



“Hearing from Heaven”

Nehemiah 2:1-8

Idea: It should be a natural and on-going part of life.

Intro: One cold, early November morning in St. Petersburg, Russia, Phillip Yancey was jogging in the dark through an area under construction. He suddenly slipped on some unseen ice and fell facedown barely missing a piece of steel rebar protruding from the curb. The fall knocked him out cold. When he awoke and sat up, he reached up to touch his right eye, which was throbbing. He immediately felt blood. The whole right side of his face was bloody. He got up, dusted himself off, and felt around for more injuries. The taste of blood was in his mouth, and he quickly realized a tooth was missing.

Yancey stumbled back to the hotel. All the way there, he noticed that people were staring. Russians rarely look strangers in the eye, so he obviously looked like a mess, but there was no way he was going to the hospital. He had heard all the horror stories of Russian medical care, so his wife doctored him up the best she could.

Later that day he went out to find an Internet Café. After finally finding one and struggling to figure out the Cyrillic alphabet on the keyboard and screen, he was able to land on an AOL screen in English. The connection was spotty, but he was able to send a simple message to a prayer group at his home church in Colorado. “We need help. Please pray!” Yancey was hurt and not sure how bad. In addition a news banner on AOL was reporting that armed Chechen rebels had just seized a theatre in Moscow and the city was under military lockdown. He was scheduled to speak in Moscow in a couple days.

As Yancey walked back to his hotel, he wondered, “Is this how prayer works? We send signals from a visible world to an invisible one, in hope that Someone receives them but not knowing if they were received.” Still, for the first time that day, he felt the lump of fear and anxiety loosen. He was confident that in a few hours his family and friends would turn on their computers, read his message, and pray on his behalf. He was not alone.

Every faith has some form of prayer. Remote tribes present offerings and then pray for everyday things such as health, food, rain, children, and victory in battles. Incas and Aztecs went so far as to sacrifice humans in order to attract the gods’ attention. Five times a day modern Muslims stop whatever they are doing – driving, having a coffee break, playing soccer – when the summons comes to pray.

Even atheists find ways to pray. During the heady days of Communism in Russia, party stalwarts kept a “red corner,” placing a portrait of Lenin where Christians used to keep their icons. Caught up in the fervor, *Pravda* ran this advice to its readers in 1950:

If you meet with difficulties in your work, or suddenly doubt your abilities, think of him – of Stalin – and you will find the confidence you need. If you feel tired in an hour when you should not, think of him – of Stalin – and your work will go well. If you are seeking a correct decision, think of him – of Stalin – and you will find that decision.

We pray because we want to thank someone or something for the beauties and glories of life, and also because we feel small and helpless and sometimes afraid. We pray for forgiveness, for strength, for contact with the One who is, for assurance that we are not alone. Millions in AA groups pray daily to a Higher Power, begging for help in controlling their addictions. We pray because we can't help it. The very word *prayer* comes from the Latin root *precarius* (obtained by entreaty). In St. Petersburg, Russia, Philip Yancey prayed out of desperation; he had nowhere else to turn.

Prayer is universal because it speaks to some basic human need. As Thomas Merton put it, "Prayer is an expression of who we are... We are a living incompleteness. We are a gap, an emptiness that calls for fulfillment." In prayer we break silence, and sometimes those words flow out of our deepest parts. We need to hear from heaven. This is where Nehemiah found himself after learning of the shameful state of his people and their land.

The story of Nehemiah's prayer life, however, did not begin with the events of chapter one. The pattern of prayer we find in the pages of this book speak of a lifelong pattern of prayer in Nehemiah. He understood how vital it was to disengage for a while from life's pressures in order to spend time with God and replenish his resources. Everyone needs that kind of spiritual space, quiet moments each day for prayer, meditation, and the reading of God's Word. But prayer must never be an excuse for laziness; rising from his knees, this man was better equipped for his everyday work. That essential rhythm of withdrawal and involvement is a vital aspect of effective Christian living.

Nehemiah was a man of prayer, and he was also a man of action, namely because each day he was able to hear from heaven.

Read Nehemiah 2:1-8.

Inquiry: Nehemiah immediately took up his prayer and petition on behalf of his fellow Jews and the city of Jerusalem when he heard the report from Hanani. He was a man of decisive action, and when he prayed it was natural for him to ask God to provide an early, if not immediate, opportunity for him to speak to the king (1:11). But as he went from his prayer to daily work in the Persian court, he began to realize that, although *today* was his preferred day, it might not be the right day for making such a huge request. More than a hundred days came and went as he waited for the best moment.

Nehemiah's daily example of hearing from heaven reveals four things that ought to be present in our devotion to prayer.

1. Presumption

As followers of Christ, we should never presume upon God's grace. We should never presume that it is okay to sin because we are under grace (Rom 6:1, 15). Doing so perverts and cheapens grace. It is, on the other hand, good and right to presume that God will hear and answer us when we pray. Nehemiah prayed with this sort of presumption.

4 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. 5 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, 6 let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant...8 Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses...11 O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants – Neh 1:4-6, 8, 11

In our study of what prayer is and how the believer is to pray, we must understand that first place must be given

to faith. It is the initial quality in the heart of any Christian who attempts to talk to the Unseen. We must, out of sheer helplessness, stretch forth hands of faith. We must believe, where we cannot prove. As E. M. Bounds has said, “Prayer is simply faith claiming its natural yet marvelous prerogatives – faith taking possession of its illimitable inheritance (in Christ).”

“Faith is believing something is so, when it is not so, in order for it to be so, because God says, it is so.”

– Manley Beasley

Beasley wasn't advocating an abstract faith. He wasn't talking about having faith in faith. He spoke of a concrete faith...a faith in a solid foundation. He spoke of a faith that presumed upon the faithfulness of God's Word (Heb 11:1).

Illust: In 1972 Tom Elliff became the pastor of Eastwood Baptist Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Having been exposed to the moving of God's Spirit on the campus of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in the revival of 1970, Tom knew he would forever be dissatisfied *with business as usual*. He began to wonder how he could set the future spiritual course of the people God had placed under his care. Eastwood was a church that had just been holding its own for a number of years. Tom had heard about Manley Beasley, who had been at death's door and who was being used of the Lord to create a hunger for revival in the hearts of God's people. Tom invited him to come and preach.

The revival was scheduled during the first week of December that year. On Saturday, one day before the revival was to begin, Manley called Tom from a hospital in Dallas to inform him that he couldn't make it on Sunday. Tom preached for him. The same thing happened on Monday and Tuesday. Finally, on Wednesday, Manley arrived in Tulsa in a wheel chair,

wrapped in a heavy winter coat, and looking as though he should have stayed in the hospital. That evening a major ice storm hit Tulsa, but Tom was not about to cancel the meeting. Two hundred people showed up for the service. Manley preached on a stool because he didn't have the strength to stand. When he finished, he just sat down.

There was more happening however, than met the eye. Tom recalls a conversation he had with Manley before the evening service. "What do you want Tom?" "What do you mean Manley?" "Son, what do you want to see happen here at Eastwood?" "Manley, I want to see God bless. I want to see people saved." The next morning Manley called from the motel and asked the same question. That evening he asked the same question. Tom gave him the same answer. On Friday morning, Manley called again. This time Tom responded, "Bro. Manley I have been listening to you, and now I think I know what I really want. I want to see Jesus. I want to experience the fullness of His life living in me. I want this personally, and I want it for my church." Son, I think revival has come."

That night Manley preached, didn't give an invitation, got sick after the service, and left Saturday morning. The message he preached remained though. It was the message of faith. The people of EBC had heard things that they had never heard before. The message was sown so deeply into the hearts of the members that for years to come their compass was set. Manley taught them the principle of getting a word from God, and he showed them that faith was simply cooperating with God in what He has said. Manley put it this way, "God's will is revealed by the Holy Spirit through the Word. Faith does not just believe that God can do something; faith is acting on the basis of what God has said.

That message revolutionized EBC. In a short time the church grew from 500 in attendance to over 2,500. They became *Exciting Eastwood*.

Nehemiah presumed upon God's Word. As he prayed, he believed what God had said. He prayed in faith.

“When faith ceases to pray, it ceases to live.”

– E. M. Bounds

2. Persistence

In the sermon on the mount, Jesus taught that in prayer, you should ask and keep asking, seek and keep seeking, knock and keep knocking and it will be opened to you (Matt 7:7). This is exactly what Nehemiah did. He persisted in prayer.

...I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven...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 – Neh 1:4, 6

E. M. Bounds taught that persistent prayer is a mighty movement of the soul toward God. It is a stirring of the deepest forces of the soul toward the throne of heavenly grace. It is the ability to hold on, press on, and wait. It is not an incident or a performance, but a passion of soul. It is not a half-needed want, but a sheer necessity.

Therefore, Christians who do not press their plea, do not pray at all. Cold prayers have no claim on heaven and no hearing in the courts above. Fire is the life of prayer, and heaven is reached by flaming persistence rising in an ascending scale. In order to hear from heaven, we must pray and keep on praying.

3. Patience

1 In the month of Nisan... – Neh 2:1

Four months passed between the time Nehemiah began praying for an opportunity and when the opportunity came. Surely, the days seemed long and patience did not come easily for this dynamic extrovert. Like any person he wanted God to act *today*, but the opportunity did not come for months.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, those four months were not lost. It was during those months of waiting that God worked in Nehemiah. The time he spent with God multiplied his creative thoughts, provided new perspectives, and made him more prepared and composed than he ever thought possible.

Appl: Waiting time is not wasted time. As you wait on God to answer your prayer, trust that He is using that time to deepen your faith, sharpen your skills, and broaden your perspective.

4. Preparation

When King Artaxerxes asked Nehemiah what he wanted, he was able to respond quickly and thoroughly because he had prayed and prepared. He had thought through what he would say. In verse 3, Nehemiah purposefully did not mention Jerusalem or anything about the city's wall. He then in verse 5 asked to return to the city of his fathers' graves. When asked about how long it would take, Nehemiah had an answer (vs. 6). He wisely asked for letters to give him safe passage and provisions (vs. 7-8). He knew the name of the keeper of the forest. He had thought through every detail of what needed to be rebuilt (vs. 8).

Surely, there were all manner of things which Nehemiah would like to have done during the four-month period of tedious delay, but he did what he could: he prayed, trusted, and thought for God. He

didn't just sit around waiting on God. He prepared. Nehemiah had a word from God, and he acted on the basis of what God had said in Deuteronomy 4. While he waited on the opportunity to present itself, he prepared.

As you wait to hear from heaven, do what you can...prepare for what you are believing God for.

Conclusion: Prayer is universal. Everyone, everywhere prays. But how can we be sure that the signals we send from a visible world to an invisible world will be received? How can we be sure that our prayers are heard? How can we be sure that the One who hears them will or even can respond?

We pray like everyone else. We pray from faith, but our faith is not abstract. It is concrete; it is real. We have the revealed Word of God and the testimonies of people who have prayed and the God of the Bible responded. They heard from heaven because they presumed that God would speak. They heard from heaven because they persisted in prayer. They heard from heaven because they patiently waited in prayer. And they heard from heaven because they prepared while praying.

How about you? Do you pray with the presumption that God will hear and respond? Do you pray persistently, continually bringing the things on your heart before the Lord? Do you pray patiently, believing that God knows the right time to respond? Do you prepare as you pray?

Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you. – Hosea 10:12