

NEHEMIAH – PRAYING GOD’S PURPOSE

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 2018

Today, we close our sermon series on Our Family Tree. In doing so, we reflect back on those who make up our extended spiritual family in the Old Testament – together, we have explored Adam & Eve, Noah, Abraham & Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Ruth, Samuel, David, Solomon, Daniel, and Esther. From the time of the Fall and throughout the lives of our spiritual ancestors, we witness a praying people. In each of their lives, prayer has been essential to their communion, their connection, and their continuity of each of God’s people to their relationship with the Lord.

Throughout this summer, I have been blessed to sit alongside many others from St. Tim’s in our Middle Hour Prayer Fellowship. We prayed fervently as we came together seeking God’s heart and desiring a unity of Spirit to grow throughout our church, our school, our marriages, our families, our relationships, our neighborhoods, our workplaces, our missionaries, and our outreach to bring the love of Christ to those He brings into our path.

We interceded for many of us and for our families. We prayed for those that have been and continue to go through challenges and battles in daily life. These battles have ranged from health concerns, relationship tensions, workplace challenges, life transitions, divisiveness in our communities, and the loss of loved ones. We have rejoiced in the mighty ways God is at work – celebrating the baptisms, weddings, family times, worship, fellowship, and other joys of life we see here throughout each of your lives here at St. Tim’s. We have lifted our Christian Academy and Church to the Lord asking for a revival of the Spirit to bring a rising tide of new people and relationships to our community of fellowship.

Today, our readings from the Lord’s Word included Nehemiah’s Prayer for the people of Jerusalem, the prayer of Jesus for His disciples and the prayer of Paul for the people of Ephesus. Across these three prayers we find core foundations for praying that will help draw us into closer communion with Our Lord. Foundations that include praying with **purpose, passion, patience, perseverance, and promise**. Together, we can explore how to model this in our own prayer lives.

In all three prayers, these men approach praying with a clear **purpose**.

Prayer is essential all God is doing while He is at work in our lives and at work in the world around us. Nehemiah was a model for us as a servant leader who initiated his plans only after engaging in prayer to gain God’s guidance and direction. Nehemiah means “Yahweh Comforts.” God does comfort us as He gives us wisdom to live out our lives.

God demonstrates through Nehemiah’s prayer and fasting, how He provides Nehemiah with the strength a leader, powerful persuasiveness in communication, skill in organizing others, confidence to pursue God’s purpose, and decisiveness in addressing problems to overcome.

God uses prayer to raise up and qualify Nehemiah as a great leader and man to accomplish the task God has placed before him – rebuilding the wall and, more importantly, restoring the faith and worship of His people.

God can use prayer in the same way in each of our lives. Paul prayed for the church of Ephesus to have “Christ dwell in their hearts,” so they could be “rooted and established in the love” of God and love for one another. He calls us to recognize that Christ’s “love in our life surpasses all knowledge.” He asks us to realize that when we approach our Lord with true expectancy that we will receive “immeasurably more than we could ever ask or image.”

Prayer offers us, as followers of Christ, a means of acknowledging the character and purposes of God and the opportunity to seek His guidance and act concerning His will. Through a prayerful life, we can engage in a constant relationship with God. His Word points to a life of prayer that is demonstrated by our humble interactions and expressions, sincere hearts, and visible trust in the promises He places before us. God’s Word interacts with us through the Holy Spirit to guide towards how, when, where, and what to pray.

Martin Luther once said, “prayer is not overcoming God’s reluctance, but laying hold of His willingness.” Christ tells us in His prayer for His disciples that everything we have comes from Him. He points us to His Word to sanctify us, to make us see how the truth of His Word will lead us to the full measure of joy that comes from walking daily aligned to His Word. Our protection from the schemes of the evil one, our ability to be a light in a fallen world to those around us, all come from the power of the Holy Spirit to draw us deeply into what God is trying to reveal to us each day.

In all three prayers, these men pray with **passion**.

Nehemiah’s prayer provides us with one of the most moving confessions and intercessions of prayer seen in God’s Word. When we reach points of despondency, despair, confusion, or desperation, going before the Lord in prayer and fasting can bring peace, clarity, and direction to our situation. The devastation upon the nation of Israel and the destruction of Jerusalem led Nehemiah to his knees in prayer and fasting. He strongly intercedes for God’s people – pleading for their awareness of the sovereignty of God. He reminds the Jewish people of his time to act according to His promises. He calls them to confess their sins and turn with true remorse to depend completely on God’s mercy.

Nehemiah turned to the Lord in prayer and fasting to intercede on their behalf. Have you ever noticed how many of the great things God has done for His people have begun with fasting and prayer? Fasting helps to focus our prayers and tap into the limitless power and wonderful plan of the Lord. Fasting provides an avenue to abstain from our worldly desires for the sole purpose of focusing our attention on God and what He has to say to us.

In a similar way, Paul expresses deep emotion and reverence as he kneels before the Lord. The Jewish people in Paul’s day usually stood to pray. By kneeling, Paul shows us how to have an attitude of submission, reverence, and intense passion. Paul prays with the glorious riches that are empowered by the Holy Spirit within Him. The same Holy Spirit that resides in each of us when we pray for ourselves, our families, our friends, our neighbors and our co-workers.

We are called to pray and intercede for others that they too will understand the grace that washes over them when we join together in mutual conversation and consolation before the Lord, confessing our sins before Him, seeking forgiveness, and speaking forgiveness on behalf of God over one another in immense times of prayer.

We overcome life's daily challenges and struggles by turning our attention away from the lies the world throws at us and the deceptions our minds play on us to the truth of God's guidance and the power that comes from sharing the journey in fellowship and prayer.

In all three prayers, these men pray with **perseverance and patience**.

Nehemiah models for us how to express the practical, everyday side of our faith in God. As the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, Nehemiah patiently waits for God's timing to approach the king hoping for God's hand to bring favor upon his request to answer God's call for His people. He fasted and prayed with perseverance seeking the right moment and most appropriate opportunity to bring his concern before the king.

In Psalm 27:14, we are taught to "wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage; yes, wait for the Lord." Rather than dash into action, Nehemiah does exactly what Psalm 27 instructs us to do, he goes before God to gain wisdom, courage, and insight before moving ahead. He waits on the Lord. In fact, he pleads with and prays to the Lord for a period of four months until one day the king himself asked Nehemiah why he seemed so downcast.

Nehemiah explained the situation, and within days, the king sent him off to Jerusalem with all the necessary authority and building materials. Nehemiah waited patiently until God put all the particulars in place, and then he moved with perseverance, passion and purposefulness—according to God's will.

In a similar way, Jesus, as He prays for His disciples, knows in the prayer that we will need patience and perseverance to deal with the struggles that life will bring our way. He tells us the "world has hated him" and will hate us just the same for following in His ways. He prays for us to persevere with God's protection as He leaves us in the world and does not take us out of the world.

We are called to come alongside others and help them get through the struggles they face in life by pointing them to the same truth Jesus gave the disciples that walked with him and is giving to us today—He is the answer, God's Word provides the instruction, guidance, understanding and wisdom to overcome anything this world and this life can and will throw our way.

In all three prayers, these men pray with expectancy for God's **promise**.

We pray powerfully when we pray according to the promises of God. When we pray based on who He is and what He has done—rather than on who we are and what we have done—our faith grows and we receive God's promises.

We can see powerful parallels in Jesus, Paul and Nehemiah. Nehemiah and Paul personify what Jesus prays for His disciples by the life they modeled in their own journeys. Both Paul and Nehemiah were courageous leaders; both defy the odds in their ministries, and both encourage the people to do the Lord's work. Jesus did the same in his ministry here on earth.

All three of these men defy the opposition of the people and encourage God's followers to endure. All three are ardent prayer warriors. Finally, these three men were dedicated to God's truth and the call to repentance of God's people to align their lives to His truth as well.

While Nehemiah had the worldly task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and the challenges facing the people of his time in doing so, His true call was reestablishing the commitment of the Jewish people to God and to guide them in repentance and restoration to the Mosaic Law God had laid out for them, bringing about their spiritual rebuilding. His mission was not rebuilding a city, rather his true mission was restoring a people to God's purpose and reminding them of God's promise.

In closing... we now move from our Family Tree series looking at the powerful way God has worked through so many of the characters of the Old Testament to begin a new journey into Romans in the weeks ahead. As we do so, let us be people of prayer. People who pray with **purpose, passion, patience, perseverance, and promise.**

For many of us, as Christians, we feel that prayer is the weakest part of our walk with the Lord. Prayer must become our lifeline connecting us in our relationship with the Lord. We should come together to encourage one another in the daily discipline of prayer to commune with the Lord. For me, the best time to set aside is in the early morning before I jump into my daily routines and responsibilities. For others prayer time can be a great way to close out the day. Many couples pray out loud together at their bedside. In our Grow Groups, we can introduce regular prayer opportunities to go to the Lord with fellow Christians.

When God invites or commands us to pray, he is calling us to respond in obedience. The call to pray is the most commonly mentioned command in Scripture. God's Word points to prayer more than "love your neighbor," more than "share the gospel" and more than "teach and baptize." As we grow as disciples, we can turn to God and engage in prayer out of love and in awe of God's work at hand.

Here at St. Tim's, we have people of great prayer who model it for others. We have prayer warriors who do not hesitate to intercede for us. We have people who see the ministry of prayer in its fullest sense of making a difference as they pray with expectancy. As Christ followers, the highest and greatest calling of Christians is the calling to a prayerful life. Martin Luther said, "to be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing."

I would like to encourage you to make a decision to pray more, to set up some specific plans to support the commitment to do so, to invite the affirmation and accountability of your brother and sister in Christ to see that you apply a passion, patience, and perseverance for prayer. Will you determine in your heart to pray continually? Will you pray with a purpose for the people in your life? Will you live with a spirit of expectancy to guide you to pray for God's promise for your life? Like those in Nehemiah's day, God is calling each of us to a life of prayer – prayer filled with purpose, passion, patience, perseverance, and promise. Let us pray...

We now go to a time of reflection with the Hymn, "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word"

We now go to our offering listening and responding to "How Great is Our God"

(Nehemiah 1:4–11) – Nehemiah’s Prayer: Call, Commission, Concern

“When I heard these things, I sat down and **wept**. For some days I **mourned and fasted and prayed** before the God of heaven. Then I said: “Lord, the God of heaven, the **great and awesome God**, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, 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 family, 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. 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.” I was cupbearer to the king.”

(Ephesians 3:14–21) Paul’s Prayer for the Church in Ephesus

“For this reason I **kneel before the Father**, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may **strengthen you with power through his Spirit** in your inner being, so that **Christ may dwell in your hearts** through faith. And I pray that you, being **rooted and established in love**, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this **love that surpasses knowledge**—that you may be filled to the measure of all the **fullness of God**. Now to him who is able to do **immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine**, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”

(John 17:6–19) Jesus Prays for His Disciples

“I have **revealed you** to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that **everything you have given me comes from you**. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and **they believed that you sent me**. I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And **glory has come to me** through them. I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. **Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name**, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled. “I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have **the full measure of my joy** within them. I have **given them your word** and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you **protect them from the evil one**. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. **Sanctify them by the truth**; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be **truly sanctified**.”