

# **Missional Prayer Prayers for Others**

*Nehemiah 1:1-11*

1. Integrity.

2. Investment.

3. Intercession.

- Identification.

- Association.

- Compassion.

4. Implication.

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Michael O'Neill

## Missional Prayer

### Part 2: Praying for Others

*(Intercessory Prayer)*

We are in our second of a four-part series on “Missional Prayer.” Missional prayer is more than simply praying for our needs or the needs of others. *Missional prayer is praying for the advancement of the Kingdom of God in our lives, our church, our community, and our world.*

Last week we learned how to pray for our church from Ephesians chapter one, and I hope you are practicing praying that way – it’s just what we prayed together: for us to know personally and intimately the person of Christ, for us to live in the promises of Christ, for us to experience and display the power of Christ through the Holy Spirit, and that in all things we would maintain the primacy of Christ.

Now, you heard me say last week we are in this series on missional prayer because God is calling our church to greater effectiveness in the Kingdom of God, and that means he is calling us to a *deeper* culture of prayer. Now, don’t get me wrong – we do an excellent job of praying for each other’s needs. When there are health issues, personal crises, or deep needs, we as a church are very, very good at praying for each other when we ask the church to do so. You are a wonderfully praying church. But there is much, much more to prayer than *just* praying for our needs.

In the words of one author, “Don’t take my word for it. In that famous passage in Matthew 6, Jesus talks to his followers about legitimate practical concerns – their food, their clothes, their lives. And he doesn’t rebuke them for caring about those things. But he does say, *Let’s think about this. Have you ever seen birds putting up a factory to make stuff? Why not? Because our Father feeds them. And have you ever seen the flowers sewing their clothes or heading down to the mall to make sure they have the right kit? Why not? Because no matter what clothes we manage to get, we’ll never match the amazing natural beauty of God’s creative handiwork.* So Jesus says, *let me tell you what to do:*

*Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness...” (v 33)*

That’s prioritizing spiritual things.

*...and all these things will be added to you.*

In other words, to paraphrase Jesus, he says: *If you take care of my things, I’ll take care of your things.*

The hub – the center of our lives and our actions – is always spiritual...And so spiritual matters are what the focus of our prayers – not the entirety, but the focus – must be.”<sup>1</sup>

So if prayer is more than praying for each other’s needs and our focus is spiritual, how *do*

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<sup>1</sup> Alistair Begg, *Pray Big* (The Good Book Company, 2019) 34-35

we pray for others? That's what I want to talk about today: praying for each other, or what's called intercessory prayer. To intercede means "to act or interpose on behalf of someone in difficulty or trouble, as by pleading or petition".<sup>2</sup> Intercessory prayer is praying for others in such a way that you place yourself on their behalf before God, pleading for them. But it is always about more than their earthly needs; it always involves spiritual priorities.

Last week we learned how to pray for the church from Paul's prayer in Ephesians. Today, I'd like us to learn how to pray for others from one of my favorite books in Bible, Nehemiah. Our 9am Sunday morning class is currently going through Ezra and Nehemiah, and so this is something that they've already heard, but I want to share it with you, too.

Before we look at Nehemiah's prayer, I need to give you the background and the context that he prays in.

After the time of King David, the Kingdom of Israel was divided, and both northern and southern kingdoms became further and further corrupt and full of sin. God sent prophets to warn them that, if they didn't turn around, they would be taken into exile, and sure enough, the kingdom of Babylon overthrew them, destroyed Jerusalem, and took all the able-bodied people off to Babylon. This exile lasted 70 years. Well, after the exile was over, God moved the heart of the king to let some Jews return to Jerusalem, rebuild the Temple, and begin to restore worship. That's all recorded in the book of Ezra. Then we get to Nehemiah's story, which takes place quite some time after the initial return – somewhere around 75 years or so. Nehemiah is a Jew, but he is still living and serving in Babylon. By this time, though, Babylon has been overthrown and is the kingdom of the Medes and Persians. Nehemiah, like Daniel, has risen to a place of authority in this foreign kingdom. But Nehemiah never lost his faithfulness to God and his concern for his homeland and people, his fellow Jews. And that's where the story begins. Would you stand with me please, and show honor to God's Word as I read us this first chapter of Nehemiah? Thank you.

The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."

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

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/intercede>

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. (Nehemiah 1:1-11, niv)

This my friends is the Word of God, for the people of God; thanks be to God! Thank you for standing, you can be seated.

So from Nehemiah’s life and his prayer, we learn that the first thing we need if we are going to pray missional prayers for others, is...

## 1. *Integrity.*

The book of Nehemiah is really Nehemiah’s personal memoirs; it’s like his journal. And until we read this book, we don’t really know anything about him—the Old Testament doesn’t say anything about him. We know that he was the son of some guy named Hacaliah, which we know nothing about except that it meant he was not a priest nor in the kingly line of David. Nehemiah was of the family of the few Jews left alive that were part of the Babylonian captives. At the end of chapter one we learn that Nehemiah was a servant to the King—in fact, he was the cupbearer. Because he was the cupbearer, there are a few more things we know about him. He had to have very high and noble character, because the cupbearer was a trusted person to the king. To be the cupbearer meant that he was the one who tasted the food before the king ate it. That meant that he was a skilled leader because he had to manage all the security background checks of workers and all the food services of the king. Because the cupbearer could be trusted, he was a kind of prime minister; he was a favorite of the king above all the other servants.

Now, we know from other stories like this in the Bible, like with Joseph and Daniel, that these men rose to their positions because they were people of high character, who were faithful to God and carried out their responsibilities with integrity. Nehemiah was a righteous person – he lived rightly before God and others, and he’s an example for us.

The book of James in the New Testament tells us that the prayers of a righteous person are powerful and effective. (5:16). So, if you and I are going to be effective in missional prayer for others – praying effectively for the most important things for others – we need to have integrity; we need to wholeheartedly walk with Christ. We also see this in Nehemiah by his response to the situation. When he is serving in the palace of the king, he crosses paths with a guy named Hanani. He calls him “one of my brothers.” We don’t really know if that

meant a biological brother, or a cousin, but for sure, it means he was a God-fearing Jew like Nehemiah. And Hanani had just come back from Jerusalem, so Nehemiah asks him what the condition of things are there. And when he hears the report – that after all this time the walls around the city are still broken down and the people are scattered, Nehemiah is heartbroken. He’s crushed, because he loves God and knows what God wants for his people, and he is devastated to hear that God’s people are living far beneath what God wants for them. He really is a man of integrity. He’s so moved, that he begins praying for them.

Being a person of righteousness means we will not only love God, but we love each other so much that we want each other living as best as we can in *all* that God has for us, and will be heartbroken when others are not living that way, so we will be moved to pray for each other.

Then, the next thing that we see in Nehemiah’s prayer is that, to effectively pray for each other, it’s going to take an...

## 2. **Investment**

...on our part. Remember what Nehemiah said? He said that “for some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of Heaven.” We know from the passage that “some days” was actually four months.

Nehemiah loved God so much, that there was no distinction between his love for God and his love for God’s people. If the walls around Jerusalem were in terrible condition, the people of God were in terrible condition.

When you think about our church, what is your response? When you see people broken down in life or in sin, do you shake your head in disgust at them? Do you gossip about them? Or do you *weep* for them? Do you lose sleep for West Valley Church because you want her to be all Christ intends for her? Or, are we just the people you occupy a building with for an hour or two on Sunday mornings? Folks, we are saved and called to be God’s people *together*, and that means we feel deeply for each other, long for each of us to live completely for Christ, together.

And I want you to see that it wasn’t just praying one time and that was it. Nehemiah prayed regularly. We don’t know how often that was, or for how long he prayed, but most devout Jews prayed at least three times a day, so you can bet that every time Nehemiah prayed each day, he was praying for God’s people – his church. How often do you pray for your church? It ought to be at least daily. And Nehemiah’s prayers included fasting. I think it’s safe to assume that he wasn’t fasting all food for four months. He could have fasted from food for a week at a time, or he could have fasted from certain foods, like meat, for the four months. The point was that he went without something in order to remind himself of the seriousness of his prayers. When was the last time you fasted in prayer for your church? I would strongly encourage you to try it. It could be coffee, or sweets – something that hurts a little. (So it probably won’t do you any good to fast from brussels sprouts or something like that.) Try fasting from something a day a week, or 3 days a week, or for four months as you fast and pray for West Valley Church.

Now, notice what prompted all this Nehemiah got an honest evaluation of the condition of the wall. I want to give you an honest evaluation of our church. God has called us to be a multi-generational, multi-ethnic, multi-site church. Are we those things yet? Barely. We do have several generations represented, but our church is trending upward; we need to reach more young families. Folks from their thirties and younger are the most unchurched generations in our nation's history.

Are we multi-ethnic? Hardly. I'm deeply grateful for our Latinx families who are so faithful to join us, but there are too few. Hispanic people make up close to half of our West Valley community, and the majority of them are also unchurched. If we are effective in God's mission, we will be more welcoming and accommodating to their culture and we will see more of them in our church family. We must see the same colors in our church as there is in our community.

Are we multi-site? We are dual-site; we have a congregation that meets here on this campus, and we have an online campus. But we've had two small groups meeting out by Mountainview Elementary for several years now; they need a worshipping community out there, and we are the best opportunity to help them create it.

So there's an honest evaluation. This should deeply compel us to fast and pray for God's leading and favor for our church.

That's what...

### 3. **Intercession**

...is. What Nehemiah does next is a great example of what it means to pray for others, or intercede for others, or intercessory prayer. Have you ever had to pray that consistently for something? Sure, we pray for our loved ones, for our families and close friends, and for decisions we are facing. But have you ever prayed for months with that kind of passion and determination for your church?

Nehemiah gives us a great example of what it means to pray this way.

One of the things about praying successfully for others is seen in how Nehemiah prayed with...

#### **- Identification.**

Nehemiah was more than 800 miles away from what was going on. His attitude could've very easily been, "well, that's too bad that they've got that problem. I wish I could do something to help, but what can I do? I'm just one person. I hope they can do something." He could have just raised some money to send to the folks over there. But he identified with them *so much* that he was moved to pray and fast, over and over for four months. They suffered, so he suffered. *He* was God's people. If they were not living up to what God had for them, *he* was not living up to what God had for them. Instead of saying, "I hope they figure it out," identification says, "I'll do whatever it takes to make my church great, starting with intense prayer!"

The second thing we see in Nehemiah's response is...

### **- Association.**

In verses 6 & 7 he says:

“I confess the sins we Israelites have committed against you.” He associated with the people of God so much that *their* failure was *his* failure, *their* shame was *his* shame, *their* sin was *HIS* sin. Do you see that? Nehemiah was broken hearted because their sin was his! Our tendency is to say, “That’s not my sin. You people better get your act together!” But *association* says, “God, forgive US our sins.” This is exactly how Jesus taught us to pray. “Forgive us our sins as we forgive everyone who sins against us.” (Luke 11:4, niv)

Notice Jesus didn’t say MY sins. He said OUR sins. That’s association. I know that theologically I am responsible for my own sin; God won’t judge me by your life, and vice versa. But God *will* judge me by how much I associate with us, with our church, with you! And I believe that God will hold a community—a church—accountable for the *individual’s* sins. Did you hear that? So *my* confession for *your* sin leads to restoration in the entire church. Your confession of my sin leads to restoration in the entire church. We must associate with each other! We are in this together.

Finally, Nehemiah was filled with...

### **- Compassion.**

Instead of worrying about what *he* wanted, he cried, wept, prayed, and fasted over what *they* needed. Nehemiah was moved to plead for the promises of God to be poured out on the people. He associated with their sin and pleaded for their redemption. He desperately wanted them to have all that God promised for them. Even though he was 800 miles away and living in the king’s palace and may never have the opportunity to enjoy what he was praying for them to have, he was desperate for them.

Did you know that when the great cathedrals were built in the Middle Ages, they often took more than a hundred years to build? People who began building a cathedral knew they would never live to see it finished. Often it was their grown grandchildren who presided over the cathedral’s dedication. They sacrificed and gave even though they wouldn’t be around to enjoy it. Are you willing to do that for your church? To pray and give and serve so that another generation can enjoy it? That was Nehemiah’s compassion—he longed for *their* best, even if he would never get to enjoy it himself. That’s what compassion does—it leads us to want what’s best for the other more than ourselves. *Compassion desires the needs of others to be met at the expense of my wants.*

That’s what it means to really intercede for people and for your church: identification, association, and compassion. If we pray for each other in those ways, we will see God move in and through this church in incredibly powerful ways.

So do we pray for each other’s needs? Absolutely! But we don’t *stop* there – we *start* there. You see, that’s the...

## **4. Implication**

...of this kind of prayer, and certainly it's the way Nehemiah prayed. Remember at the beginning we said that this kind of prayer is about more than our needs; it is about spiritual matters. When we pray for others, whether it is for individuals and always for our church, it is for God's mission to be achieved in their lives and in our church. So yes, we pray for somebody with cancer. But we also pray that, whether through their healing or not, God's highest purposes will be accomplished in, and through, their lives. And that's what we pray for the church, as well. God's mission is the most important thing. Our prayers for healing are only for this lifetime, until we are finally, completely healed in eternity. Our prayers for financial needs, or job needs, or relational needs, or to pass that exam at school, or whatever it is, is only temporary – except for the ways it is used to accomplish God's mission in our lives and in our church. THAT is forever. That's why Jesus taught us to pray, "Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven..." That's the implication of every prayer in the Bible, whether saints like Nehemiah or Paul or Peter are being quoted, or if it's a prayer in the Psalms, or if it's the prayers of Jesus. We are praying for God's mission for others and for our church. And, like Nehemiah, we make plans to do whatever we can to be the answer to our prayers. Nehemiah had a plan, God opened the door, and Nehemiah made the 800-mile journey to Jerusalem and provided the leadership and expertise he had to help them get the job done – rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem and restoring the community of God's people.

That, my friends, is missional prayer for others.

*Pray: to be a person of integrity. To be willing to make the investment. To intercede for a person(s), for our church – identify with them, associate with them, have compassion for them, for our church. The implication is God's mission be done – not just needs, but God's best. Commit to making plans to be the answer to your prayers!*

Pastor Jason, benediction:

*This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, (people) will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in (your) prayers for (each other, your) hearts will go out to (each other), because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! (2 Corinthians 9:12-15)*