

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 8, 2019**

## **A PROFILE IN PRAYER**

### **Nehemiah 1:1-11**

Let me begin this morning with a story (or three) of profiles in prayer.

#### **MR. & MRS. RINARD**

Chuck Sackett did not grow up going to church, but when he learned about the God and Country award as a Boy Scout, he wanted it. If it meant going to church, that's what he was determined to do. Every Sunday he walked from his house to the little church in the next block. Every Sunday he went past the home of an older couple named the Rinards. Sometime later, he worked for the Rinards, doing yard work. He attended church just long enough to get the God and Country award, and then he quit going.

Several years later, after becoming a Christian and a pastor, Chuck learned that the Rinards were in a nursing home nearby. So he and his wife went to visit them. At the end of their visit, as they were about to leave the nursing home, one of the Rinards said: "Do you remember when you used to walk to that little church? We've not missed one day since, praying that God would do something in your life."

For 12 years, Chuck says, this elderly couple prayed for him – every day – that God would one day "do something" in his life. He had no other Christian influence in his life at that time, but eventually became a follower of Jesus and a pastor.

He says: "I was prayed into the kingdom. There is simply no other explanation."

Chuck Sackett's testimony and the prayers of Mr. and Mrs. Rinard for him show that prayer really does make a difference. Max Lucado has written: "Our prayers may be awkward. Our attempts may be feeble. But since the power of prayer is in the One who hears it and not in the one who says it, our prayers do make a difference."

Mr. and Mrs. Rinard are not famous. I doubt that you have ever heard of them. I never had. But they are exemplary profiles in prayer.

#### **A WEBSITE ARCHITECT**

Here is another story: A website architect was hired by a big bank in a major U. S. city to upgrade the bank website's interface for people with disabilities. Everyone with whom she directly worked told her she couldn't do it, that she would fail. She agreed, because the truth is, she didn't know how to do it. No one she knew, knew how to do it. One web technician told her he couldn't do in a year even part of what the company was asking her to do in six months. These were uncharted waters. She feared that she would fail and lose her job.

So, do you know what she did? She took it to the Lord in prayer. All day long, every day, she prayed fervently over every detail, every page, every line of code. She even wept at times as she prayed. She felt small and inadequate, but she also had a fierce conviction that God was great enough to help her with an impossible job. She continued to cry out to God day after day, planning functionalities, writing code, telling her team of developers what to do. Day by day she received wisdom for one piece of the project after another. Every step was a new discovery.

Week after week, one piece, one page, one functionality of the website after another came together. As the months passed, progress continued. She felt the hand of God upon her, and He blessed her entire team. They finished the project ahead of deadline. On the day of release, they went live with about 80 new web pages of cutting-edge technology. With the exception of one minor bug that was easily fixed, it worked flawlessly. (Source: [www.Craigbrianlarson.com](http://www.Craigbrianlarson.com). "The Impossible Job," 12/11/17.)

Does God promise that things will always work out the way you want, as long as you pray? No. Prayer does not guarantee success, at least not as we usually define success. But one thing is sure. As someone (author Rachel Wojo) has put it so simply and so beautifully: "Prayer trumps panic. Every. Time." And in all the challenges we face in life, both personal and professional, God is only a prayer away.

We've got to beware, however, of thinking that prayer is just a way of getting something from God. Yes, we bring our needs and requests to God. Yes, God invites us to bring our needs and requests to Him. But, as Tim Keller points out: "Prayer is not so much a way of getting things from God as it is a way to get more of God Himself" (Keller, *Prayer*). More of God is what we most need in our lives. More of God is what our world most needs.

Without a doubt, this web architect is a profile in prayer. More of God is what she most needed and what she experienced.

### **PRESIDENT WILLIAM MCKINLEY**

Here is one more profile in prayer, this one from American history. William McKinley (whose father was born in Pine Township, Mercer County, PA, just outside of Grove City) was the 25<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. He was first elected in 1896, then re-elected in 1900, but his second term and his life were cut short by an assassin in September 1901. Prayer was a lifelong practice that guided McKinley's life throughout his political career, including his presidency. Born into a Christian home in 1843, he was born again at the age of 14. According to his pastor, McKinley stood up at a youth meeting and said: "I have sinned. I want to be a Christian.... I give myself to the Savior who has done so much for me."

McKinley's mother was a woman of deep prayer who taught him to pray by example and encouragement. His greatest lessons in prayer, though, may have been those forged under the pressures of his duties as President of the United States. One of his weightiest decisions came in 1898 regarding the status of the Philippines after the Spanish-American War. A delegation of church leaders came to the White House to see him. He told them how he had decided to

resolve the crisis in the Philippines: “The truth is,” he said, “I didn’t want the Philippines. I didn’t know what to do. I sought counsel from all sides – Democrats as well as Republicans – but got little help. I walked the floor of the White House night after night until midnight, and I am not ashamed to tell you that I went down on my knees and prayed to Almighty God for light and guidance more than one night.”

As he prayed, McKinley came to the conviction that the Philippines and its people should be taken seriously and helped, and that the United States should “by God’s grace do the very best we could by them as our fellow-men for whom Christ died.” McKinley added: “And then I went to bed, and went to sleep and slept soundly” (Robert Morgan, *Worry Less, Live More*, 49-50).

I suspect that William McKinley is not the only President in our history who was a profile in prayer. It would be good for us to pray that President Trump would become, by God’s grace, a true follower of Jesus and a profile in prayer as well, and that all who succeed him would be the same.

## **NEHEMIAH**

Nehemiah in the Old Testament is also a profile in prayer. If he is not one of the unsung heroes of the Bible, Nehemiah is certainly one of the Bible’s lesser-sung heroes. But it doesn’t have to be that way. I want you to know about Nehemiah and to properly appreciate his faith in God, his faithfulness to God, and his commitment to a life of both prayer and action. Nehemiah was a man of prayer. *And* a man of action. I encourage you to read the entire Book of Nehemiah to get the full picture of the kind of man he was and how God used him.

A little background: If you know your Old Testament history, you know that after the death of David’s son Solomon, the nation of Israel became a divided kingdom – Israel in the north and Judah in the south. The northern kingdom of Israel came to an end in 722 BC when it was conquered by the Assyrians. The southern kingdom of Judah remained in existence until it was conquered in 586 BC by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. The Babylonians forced the leading citizens of Jerusalem and Judah to go into exile in Babylon, 800 miles from their homeland.

Almost 50 years later, in 539 BC, Babylon fell to the Persians, led by King Cyrus, who gave the Jews permission to return to their homeland and to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. The first wave, led by Zerubbabel, returned to Jerusalem and began the work of rebuilding the temple. The second wave of returning refugees came 80 years later, in 458 BC, during the reign of King Artaxerxes I, under the leadership of Ezra.

The Book of Nehemiah begins a little more than a decade later, around 445 BC, with Nehemiah serving in the administration of King Artaxerxes, who ruled from 464-423 BC. As he tells us in 1:11, Nehemiah was “cupbearer to the king.” That may not seem like a very important office. But it was. His job was to choose and taste the wine (and other drink) before it was offered to the king, to insure it had not been poisoned. So it was a position of

trust in the royal household. Only someone the king could thoroughly trust would be given this responsibility. It also meant that Nehemiah had regular access to the king. In theory, at least, it was a position of significant influence in the administration of Artaxerxes.

Thirteen years after Ezra led a group of exiles back to Jerusalem, Nehemiah received word that the wall of the city and its gates, which were its main defense against attack, were still in ruins. Broken down. Dilapidated. In total disrepair. And the city's populace was disorganized and discouraged. Nehemiah was devastated. The news from Jerusalem broke his heart. Heartbroken as he was, though, Nehemiah did not fall into a pit of despair. In verse 4 he says: "When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven." Instead of giving up hope, he took his grief to the Lord in prayer.

It is true that he did not just pray. He fasted as well. Fasting is not much emphasized or practiced by most Christians or churches today. At least not here in America. But it was a common part of the religious life of devout Jews in the Old Testament and of Christians in the New Testament church. Jesus spoke about fasting as well as prayer and charitable giving in His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount on "acts of righteousness" (Matthew 6:1-18). To fast is to miss a meal, or to give up eating for a specified period of time, like one day a week or one day a month, for one major purpose: To zero in on your relationship with God; or to pray earnestly, fervently, passionately, and persistently about some situation in which you want God to act. When you fast, whatever time you would normally spend preparing, eating, and cleaning up after a meal can be spent in prayer instead.

You can fast from things other than food as well. As God leads you, you can fast from TV. You can fast from your computer or smart phone. You can fast from football. Or from some other activity that may keep you unnecessarily from seeking the Lord.

Nehemiah didn't just pray. In his mourning for the condition of Jerusalem, he *fasted and prayed*. I mainly want you to see Nehemiah as a profile in prayer today, but we can't miss the fact that he was a profile in fasting, too.

In verses 5-11, Nehemiah shares the essence of the prayer he prayed. This was not a one-time prayer. He did not just utter a spur-of-the-moment prayer and then get on with his life. He mourned and fasted and prayed "for some days." How many, he doesn't say. But you can be sure it was an ongoing, daily prayer in his life for an extended period of time. In fact, when you come to Nehemiah 2, you discover it has been four months since Nehemiah first heard about the dilapidated state of the walls and gates of Jerusalem. For four months, he had been praying for the Lord's guidance, for His mercy and provision for Jerusalem!

Nehemiah did pray spur-of-the-moment prayers, too – what we sometimes call "arrow prayers." In chapter 2, for example, the king asked him why he looked so sad. Nehemiah admits that he was afraid, but he said to the king: "Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"

Then the king said: "What is it you want?"

Then, Nehemiah says, “*I prayed to the God of heaven*” (emphasis added), “and I answered the king: ‘If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let (the king) send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it’ (2:2-5). Since there is never a time when it is not time to pray, it is always the right time to pray spontaneous “arrow prayers.” But not to the neglect of regular prayer appointments with God.

It did please King Artaxerxes to send him to Jerusalem (2:6). So Nehemiah the cupbearer became Nehemiah the builder (or rebuilder) of the wall of Jerusalem, a project that took 52 days from start to finish (6:15), despite vocal objections and attempts to sabotage the work by Nehemiah’s opponents. Nehemiah the builder then became Nehemiah the governor, spending the next 12 years in Jerusalem as governor of Judea.

In addition to the prayers in chapters 1 and 2, other prayers of Nehemiah are recorded in 4:4-5; 5:19; 6:14; and 13:44, 22, 29, and 31. It seems self-evident that prayer was part of the fabric of Nehemiah’s life.

### **NEHEMIAH’S PRAYER**

When you zero in on his prayer in 1:5-11, you see that Nehemiah begins by praising God as “the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant of love with those who love Him and obey His commands” (1:5). I have a friend who often begins his prayers by saying: “Lord, thank You for being so awesome.” I like that! The Lord our God *is* awesome. If anything should evoke a response of awe in us or from us, it is God in all the greatness of His glory and grace, in His holiness and love, in His sovereignty and power, and faithfulness. God, of course, is not a “thing” but a Person – a personal God who loves each of us personally and desires to have a personal relationship with us. He *is* an awesome God, and we should never cease to think of Him with reverence and awe and amazement.

Nehemiah recognized the awesomeness of God and praised Him. He followed up his praise with an honest confession of sins. He confessed both the national sins of the people of Israel and his own complicity, his own sinfulness and that of his family, in the sins of God’s covenant people. In verse 6 he says: “I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s house, have committed against You.” There is no trace of feeling that he was “holier than thou.” Nehemiah knew that he shared in the guilt of his people. Just as we are not exempt from the guilt of our nation in its sin, redeemed sinners – forgiven sinners – though we are.

Nehemiah then reminds God of His gracious promise to restore His people to Jerusalem (1:9). As Chuck Swindoll points out, “God does not lightly give out promises. He says: ‘I promise you that if you will give me your burden, I will bear it. If you will seek first my kingdom, I will add all these other things to you. If you will make your heart right before me, I will lead you into a path of stability and prosperity.’”

Before you get the wrong idea and think Swindoll is promoting some kind of prosperity gospel – or that I am – Swindoll says: “That doesn’t necessarily mean (God) will fill your

wallet [or bank account]. It does mean that He will give you peace – like the world is not able to know” (Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick*, 37).

When God makes a promise, you can be sure that He will keep it. And it is okay to remind God of His promises, although you don’t ever need to worry that He will forget.

The last element in Nehemiah’s prayer is his request for God’s blessing. With both humility and boldness, he asks the Lord to give him success by granting him favor with the king. Which was a prayer the Lord graciously answered.

### **FAITH ON FIRE**

Nehemiah’s prayer was an expression of his faith in God. “Prayer,” Chuck Swindoll says, “sets faith on fire” (Swindoll, 39).

Do you want God to set your faith on fire? To set *our* faith on fire? Then follow the example of Nehemiah. Follow the example of President McKinley. Follow the example of the web architect faced with a seemingly impossible assignment. Follow the example of Mr. and Mrs. Rinard, who for 12 years prayed faithfully – daily – for God to do something in the life of Chuck Sackett.

May our lives, like Nehemiah’s be profiles in both prayer and action. Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.