

God, Help Me Rebuild My Broken World

MICHAEL YOUSSEF



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*To all faithful preachers, teachers, and Christian leaders
who seek to faithfully expound the Word of God from pulpits or
in Sunday school classes or in home Bible study groups.*

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I offer all my thanksgiving to the Father in heaven whose Holy Spirit has laid on my heart the writing of this book for the glory of Jesus. I am also immensely grateful to the Lord for sending me an able and gifted editor and compiler of my material in Jim Denney.

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My earnest prayer is that, as I leave this legacy to the next generation, God would raise up great men and women to faithfully serve their generation by accurately interpreting the Word of God.

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Introduction

From Rubble to Rejoicing

If you are dealing with the wreckage of a damaged life, if you feel like an exile living among the ruins of your past, God wants to clear away the rubble and rebuild safe and secure walls of faith in your life. He wants to restore you and empower you to truly live for him.

The Bible is filled with the stories of saints who served God in the midst of trying circumstances, and they came from a wide variety of vocational callings. Noah was a shipbuilder. Job and Abraham were ranchers with vast herds of livestock. Joseph was a slave who became the prime minister of Egypt. Moses and Joshua were military generals. David was a shepherd, a poet, a warrior, and a king. Deborah was a prophetess and a judge. Matthew was a tax collector and Luke a physician. Paul was a tentmaker and a missionary. And Nehemiah, a cupbearer and trusted advisor to the king of Persia, became God's building contractor.

The name Nehemiah means "the Lord has comforted." He held

one of the most honored positions in the royal city of Susa, in the kingdom of Persia—a position of great prestige, influence, authority, wealth, luxury, and comfort. Though Nehemiah was born in Persia and had never even visited his homeland, Israel, his heart was burdened and broken for that land and for the Jewish people. Though he was raised in a pagan land and served a pagan king, his heart was devoted to the God of Israel. He was a man of pure faith, deep character, and godly leadership.

In the Hebrew Bible, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were combined as a single book. Ezra tells the story of the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. Nehemiah tells the story of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. The events of the book of Nehemiah take place soon after the events in Ezra, and Ezra himself appears in the later chapters of the book of Nehemiah.

In the book of Ezra, King Cyrus of Persia is moved by God to issue a decree, permitting the exiled people of Israel to return to Jerusalem. More than 42,000 Jewish exiles, under the leadership of Zerubbabel the governor and Jeshua the high priest, return to the city of Jerusalem. There, under the direction of Ezra the priest, the exiles rebuild the temple. Through the restoration of the temple, Ezra calls the people back to authentic worship and fellowship with God. It's clear that the temple has been rebuilt by the time Nehemiah moves to Jerusalem, because in Nehemiah 6, the pagan opponents of the rebuilding project try to lure Nehemiah into the temple as part of an apparent assassination plot.

Nehemiah, the cupbearer and advisor to the Persian king, emerges as one of the most noble and exemplary leaders in all of Scripture. He is a role model for us all because we are all called to be leaders in some arena of life. In the end, Nehemiah demonstrates that he is far more than a mere building contractor. He shows us

how a godly leader prays fervently, makes sound decisions, assembles teams, assigns tasks, faces opposition, manages crises, resolves conflicts, confronts setbacks, and celebrates victory.

I believe God has an important purpose for recording in his Word the story of the rebuilding of the walls. A wall is a powerful symbol. It's more than a simple structure made of stone.

You will recall that, in the book of Joshua, the city of Jericho was surrounded by walls that symbolized the arrogant pride of that pagan city. God demonstrated his power over human arrogance by shattering the walls of Jericho with a mere shout of the Hebrew people—a shout of faith and obedience that invoked God's mighty power. The arrogance of human power is no match for the humble faith of an obedient believer.

Here, in the book of Nehemiah, the walls of Jerusalem symbolize the strength and protection of God in the believer's life. The person who goes through life without faith in God, without a relationship with Jesus Christ, must face the trials, opposition, and setbacks of life without the strong, secure defense that God provides. The story of the rebuilding of the walls of the holy city symbolizes how God stands ready to rebuild the walls of peace and security in any human life, any church, any community, or any nation.

The triumphal account in the book of Nehemiah is the story of how a prayerful, committed believer followed God's leading—then led his people from the rubble of despair to a celebration of rejoicing. You too can go from rubble to rejoicing. Let the book of Nehemiah be your guidebook to a renewed, restored, and reconstructed life.

Turn the page with me—and let the rebuilding begin.

1

The Mighty Power of Prayer

As Saddam Hussein rose to power in Iraq in the late 1960s, he envisioned the restoration of the glories of ancient Babylon. He even planned to rebuild the legendary Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Supremely self-obsessed, Saddam saw himself as the reincarnation of the ancient Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar, and he had ambitions of transforming the nation of Iraq—the former ancient Babylon—into the greatest empire the world had ever seen. He dreamed of uniting the Arab world under his rule.

Saddam Hussein patterned his cruel and bloodthirsty rule after the iron-fisted reign of Nebuchadnezzar. Like Nebuchadnezzar, Saddam placed images and statues of himself all over Iraq. He made sure that even the mildest criticism of his leadership was punished with torture and death. When the Kurds of northern Iraq tried to win their independence in the late 1980s, he responded with

a genocidal campaign that may have killed as many as a hundred thousand people, according to Human Rights Watch. He carried out mass slaughter, imprisonment without trial, and grisly torture against untold thousands of his fellow Iraqis. In his ambition to become a new Nebuchadnezzar, Saddam was eager to imitate and exceed (if possible) the worst of Nebuchadnezzar's cruelties.

In the late 1970s, Iraq began construction of a plutonium-producing nuclear reactor with the help of the French government. Saddam Hussein named the reactor Tammuz after the Babylonian month when his ruling Ba'ath party came to power in 1968. Significantly, Tammuz was also the Babylonian month when the armies of King Nebuchadnezzar broke down the walls of Jerusalem in 586 BC, conquering the Jewish capital, suspending the sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple, and resulting in the exile of the Jews to Babylon.

In 1981, threatened by Saddam's growing nuclear threat, Israel dispatched a squadron of seven jets to Iraq. Those jets succeeded in destroying the Tammuz reactor. Though angered by the Israel's destruction of the reactor, Saddam continued building monuments to himself, glorifying himself as the reincarnation of Nebuchadnezzar. He began reconstructing the 600-room palace of Nebuchadnezzar atop the original site. His workers laid more than sixty million bricks atop the original bricks that had been laid in Nebuchadnezzar's time. Each of Saddam's bricks bore the inscription, "To King Nebuchadnezzar in the reign of Saddam Hussein, protector of Iraq, who rebuilt civilization and rebuilt Babylon." Ironically, the bricks inscribed with Saddam's name began to crack within a few years after they were laid.

In March 2003, a US-led international coalition invaded Iraq. Within three weeks of the invasion, the Iraqi government collapsed. For weeks, Saddam Hussein could not be found. Finally,

on December 13, American forces found Saddam Hussein, looking filthy, bedraggled, and disoriented. The soldiers pulled him out of the “spider hole” where he had been hiding. On November 5, 2006, after a lengthy trial, Saddam was found guilty of crimes against humanity. He was hanged on December 30.

Saddam dreamed of restoring the glories of Nebuchadnezzar’s fabled Babylonian Empire. But Saddam seemed to forget that Nebuchadnezzar suffered his greatest humiliation when he was at the height of his power and glory. The prophet Daniel records that, as Nebuchadnezzar walked along the roof of his royal palace in Babylon (the very palace Saddam attempted to rebuild), he said to himself, “Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?” (Daniel 4:30).

Even as Nebuchadnezzar boasted, God said to him from heaven: “O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: The kingdom has departed from you, and you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. And you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will” (Daniel 4:31-32).

And God’s words were immediately fulfilled against Nebuchadnezzar. The king ended up on the ground, eating grass like a beast (see Daniel 4:28-33). Similarly, Saddam—who had pretensions of being the reincarnation of Nebuchadnezzar—ended up living like a beast himself, hiding in a hole under the ground. Instead of rebuilding the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, Saddam found himself hanging from an executioner’s noose.

The destruction of Jerusalem

One of King Nebuchadnezzar’s achievements—an achievement Saddam Hussain had hoped to repeat—was the conquest

of Jerusalem. The original Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem is described in 2 Kings 25.

The Scriptures tell us that King Nebuchadnezzar, in the ninth year of his reign (that is, in January 588 BC), led his army into Judah, surrounded Jerusalem, and laid siege to the city. The Babylonian army built siege works around Jerusalem—temporary structures that included walls, platforms, and towers. The siege works were constructed parallel to the city walls and rose up higher than the walls so that the Babylonian soldiers could shoot arrows down into the city. The siege works probably included scaling ladders, battering rams, and even tunnels under the city walls.

The Babylonians laid siege to the city for a year and a half. During that time, the people of Jerusalem lived in terror. All commerce in and out of the city was stopped, so that the people soon faced the horrors of starvation. The Babylonian archers steadily wore the Jewish people down with sniper attacks from the siege walls.

When the famine was at its height, in the month of Tammuz (approximately our month of July) 586 BC, the army of Nebuchadnezzar breached the city wall. When King Zedekiah of Judah heard that the Babylonians had breached the wall and were pouring into the city, he took his soldiers and escaped by another gate, leaving Jerusalem defenseless. The Babylonians chased King Zedekiah and his army, overtaking them in the plains of Jericho. The soldiers from Judah scattered in terror, abandoning their king. The Babylonians captured King Zedekiah and brought him before Nebuchadnezzar at his battlefield headquarters in Riblah, in modern-day Syria. Nebuchadnezzar cruelly punished King Zedekiah by executing Zedekiah's sons before him, then putting out his eyes so that the death of his sons would be the last sight he would ever see.

Then, at King Nebuchadnezzar's orders, Nebuzaradan, the

captain of Nebuchadnezzar's bodyguard, entered Jerusalem and set fire to the temple of God, to the palace of the king, and to the great houses of the noblemen. The soldiers broke down all the walls that surrounded and protected Jerusalem. Then the Babylonians took the leading citizens of Jerusalem, along with the soldiers who had deserted, and led them off in chains to Babylon. The Babylonians left only the poorest peasants of the land to be farmers and vineyard keepers to grow crops for the benefit of the Babylonian Empire.

The Babylonians stripped the temple of all of its beautiful gold, silver, and bronze furnishings, including all the vessels and implements that were consecrated to the worship of the Lord. They carried these items away into Babylon. The soldiers also took the priests and servants of the Lord's temple and marched them off to Nebuchadnezzar's headquarters in Riblah, and the king himself put them to death.

From 586 to around 430 BC, Jerusalem lay in ruins. The peasants in Judah worked as servants of the Babylonian Empire. Most of the Jews lived in exile and slavery in Babylon. All of the Jews, both the exiles and the ones who were left behind, lived in perpetual despair.

Then God raised up a leader named Nehemiah.

Born in exile, Nehemiah spoke the language of the Persians (by this time, as described in Daniel 5, the Persians had conquered the Babylonian nation). Nehemiah was well-educated in the Persian ways and traditions. As we will see in the last verse of Nehemiah 1, he served as the cupbearer to the king of Persia, Artaxerxes I.

The fact that Nehemiah was a cupbearer doesn't mean he was a waiter. In those days, a cupbearer was the equivalent of the chief of staff, a highly placed advisor to the king. Nehemiah was responsible for the efficient operation of the royal palace at Susa. A man could

rise to such a position only by being a hard worker and a person of trustworthy character.

By knowing this one simple fact about Nehemiah—that he was the cupbearer of the king—we immediately know a great deal about Nehemiah’s character, his status, his education, and the respect he had earned as an exiled Jew living in Susa. We know that he was a servant, yet he was also a leader and had studied the principles of effective leadership while serving in the court of Artaxerxes. The Jews needed a friend in high places if they ever hoped to rebuild their city and their society.

By God’s divine and miraculous appointment, Nehemiah was that man. He would lead the people in rebuilding the walls of the holy city.

Returning from exile and rebuilding their desolate city was the hardest challenge God’s people had ever faced. Achieving that goal would require nothing short of a miracle. And in order to experience a miracle in your life, you must be a willing recipient of that miracle. You must be an eager and obedient vessel for God’s power.

The walls are broken down

This servant-leader Nehemiah begins his account by telling his own story in the opening lines of Nehemiah 1:

The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah.

Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel, that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said to me, “The remnant there in the province who had

survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire" (1:1-3).

In this scene, some Jewish visitors have come from Judah, so Nehemiah asks them for news from the homeland, particularly about the condition of the Jewish capital city, Jerusalem. The visitors tell Nehemiah that Jerusalem is in ruins, its walls and gates destroyed, and its people suffering from reproach, distress, and shame.

People respond to bad news in various ways. Some get angry and put their fist through the wall. Others become depressed and despondent. But godly people, those who remain in tune with the Spirit of God, always have one response to bad news: They fall to their knees in prayer. That was Nehemiah's response:

As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And I said, "O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the word that 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 your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.’ They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man” (1:4-11).

Nehemiah has received bad news from Jerusalem, and the bad news has driven him to his knees in prayer. The bad news concerns the deplorable condition of the people of Jerusalem. But it also concerns the state of the city itself. The walls and gates are destroyed. The brokenness of Jerusalem’s walls is not an insignificant detail. The meaning of the city’s broken walls is extremely important for our lives today.

The brokenness of the walls signifies the vulnerability and defenselessness of God’s people. It signifies that the people of God have no protection whatsoever. It’s a serious matter when the citizens of a city or a nation are left defenseless and without protection.

Throughout Western civilization, and particularly in America, we are seeing the protective walls of the culture being systematically torn down. The abortion laws in America permit the destruction of life within the womb in every state until the twenty-fourth week, and in many states all the way through pregnancy. In some states a woman can walk into an abortion clinic on the day she is scheduled to deliver her baby, and it is perfectly legal for her to have that baby put to death (and no, it’s not a “fetus,” it’s a *baby*). Many Americans don’t know that the law allows this, and would even say that I don’t

have my facts straight, but this is absolutely true. A nation that willingly, legally permits the slaughter of its children, for any reason or for no reason at all, has chosen to forgo the protection of a just and righteous God.

As we have increasingly permitted the slaughter of children, sacrificing innocent life as an accommodation to our rampant sexual immorality, we have also seen the walls collapse with physician-assisted suicide and the taking of lives (as in the Terri Schiavo case) that some black-robed judge has determined to be without worth. When the life of the child becomes disposable, then the life of a sick, disabled, or aging adult quickly becomes equally disposable.

Our courts and lawmakers have decided that so-called “same-sex marriage” should be legally regarded as the equivalent of traditional marriage—and this is yet another protective wall that is being destroyed. God loves homosexual people in spite of their sin, and so do I—but it is a crime to elevate a same-sex partnership to the equivalence of traditional marriage. One of the many consequences of doing so is that we make it illegal to distinguish between a traditional marriage and a “same-sex marriage” when finding homes for adoptive and foster children. By saying that it doesn’t matter if the child has two daddies or two mommies, we are in effect saying that both fathers and mothers are expendable.

Both the Scriptures and child-development experts tell us that, ideally, every child should have a mother and a father. Though it’s not always possible for a child to have both parents (for example, if one parent dies), it is a tragic mistake for society to deliberately consign a child to a home in which both parents are either homosexual men or homosexual women. In many ways, I see this as yet another consequence of abortion-on-demand, because society is thinking only of the same-sex couple and their fulfillment and giving no

thought whatsoever to what is best for the healthy development of these precious and vulnerable children.

The walls of our culture are falling, and we as citizens are defenseless. The gates of our culture are burned and destroyed, and our children have no protection. As Christians, we have tended to place our faith in the protection of our laws, our government, our borders, our armies, our economy, and our technology. But we are learning that our laws no longer protect us. Our government is turning against us. Our borders are no longer respected. Our armies are stretched to the breaking point. Our economy is built on a shaky foundation and could collapse at any moment. And the technology that was once our servant is fast becoming our master, robbing us of our privacy and freedom.

Though this may sound like a grim diagnosis of our cultural ills, I'm going to surprise you and say that I believe this is a *great* time to be a Christian! Yes, we live in a post-Christian age, but most of what was "Christian" about our society was a mere religious veneer. Yes, our money says, "In God We Trust," but if we are honest with ourselves, our trust has been in our money, not in God.

The walls of our society have fallen. They no longer protect us. We can no longer take comfort behind the walls of our government or our laws or our economy. We can no longer take comfort behind the walls of this political party or that political officeholder. We can no longer take comfort behind marches and movements and methodologies. When the walls have fallen, there's only one way to look—and that is *up*.

These are great days to experience, perhaps for the first time in many years, the powerful hand of God. In times like these, God is able to work miracles. When the walls are crumbling in your life, in your family, in your business, in your world, don't get angry, don't

despair. Instead, do what Nehemiah did. Drop to your knees and lift your eyes toward heaven. Then pour out your heart to him in prayer.

We like to remain in our comfort zone. We would much rather remain in a condition of indifference and complacency than to be driven to our knees in prayer. But when the walls of safety and security collapse all around us, God is able to get our undivided attention.

As we look around us, we see broken lives and fractured families. People we trusted, people we looked up to as examples of faith and morality, have gotten caught in scandals or have fallen away from the faith. Unbelievers walk past our shattered walls and burned gates, and they mock us and ask, “Where is your God now?”

Tell the mockers to wait—they will see God act. They will see the mighty power of prayer. Because in the calculus of God’s universe, there is a simple equation that always proves true: one + prayer = great power. You are that one. God is the great power behind your prayers.

There is a reason you are studying this book right now. God has chosen this time in your life for you to discover the lessons of the life of Nehemiah. All across this land, all across the globe, God is raising up Nehemiahs. He is raising up people who will step up and lead, who will kneel down and pray, who will lift up their eyes to God, who will stand in the gap, and who will help to rebuild the walls of righteousness. God is raising up men and women of Nehemiah-like character and Nehemiah-like faith who will weep in anguish over the broken walls, burned gates, and shattered lives of the people all around. God is raising up people who will lay hold of the mighty power of prayer. God is raising up people who will take him seriously, take him at his word, and spend significant time in the presence of God.

I once heard about a place in Africa where the gospel of Jesus Christ spread like wildfire. Many people came to Christ, and they committed themselves to a daily discipline of prayer. Each believer picked out his or her own private spot outside the village for a quiet time with the Lord. The grasslands and thickets beyond the village became crisscrossed with paths and well-worn spots where people would go to pray.

One interesting benefit of this practice was that every believer could expect his Christian brothers and sisters to literally keep him on the right path. If a believer began to neglect his daily discipline of prayer, a fellow believer would take him aside and hold him accountable, saying, “Brother, the grass grows on your path.”

Isn't that a beautiful and gentle way to keep each other on the path of prayer? Are you maintaining a daily discipline of meeting privately with God? Are you experiencing daily the mighty power of prayer? Or has the grass been growing on your path?

The mighty prayer of Nehemiah

God is not impressed with our outward religious display. God wants to do business with men and women who mean business, and who want to be about God's business. How did Nehemiah go about doing God's business?

First, Nehemiah identified the problem. He learned that the city of Jerusalem was desolate, the walls shattered, the gates burned, and the temple in ruins. God's people lived in hopelessness and shame. The very name of the God of Israel was mocked among the pagans. This was the crisis that Nehemiah faced. This was the problem Nehemiah was desperate to solve.

Second, Nehemiah took his problem to the Lord in prayer. He didn't waste time on angry recriminations or blaming others. He

fully identified with his people and he acknowledged that he himself was part of the problem. He didn't pray for "their" sins. He came to God confessing, "*We* have sinned against you. Even *I and my father's house* have sinned. *We* have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses."

Isn't it amazing that Nehemiah took this responsibility upon himself? He could have said, "I feel terrible about the sufferings of my brothers in Jerusalem—but it's really not my problem. I wish I could help, but I have too many duties to attend to right here in Susa." Nehemiah enjoyed wealth, security, and comfort in the court of the king. He had all the privileges any person, Jew or Persian, could ever want. He lived safely and peacefully in Susa. Jerusalem was hundreds of miles away. Why should he get involved in the problems of that city? He had lived all his life in Persia. Just because Judah was his ancestral homeland, why should he get involved in the problems of that distant land?

But that was not Nehemiah's attitude. He identified with his people, who were exiles in Babylon. He longed to restore life and godliness to the land of his forebears, even though he had never seen Judah with his own eyes. He longed to see his people return to the worship of the God of Israel, as commanded by God's servant, Moses. Even though the people were indifferent that day, even though the exiled Jews had conformed themselves to the ways of their captors, Nehemiah longed to see them return to their land, rebuild their walls, and resume their worship of the one true God.

Most important of all, Nehemiah understood that simple spiritual equation: one + prayer = great power. Somehow, Nehemiah grasped the fact that God is not impressed with numbers. God is not intimidated by multitudes. God's judgment is not influenced

by majority opinion. One individual plus God is a majority in every situation.

If you truly want to see God at work, then watch him work in a life or a family or a church or a community where the walls are broken, where the gates are shattered, where the people have no hope of rescue but God alone. If you see a man or woman kneel and pray, “Use me, Lord, in this situation, and I will give you all the glory”—then you’d better get out of the way, because great power is coming!

When you read through Nehemiah’s prayer, you can see that his heart was broken. But it wasn’t the ruined walls that broke Nehemiah’s heart. It wasn’t the burned gates that broke his heart. It wasn’t even that desolate temple that broke Nehemiah’s heart. There was only one factor in this entire situation that wounded Nehemiah to the heart: God’s name was disgraced. The pagans not only mocked God’s people, but they mocked God himself.

The Bible tells us that Nehemiah moaned and wept, fasted and prayed over the sins of his people. When was the last time you wept and fasted over the sins of your nation? When was the last time you prayed in agony over your own sin? When was the last time you sought God in tears over the sin of apostasy in the church? When was the last time you felt genuine anguish at hearing the name of God, the name of his son Jesus, mocked and ridiculed?

Nehemiah experienced agony at the thought of the holy name of Yahweh being ridiculed by the pagans. So he went to his knees and he prayed a threefold prayer. First, he began his prayer with praise. Second, he persisted in prayer. Third, he prepared himself in prayer to do whatever God asked him to do.

Let’s take a closer look at the three parts of Nehemiah’s prayer.

Part 1: Praise

In verse 4 we hear Nehemiah pray, “O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments.” Nehemiah was deeply aware that he stood before the majestic King of the universe. When we pray, we must acknowledge that we stand before an awesome God who deserves our deepest reverence and respect.

Because of Jesus, we can come to him boldly—but not arrogantly. Because of Jesus, we can come to him expectantly—but we must never presume upon his grace. Because of Jesus, we can lay our petitions before him, knowing that he hears our prayers—but we must never make demands on him. Because of Jesus, we can come before God and call him “Abba,” meaning “Father” or even “Daddy.” We can crawl into his lap and put our arms around him, for he is our heavenly Daddy.

But even an earthly daddy is worthy of respect. Just as a child should never treat his or her daddy with disrespect, we should never treat God as if he were a cosmic bellboy, waiting at our beck and call to do as we demand. Many in the church today seem to have lost their reverence for God. I have heard people make demands on God in prayer, seeming to order him around. Approaching God in prayer without giving him due reverence and respect makes a mockery of prayer.

When we step into the presence of God, we must do so in a spirit of humility and brokenness. If we want God to hear our prayers, then we must approach him prayerfully, not pridefully. The Scriptures tell us that God resists the proud, but he gives grace to the humble. Pride is the antithesis of what God desires from us. Pride is the mortal enemy of prayer. Pride is a hindrance to God’s blessings.

If you want to get the glory and the accolades, the praise and the applause, God won't stand in your way. He will let you have all the glory that rightfully belongs to him, if that is what you truly want. But God will cease to use you.

When you try to do God's work *your* way for *your* glorification, you are not going about God's business. You're going about your own business. And if the praise of other people is what you want, you can have it. But don't expect to hear God say to you, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Because that is one thing you have not been. A good and faithful servant does not steal the glory that rightfully belongs to his Master.

Nehemiah went into the presence of God as a man with a broken spirit, a man who confessed his own sinfulness, a man who gave all praise and glory to God alone. We sometimes think of praise as the music we sing in church. But praise is an attitude of the heart, and an attitude of praise transcends all words and all melodies. If our spirit is contrite and broken before God, if we go before him, acknowledging his glory and majesty, then we have hearts full of praise. And the heart that is humble and brimming with praise is a heart that is ready to receive grace from God.

When a little girl named Judy disobeyed, her mother sent her to her room to think about her actions and her attitude. Judy's mother stood outside the little girl's bedroom door and listened as the child first cried, then pouted, then began to pray. "Do you see, God, all the trouble you've gotten me into? Last night I said my prayers and asked you to make me a good girl, and you didn't do it. So it's really all your fault, God, and it's not my fault at all that I was naughty. You didn't answer my prayer, so it's up to you to make Mommy stop being mad at me."

That's a childish prayer, prayed with a childish attitude. Yet

it's really not so different from the prayers we adults so often pray. When the choices we make bring bad consequences upon our lives, we are quick to blame circumstances or other people or God himself. We pray, "God, if only my husband wasn't so selfish." Or, "God, if only my wife didn't nag me." Or, "God, if only I had been brought up in a more loving home." Or, "God, if only you hadn't made me to be so easily tempted." And we spend our time in prayer playing the blame game. When we come in prayer with an attitude of shifting blame instead of abject humility and contrition, we are being just as childish as little Judy.

Nehemiah has shown us an example of authentic prayer, mighty prayer, and it begins with humility before our awesome and holy God. As we humble ourselves before God, we recognize that we are completely dependent upon him for our physical well-being, our emotional well-being, our psychological well-being, and our spiritual well-being. There is nothing we have that does not come from him. We are totally dependent on God. And our prayers will have no power until we learn to praise him and recognize our complete dependence on him.

Part 2: Persistence

Nehemiah began his prayer with praise, then he persisted in prayer. He fasted and prayed for a long time. "Pray without ceasing," said the apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:17. That is the kind of prayer Nehemiah exemplified in this passage.

We see in Nehemiah 1:1 that Nehemiah received the report from the men of Judah in the month of Chislev (approximately November-December on our calendar). As we shall see in Nehemiah 2:1, Nehemiah continued in prayer until the month of Nisan (approximately March-April on our calendar), when he finally took

action. So Nehemiah wept over the desolation of Jerusalem and the distress of the Jewish people for about four months. He also wept over his own sins and the sins of his people.

Nehemiah was a prayer warrior. And I don't mean that in a casual sense. Nehemiah went to the battle on his knees. He faced the enemy on his knees. He fought the spiritual forces that were at war with his soul—and he fought them on his knees. He fought them courageously and persistently. His prayer is a great example of spiritual warfare. He refused to yield an inch of ground before his spiritual enemy.

When you pray, do you go to war in prayer? Do you persist in prayer? Do you stand your ground in prayer? Are you truly a warrior in prayer?

The reason we must wage a persistent war in prayer is that there is no cease-fire on the spiritual battlefield. We must keep our spiritual supply lines open so that God can continually give us what we need to continue fighting this war.

Many Christians have the idea that God is reluctant to help us, so we must pray and pray in order to overcome his reluctance and convince him to answer our prayers. But that is not the reality of prayer. God is not reluctant at all. He is eager to bless us. And his chosen means of distributing his blessings is through the power of prayer. When we pray, he showers his bounty upon us. Through prayer, God is able to perform miracles in us and through us.

As the apostle Paul writes, “Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us” (Ephesians 3:20). But in order to receive that abundance, we must be about his business. We must be willing to do what he wants, the way he wants it done.

You cannot out-ask God's abundance. You cannot out-imagine God's generosity. There is nothing you can ask of God that he cannot

do—so long as you ask him according to his will. So as you pray, be persistent. Persevere in prayer. Continually ask God to conform your will to his. Become God’s warrior in prayer. Ask him to align your spirit, your desires, your wants, your yearnings, with his Spirit.

Then watch him do far more in your life than you dare to ask or think.

Part 3: Preparation

Finally, Nehemiah offered a prayer of preparation. It was the prayer of a prepared heart. Nehemiah said, “O LORD, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”

Nehemiah identified himself as God’s humble servant, and he asked God to give success to him as God’s servant, going about God’s business. An important principle is at work in Nehemiah’s mighty prayer—a principle that you and I should heed: Don’t ever ask God for something without having your heart prepared, without being willing to do great things for God.

Prayer is not an excuse for doing nothing. Prayer does not absolve us of the responsibility to act. In fact, if we are going to ask God to pour out his power and blessing on us, we had better be prepared to serve his agenda. When we pray, we must be ready to surrender, to sacrifice, and to serve. As King David once said, “I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God that cost me nothing” (2 Samuel 24:24).

Prayer is not submitting a wish list to God. Prayer is the act of reporting for duty. Prayer is the act of volunteering for service. You and I are God’s servants through whom he seeks to accomplish his will. We pray in order to be about God’s business.

Nehemiah could have received the report from the Judean visitors, then prayed, “God, bless those people in far-off Jerusalem. If only I could help them myself. But God, you know their need, so please help them with their distress, with their broken walls and shattered gates. O God, please send those people a miracle.”

Nehemiah didn’t do that. To him, prayer was much more than simply thinking a good thought and sending it to God on behalf of other people. To Nehemiah, prayer was a call to action. Prayer was stepping forward and saying to God, “I’m ready to go. I’m willing to leave the comfort of the palace. I’m willing to step out and risk everything for you and your people. Send me, Lord.”

It’s one thing to pray, “Lord, please send more workers into the harvest.” But it takes a whole different level of commitment, a much deeper level of preparation to pray, “Lord, send *me* into the harvest. Send *me* into my neighborhood, into my workplace, onto my campus, and out into the world to harvest souls for your kingdom.”

The prophet Isaiah records the moment when God commissioned him as a prophet to Israel: “And I heard the voice of the LORD saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ Then I said, ‘Here I am! Send me’” (Isaiah 6:8). And that is what Nehemiah was saying: Here I am, prayerfully prepared for your service. Send me.

The last sentence of the last verse of Nehemiah 1 is stated very simply, yet the implications of that sentence are profound:

Now I was cupbearer to the king (1:11b).

That simple sentence tells us so much about Nehemiah. We have seen Nehemiah receive a report from the Judean travelers. Then we saw him go down on his knees and pray that mighty prayer of praise, perseverance, and preparation. And now Nehemiah tells us in one sentence about his position: he was the cupbearer to the king. He

was God's man in the Persian palace at Susa. He had the ear of the king himself. Nehemiah was strategically placed to be used by God to achieve his purposes in human history.

Nehemiah knew why God had given him such an influential position as cupbearer to the king. So he placed himself completely at the service of the God of Israel. In the rest of this book, we will see how God uses Nehemiah, this fully submitted and obedient servant.

The mighty power of a mother's prayer

Hudson Taylor was born in 1832, the son of a pharmacist father and a mother who was a Methodist lay preacher. His parents raised him in the Christian faith, but he rebelled during his teenage years. He renounced the Christian beliefs of his parents, and he broke his mother's heart. At the age of seventeen, he happened to be in his father's library, looking for a certain book, when he picked up an evangelistic pamphlet titled *Poor Richard*. As he read the pamphlet, he was overwhelmed by the realization of what Jesus Christ had done in dying for him on the cross. Instantly, he dropped to his knees and received Jesus as his Lord and Savior.

At the time, his mother was in another city, about seventy miles away, on church business. When she returned home, about ten days after Hudson's conversion experience, he met her at the door and told her the good news that he had committed his life to Jesus Christ. Strangely, she didn't seem surprised.

"I already know," his mother said.

"But how could you know?" Hudson asked.

"Ten days ago," she said, "on the very day you tell me you read that pamphlet, I rose from the dinner table, and I felt a strong yearning that you should give your life to the Lord Jesus. So I went to my room and I closed the door and turned the key, and I got on

my knees and prayed for you. I resolved not to leave that spot until I had God's assurance that my prayers were answered. I pleaded with God in prayer until I could pray no longer. And then I felt his Spirit telling me that all is well. My son has been converted."

Within months of his conversion, Hudson Taylor committed himself to becoming a missionary to China. Before his life was completed, he had spent fifty-one years in China, had founded the China Inland Mission (now OMF International), recruited more than 800 missionaries to the country, founded 125 schools and 300 mission stations in all eighteen provinces of China, and led thousands of Chinese people to the Lord Jesus Christ. He was known not only for his evangelistic passion, but for his great love of the Chinese people and sensitivity to their culture.

And all of this can be traced to the mighty power of a mother's prayer.

What are you praying for? Are you willing to get on your knees and not move from that spot until you feel God's power at work through your prayers?

Through the mighty power of prayer, God makes it possible for us to surrender, to obey, and to be about our Master's business. Prayer calls us to prepare ourselves for service. Through prayer, we can go to God and—like Isaiah, like Nehemiah, like Hudson Taylor—say, "Here I am! Send me."