“The Prayers of a Breaking Heart”

What breaks your heart?
What drives you to your knees?

Has your heart ever broke for the Church? You found yourself wanting so much for the church you were compelled to fast and pray?

What about for your church? Have you ever spent time earnestly fasting and pleading with God for the ministry, members, and leaders of your church? Prayers that went beyond the “please bless my church” prayers? Heart felt prayers pleading with God for healing, hope, and impact?

Nehemiah did.

In Nehemiah 1, we find this king’s cupbearer heartbroken and weeping for his city and temple.

A little history. The children of Israel had been taken captive. The city of Jerusalem was destroyed. And along with it, the temple. Years later, this scattered nation is now free. Ezra and others return to Jerusalem and being the task of rebuilding the temple. But they cannot seem to make progress because of the attacks of their enemies who do not want to see God’s temple—or His people—restored. They have no protection from the enemy because the walls of Jerusalem lay in shambles all around the city. They are discouraged and struggling.

When Nehemiah learns of their plight, it breaks his heart. He “sat down and wept, and mourned for many days” (Nehemiah 1:4). Wept. Mourned. For days. He is grieving for his city, his people, and the temple. His heart is breaking for his church. Not just the building, but the people and for their witness to the nations around them. He does not want the enemy to win. And so he fights for his church.

“I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.” (verse 4) He begins battling for his church by spending time fasting and praying. He knows where to go to find the power and resources to win this battle. God. And he knows that this is no ordinary battle. It requires more than just a “bless our efforts” prayer. It requires committed fasting and prayer.

The disciples once questioned Jesus why they weren’t able to hear a man’s son. They had healed many people and participated in miracles. But for some reason, they couldn’t seem to bring freedom to this child from the demon out to destroy him. “Why could we not cast it out?” (Matthew 17:19) Jesus told them, “Because this kind does not go out except with fasting and prayer.” There are battles to be prayed that require the commitment that fasting brings to the heart of the pray-er. Nehemiah recognizes that this is one of those moments. His breaking heart drives him to fast and pray for his people and church.
As he prays, he spends time praising God for who He is. “O great and awesome God, You who keep Your covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments...” (verse 5) Nehemiah begins praying by praising God. Not because he’s attempting to get on God’s good side and thus receive the answer he wants. But because it reminds him of who God is. What He has promised. How He loves and cares for His people.

While his heart is heavy for his church, he next spends time confessing sin. He wants to make sure things are right between him and God, before making any requests. “...I pray before you now, day and night, for the children of Israel Your servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against You...” (verse 6) Nehemiah confesses the sins of God’s people. And sees himself as part of the sinners. “Both my father’s house and I have sinned against You.” (verse 6) He recognizes that it’s not just everyone else who has sinned. He has, too. He takes on the responsibility of the entire nation and confesses their sin.

Nehemiah knows that God is merciful. Forgiving. And has promised to never abandon or forsake His people. Even though He allowed them to be taken captive, He still saw them, loved them, and had a plan for them. The often quoted promise in Jeremiah 29:11—that God has a plan that includes hope for His people, was given right after His people were told that they were going to be in captivity for 70 years and challenged to live there. Build houses. Plant gardens. Raise children. See those children married and raise their own families. They were going to be captive for a while. So live there. But He promised them, He had a plan.

Nehemiah reminds God of His promises. Praying God’s Word right back to Him. Claiming those promises God made to His people. “Remember, I pray the word You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, “If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if You return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I will gather them from there, and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for My name.” (verses 8-9) He claims God’s promise, believing God will answer. Then gets back to work.

Yet when he shows up in front of the king, he is still heart broken and grieving—still longing for his church to be rebuilt and his people protected from the enemy. And the king immediately sees it. He knows Nehemiah. He knows that Nehemiah is a man of joy and peace. He doesn’t typically walk around grieving. So the king asks, “What’s wrong, Nehemiah?”

Nehemiah tells him about the plight of his people.

“What do you request?” Nehemiah recognizes the king’s question as God’s possible answer to his prayers. He’s been watching and waiting for God to answer. Expecting God to answer, He sends up a quick prayer (verse 4) and confidently asks the king for help. And not
just a little help. He asks for huge things.

“...send me to Judah...that I may rebuild it.” (verse 5)

The king asks, “How long will you be gone?” Nehemiah “set him a time.” (verse 6) As we continue reading the story, we see that Nehemiah is gone 12 years. So he’s not asking for a couple of weeks off work, but a dozen years.

“Futhermore I said to the king...” (verse 7) And he’s not done yet. He asks for letters that will ensure him safe passage all the way to Jerusalem. As well as timber from the king’s own forest for the rebuilding supplies. (verse 8)

“And the king granted them to me according to the good hand of my God upon me.” (verse 8) Nehemiah recognizes that the king answers these outrageous requests because of God. And not only does he give Nehemiah all he requests, but he also sends captains of the army with him to protect him on this journey. God is answering his prayers.

Trusting God to continue to answer and be with him, Nehemiah heads off to Jerusalem and leads the rebuilding efforts. It’s not an easy task. The enemies don’t give up easily and continue to attack. But they are no match for the prayers of a heart breaking for God’s people and church. Nehemiah and God are successful. The wall is rebuilt. The city fortified. The people encouraged. The enemy defeated.

“So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of Elui, in fifty-two days. And it happened, when all our enemies heard of it and all the nations around us saw these things, that they were very disheartened in their own eyes; for they perceived that this work was done by God.” (Nehemiah 6:18)

“There is need of Nehemiah’s in the church today—not men who can pray and preach only but men whose prayers and sermons are braced with firm and eager purpose...the success attending Nehemiah’s efforts shows what prayer, faith and wise, energetic action will accomplish.” (EGW ChS 177)

We need Nehemiah’s in the church today. People whose hearts are breaking for the church. People who are compelled by their love for God and His people to spend time fasting and praying for the church. People who are willing to ask God for big things for His church. And then expect and watch for Him to answer. People who don’t just sit back and watch, but become a part of God’s answer to prayer by getting involved. Taking action. Being a part of the rebuilding—not of a building—but of people’s lives.

Today we can take a first step towards becoming Nehemiah’s. As we spend this day fasting and praying for our church, we can come together and pray. Real, intentional, heart-felt prayers for our church—our leaders, our ministries, our SS classes, our members, our visitors, and those seeking God in our community. Join us as we step out in faith and fight
for our church in prayer.

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**Summary – Just to Recap**

The condition of the church broke Nehemiah’s heart. His response is a great outline for us as we pray for our churches:

- He fasted and prayed
- He praised God
- He confessed sin
- He claimed God’s promises
- He asked for huge things
- He got involved

**Suggested Children’s Story**

*Share the story of Joash from 2 Kings 12:1-19. Point out that he was just a little boy, but he cared about God’s church and wanted to do something to make sure that God had a beautiful church for people to come and worship Him. So Joash took a chest, drilled a hole in the top, and invited people to come and give whatever God encouraged them to give, so that they could rebuild the temple (church.) No matter who young or old we are, God has something for each of us to do for Him, to help the church grow and help others know God.*

*If you’d like to include a visual activity, fill a large bowl with brown rice. Hide a couple of pennies in the rice. Invite kids to look for the pennies with chopsticks. Do this before the story, then share how the church was falling apart and needed repair, but they needed to find money to pay for rebuilding the church. God gave Joash an idea for finding the money.*

**Prayer Time: Fighting for the Church**

*Spend the afternoon prayer walking your church—covering every ministry, every SS class, each leader, and every aspect of church life. This can be done as a large group, but may work best in small groups, giving each group the outline below in a different order so each group is praying in a different area, but pray for each area of prayer concern.*

- Begin this time of prayer, by spending time **praising** God in the sanctuary—focusing on who He is.
- While still in the sanctuary, lead in a time of **confession**, asking God to forgive and heal the church. Include a time of personal, silent confession prayer time, inviting each person to ask God to seek their heart, convict of sin, confess, ask for forgiveness, and invite God to replace that sin with more of Him.
- Pray on the platform for the sermons, music, children’s messages etc.—the **worship service**, that God’s Word will accomplish all He desires each Sabbath, opening the hearts of people to be convicted, challenged, encouraged, and affirmed by the message.
• Pray in the pastor’s office/study (if there isn’t one, choose a spot that best represents the pastor), and pray specifically for the pastor and his family by name.

• Pray in each SS class, lifting up each teacher and each student by name, and asking God to use this time to draw each person closer to Him, to open their hearts to understand His Word, and to grow the class.

• Pray in the fellowship hall for the social activities and friendships of the church, asking God to grow friendships and enable every single member to feel accepted and like they belong and are a part of the church.

• Pray in the lobby for the visitors who attend church, that they will feel welcomed, learn more about God, and want to return.

• Pray outside the front doors for the community, that God would draw those who are seeking Him to the church, also praying for the church’s outreach ministries, inviting God to give wisdom, discernment and ideas for connecting with people in the community.

• Pray in the room that the church board meets for the church board and leadership of the church by name, asking God to give each member wisdom and a heart for Him and for others, so that the board and leaders focus most of their energies on ministry and not maintenance.

• Choose spots to pray for each ministry of the church—community services, women’s ministries, personal ministries, etc.—and pray specifically for those leaders, committee members, asking God to give them wisdom, ideas, and a heart for Him and people.

• Return to the sanctuary and end the time of prayer with a season of thanksgiving and praise, thanking God for the ways He is working in and through the church.

**Continue to Fight for the Church in Prayer**

Covering the church in prayer is a great way to start the year, but it’s also important to pray for the church throughout the year. Here are some ideas for keeping members praying for the church throughout the year:

• Include prayer requests for the church in the weekly bulletin or eblast.

• Invite SS teachers and ministry leaders to share specific prayer requests for their area of ministry.

• Begin a weekly prayer focus for the church—choosing one ministry or SS class to focus on each week. Pray for that ministry/SS class on Sabbath, then invite church members to pray throughout the following week. You could consider creating a bulletin insert with that week’s focus and things to pray specifically about for that area of ministry—including the name of the leaders involved.