responding to the king's question, "What is it you want?" (Neh. 2:4-5). He utilized the strategy of prayer for preparation and also to gain the wisdom to speak the words God wanted him to say ("Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king . . ."). Jesus tells us not to fear when we stand before kings and authorities on His behalf for He will give us the words to say

Luke 21:12-15). Nehemiah experienced this same promise from God.

GIVING GOD THE GLORY AND THE CREDIT

(Nehemiah 2:8). Not only did the king grant Nehemiah's request for time off to rebuild Jerusalem he also wrote letters to governors for protection, and to obtain the timber Nehemiah needed. In addition, above and beyond what Nehemiah asked for, the king sent army officers and cavalry with him (Neh. 2:7-9). Nehemiah could have been puffed up with his own success, but instead he said, "And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests."

There is one more aspect of strategic prayer to look at in the story of Nehemiah. It came after his request was granted by the king and he traveled to Jerusalem with the king's protection and blessing to build the walls of Jerusalem. The Israelites in the city had responded favorably to Nehemiah's presence and had set themselves to the task of rebuilding the city walls under his leadership. But as so often happens in any work of God, it was not long before the enemy made his move. Opposition arose against the building of the wall.

Nehemiah's response?

WARFARE PRAYING

(Nehemiah 4:4-5). This prayer warrior moved to the attack mode of prayer: "Hear us, O our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders." The task was not going to be completed until there was some spiritual warfare prayer. Once again, Nehemiah did not pray and then sit back and do nothing. Prayer was primary strategy for rebuilding the walls . . . but not the whole strategy. He also called the people together and posted guards to protect the builders. He phrased it this way in Neh. 4:9, "But we prayed to our God and posted

a guard day and night to meet this threat.”

What a powerful combination of prayer and physical activity! Nehemiah understood clearly that prayer was as essential to the building of the wall as manual labor. In our plans and ministries, we must begin to see the strategic place that God has for prayer. With Nehemiah we saw that the project emerged out of prayer . . . continued in prayer . . . and was completed through prayer. Because of this biblical prayer warrior, we can see how this type of continuous emphasis on prayer can bring any work of God to completion in such a way that God is honored and His Kingdom advanced.

–Dave Butts (1953-2022) was the president of Harvest Prayer Ministries, and the author of multiple books, articles and resources on prayer. Some of his books are [Prayer, Peace and the Presence of God](#), [The Giving Church](#), and [Prayer Ministry Volunteer Handbook](#) co-authored with his wife, Kim.