

Greenwood Hills Conference 1989-02

Nehemiah 4:1

by William MacDonald

The sermon emphasizes the importance of prayer in the Christian life, using the book of Nehemiah as a model for how prayer can lead to spiritual revival and overcome opposition.

Duration: 47:05

Scripture: 1 Chronicles 28:20, Psalm 126:5, Isaiah 49:4, Jeremiah 31:16, Romans 8:31, 1 Corinthians 15:58, Galatians 6:9

Topics: "Conference"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the importance of conflict in the Christian life and service. He highlights various challenges faced by the people in the book of Nehemiah, such as discouragement, greed, and compromise. The speaker emphasizes the need for steadfastness and perseverance in the face of opposition. He also emphasizes the power of prayer and encourages listeners to engage in extended times of prayer for the work of God. The sermon references several Bible verses, including 1 Corinthians 15:58, Galatians 6:9, and Matthew 9:38.

Transcript

Nehemiah 4.1, But it so happened when Zamballot heard that we were rebuilding the wall, that he was furious and very indignant, and mocked the Jews. He spoke before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they complete it in a day? Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish, stones that have burned? Now Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, Whatever they build, if even a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall. Hear, O our God, for we are despised.

Turn their reproach on their own heads, and give them as plunder to a land of captivity. Do not cover their iniquity, and do not let their sin be blotted out from before you, for they have provoked you to anger before the builders. So we built the wall, and the entire wall was joined together up to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

Last night at the close of the meeting we were speaking on prayer, because prayer is certainly one of the dominant themes in the book of Nehemiah. You get it everywhere. It's a thread running through the book.

And I'd just like to review some of the indisputable facts concerning prayer which we mentioned last night. The first was that man never comes closer to omnipotence than when he prays in the name of the Lord Jesus. And the reason for that, of course, is that our prayers ascend to the Father through the Lord Jesus, and he removes all imperfections and impurities, so that when those prayers reach God the Father, they're absolutely perfect.

I don't know if that's an encouragement to you, but it is to me. And it's wonderful to think of the Lord Jesus praying our prayers before God the Father in the throne room of the universe. Secondly, we noted last night that Christians hold the balance of power in the world through prayer.

Through prayer they can move men, and through prayer they can affect the destiny of nations. And books have been written on the subject proving that indeed to be the case. We also mentioned last night that God seldom, if ever, does anything except in answer to prayer.

And when you see answers to prayer and do a little probing, usually you can find out somebody prayed. Also, we noted that prayer moves God to do, or did we? Maybe this is where we stopped. Prayer moves God to do things that he would not otherwise have done.

Let me say that again. Prayer moves God to do things that otherwise he would not have done. A lot of people don't think that's true.

They say, well, prayer is good for you. It reconciles you to what's going to happen anyway. In other words, prayer is sort of acceptance of the inevitable.

It's almost a form of fatalism, but it brings you into a happy relationship with fatalism. But that isn't true. Prayer moves the hand of God to do things that otherwise he would not have done.

It says, you have not because you what? Ask not. That's what it says. You have not because you ask not.

That sends my mind thinking of what we might have if we just asked for it. In the way of missions, areas of the world that we've never claimed for the Lord Jesus Christ. You have not because you ask not.

Number five, God answers every prayer in exactly the same way you would answer it if you had his wisdom, love, and power. And I believe that with all my heart. Things happen in our lives, and we say, why did that happen? That why occurs all the times in our lives.

God answers prayer in exactly the same way we would do it if we knew as much as he knows, if we loved as he loves, and if we had the power that he has. God nothing does nor suffers to be done but what thou wouldst thyself. Wouldst thou but see the end of all he does as well as he.

That's great, isn't it? That's enough to give peace and poise to our lives day by day. And then, number six, the work of God is done more in prayer than in any other way. We have our programs, we have our strategies, we have our seminars, conferences, and conventions, but the work of God is done more in prayer than in any other way.

I think it was R.A. Matthews who said, Prayer is the cutting edge of any work of God. It's not a supplemental spiritual rocket to get some well-meaning effort off the ground. Prayer is the work and the working power in any spiritual ministry.

It should be the central thrust. The spiritual history of any church is written in its prayer life. The expression of corporate life is not measured in statistics but in prayer depth.

The expression of corporate life, yes, the program of preaching, teaching, and serving, the goal-setting, the adoption of new twentieth-century techniques, seminars on time management, and administrative procedures are all good but effective and productive in God's economy only as they are subject to prayer. And then one last point. Prayer should be a joy.

Paul said in Philippians chapter 1, verse 4, Making my requests with joy. Donald English wrote how different this is from many textbooks on prayer. They speak of prayer as a discipline.

They speak of prayer as duty. They speak of prayer as routine and as ritual. And Paul says, pardon me, but I just happen to enjoy prayer.

What's wrong with enjoying it? I know there are times when it has to be a discipline, a routine, but are we not allowed that warmth of the Spirit as we pray which enables it to be a joyful activity? And it's a strange thing that we know all of these things, and yet the Christian church today would rather do anything than have an extended time of prayer. We do not give prayer. I'm speaking of the church here in the United States.

We do not give prayer the place it should have in our lives and ministry. We emphasize preaching more than prayer. We emphasize information more than intercession.

We emphasize even flies more than supplication. It's interesting, when a night of prayer is announced or even an extended time of prayer, we have 60 non-theological reasons why we can't be there. Marvelous, really.

We disappear like beetles scurrying under the rocks. And I would like to suggest to you that I think one of the greatest things a missionary on furlough can do is go around and stimulate the formation of prayer groups. You heard tonight earlier about the prayer group in Kenilworth.

We hear about that out on the West Coast too. You heard about the one in San Leandro and the one in San Jose, California as well. But they are an endangered species.

They really are. And in many, many churches and assemblies today, small group fellowships have taken the place of the prayer meetings. We go around and we urge people, especially young people, to be interested in missions.

The best way to get young people interested in missions is to get them on their knees praying for missions. Your presentation otherwise might be very dramatic and your appeal very emotional. But if you really want people interested in foreign missions, get them praying.

And the Lord said that, didn't he? Praying therefore the Lord of the harvest that he will send forth workers into his field. And what's the next verse? He called twelve. The twelve that were praying.

You pray first and then I will call you. And so, I would suggest to you as you move around, if you could possibly be used of God in forming groups for extended times of prayer for the work of God overseas, it's one of the greatest things you could do. Prayer, a dominant theme in the book of Nehemiah.

Well, go from prayer to opposition. Opposition from without and opposition from within, or at least problems from within. And all of you here in the service of the Lord know something about this.

It's good, opposition is good, and it's difficult too. I think oftentimes opposition means that God is working, and when God is working, the devil is going to work too. The hardest problem to cope with is the problem that comes from within from our own people.

So, let's look first of all at opposition from without. And as we do, let's remember the words of an American industrialist who said, Problems are the price of progress. Don't give me anything but problems.

Good news weakens me. Well, Nehemiah faced problems. He faced opposition.

He never walked away from it. He faced it head on, not always in the same way. Here you see again the sovereignty of the Spirit of God.

First of all, going back to chapter 2, verses 19 and 20, I think the first opposition we notice in the book is ridicule. Ridicule. You ever get ridiculed for your Christian faith, for your service for the Lord Jesus? When Senballat, this is verse 19, When Senballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they laughed us to scorn and despised us and said, What is this thing that you are doing? Will you rebel against the king? And what was the response? The response was an answer of faith and courage.

So I answered them and said to them, The God of heaven himself will prosper us. Therefore we are his servants. We his servants will arise and build.

But you have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem. Great, you know. First of all he exalted God and honored and glorified God and then he gave them the put down.

You're aliens, you're foreigners. You have no right or heritage or memorial in Jerusalem. There is a time in Christian service for words like that.

The second instance I think of opposition from without is found in the passage we read tonight, chapter 4, verses 1 through 3. And once again it's scorn. Scorn being heaped upon the work of God and upon the workers. And what was the response in this case? Well the response was, first of all, prayer.

And that's perhaps the most common response in the book of Nehemiah. Prayer and work. Verse 4. Hear our God for we are despised.

Turn their reproach on their own heads and give them as plunder to a land of captivity. Do not cover their iniquity and do not let their sin be blotted out from before you for they have provoked you to anger before the builders. Prayer and work.

So we built the wall. You say, well that's pretty strong language and we don't pray like that in the New Testament. We don't call for the wrath of God to come down on the heads of people.

But we really do. We really do. When we pray, thy kingdom come, we're praying something like this.

Because before the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ can ever be set up on earth, his enemies have to be put down. And it's a package deal and we're praying that way when we pray that prayer. Then next is in chapter 4 verses 7 and 8. Now it happened when Senballot, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the

Ashdodites heard that the walls of Jerusalem were being restored and the gaps were beginning to be closed.

They became very angry and all of them conspired together to come and attack Jerusalem and create confusion. Here the opposition is the threat of attack. And what was the answer to it? Prayer and precaution.

Prayer and precaution. Verse 9. Nevertheless we made our prayer to our gods and because of them we set a watch against them day and night. Nice to combine prayer, in this case, with positive action.

Then in chapter 4 verses 11 through 23 you have the threat of secret attack. And the response is to arm the people and encourage them to be brave. In other words, the response here was work and warfare.

And I'd like to suggest to you that there is a place for conflict in the Christian life and in Christian service today. There is a place for conflict. I think that we've been so saturated with teachings of love that we've kind of lost our moral fiber.

We become spiritual wimps. We become wet noodles even as far as the truth of God is concerned. Let me give you an illustration of what I mean.

Some time ago a man wrote a book called *The Case for Orthodoxy*. Actually, it was an attack on the inspiration of the Scriptures. How do you like that? A good title, a horrid book.

The Case for Orthodoxy. And it was an attack on the inspiration of the Scriptures. Two theologians were discussing it.

One theologian was very violently against the book. And do you know what the other one said? The author is my friend. You don't know him the way I know him.

He's a Christian gentleman. Now I want to ask you, is that an answer? To a man who denies the inspiration of the Scriptures? He is my friend. You don't know him as I know him.

He is a Christian gentleman. Dear friend, if the word of God is not verbally and plenary inspired, we have nothing tonight. We might as well close the book and go home and eat, drink, and be merry.

That's what Paul says. Isn't that right? And there's a place for conflict when the fundamentals of the Christian faith are being attacked, and they are being attacked today, on every front in some ways in a very subtle way by men who pose as scholars and are mealy-mouthed and speak out of both corners of their mouth at the same time. Pardon that outburst.

The next opposition is chapter 6, verses 1 through 4, *Conspiracy and Pretense*. *Conspiracy and Pretense*. Just let me read it.

Now, it happened when Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem, the Arab, and the rest of our enemies heard that I had rebuilt the wall and that there were no breaks left in it, though at the time I had not hung the doors and the gates, that Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, Come, let us meet together in one of the villages in the plain of Ono. But they fought to do me harm. Notice the response.

I sent messengers to them saying, I am doing a great work so that I cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you? What was the response? A refusal to be sidetracked. And

you know and I know that in Christian service there are all kinds of temptations that arise to be sidetracked, you know, to change our sense of priorities and go in for this and that.

The next is in verses 5 through 9 of chapter 6, and here it's a matter of accusation and bluff. Accusation and bluff. I won't take the time to read it, but look at verses 8 and 9. The response.

A denial of the charges and prayer to God. Then I sent to him saying, No such thing as you say are being done, but you invent them in your own heart. For they were all trying to make us afraid, saying their hands will be weakened in the work, and it will not be done.

Now, therefore, O God, strengthen my head. Wonderful. The way he turned to God and cast his burden upon the Lord knowing that the Lord would bear it.

And finally, in verses 10 through 14, the opposition takes the form of treachery. Entrapment. And the response to that was a refusal to go into the temple.

Contrary to the word of God, it would have been contrary to the word of God, refusal to go into the temple, and then prayer. Prayer, once again. In most of the instances of opposition, from, without, in the book of Nehemiah, you have prayer as one of the responses.

But then we come to the subject of problems within. It wasn't just a case of being attacked from without. Problems from within.

And what were those problems? Well, one of them was discouragement. Chapter 4, verse 10. In fact, there are several here in verse 10.

Let me just read the chapter again. Chapter 4, I mean the verse again. Chapter 4, verse 10.

Judas said, The strength of the laborers is failing. That's the first thing, discouragement. There is so much rubbish that we're not able to build the wall.

Our adversaries said they will neither know nor see anything till we come into their midst and kill them and cause the work to cease. There's discouragement here. There's exhaustion.

There's debris. There's hopelessness. And there's fear.

All in this chapter. And then in chapter 5, there's the greed that has come in among the people. And then in chapter 6, there's the cliques of compromised brethren.

We'll just go over them individually. First of all, one of the great problems was discouragement. Discouragement is the devil's work.

Perhaps you'll remember that during the time of Absalom's rebellion against David, Ahithophel the counselor asked for 12,000 men with whom he could pursue David the king. And this is his plan. And these are the words in one of the paraphrases of the Bible.

His plan was to come upon him when he is weary and discouraged and throw him into a panic. 2 Samuel 17, verse 2. To come upon him when he is weary and discouraged and throw him into a panic. What do you do when you're discouraged? One of the things I do is I remember what Moody said.

Moody said, I have never known God to use a discouraged person. That helps to snap me out of discouragement because I want God to use me. That's what he said.

He said, I have never known God to use a discouraged person. Well, there are some specific things we can do. But I think the first thing, when periods of discouragement come upon us, I think the first thing we should do is take it to the Lord in prayer.

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere we should never be discouraged? Take it to the Lord in prayer. Can we find a friend so faithful who will all our sorrows share? Jesus knows our every weakness. Take it to the Lord in prayer.

The Savior can solve every problem. The tangles of life can undo. There's nothing too hard for Jesus.

There's nothing that He cannot do. Take it to the Lord in prayer. And I think we should check out our spiritual state when discouragement comes.

Any unconfessed sin, any grudge or lack of forgiveness, any guilt in our hearts. In one of his books, Paul Tournier tells of a woman who came to him suffering from severe anemia. And she wanted a chip so that she might go to a chalet in the mountains there provided by the government in the Alps.

He wasn't able to issue the chip to her so he sent her to another doctor and the doctor checked her blood and right enough, her blood was down. She came back for a second visit and her blood was normal. And he said to her, he said, I'm glad to give you the chip to go up into the chalet, but he said, there's really nothing to matter with your blood.

Well, she said, I don't understand that. You know what it was when it was first checked. Well, he said, has anything happened in your life between these two visits? She said, no.

He said, think hard. Can you think of anything that's happened in your life? Any traumatic experience? Any exceptional experience that has happened in your life? She said, the only thing I can think of is she said, I held a grudge against another woman for years. And she said, I settled it between then and now.

Dr. Tournier said that was it. And since then we've heard of a more dramatic case than that of a woman who was suffering and the doctors were at their wit's ends. They could not find what it was all about.

Lying there in her hospital bed, she had a meeting with the Lord Jesus. And she got things straightened out in her life. She's living a normal life today.

But it's no thanks to medicine. It's thanks to a correction in her spiritual life. So the first thing is take it to the Lord and pray.

The second thing is to check out your spiritual state. I would say also check out your physical condition as well. Rundown? Over fatigued? Any kind of illness.

And I think the next one is very, very important. Take a generous dose of antidepressants. What new heresy is this? Take a generous... That was a pharmacist who just laughed.

Take a generous dose of tranquilizers. I have nine of them for you. Generic brands.

The first is found in First Chronicles, chapter 28 and verse 20. It's tremendous. You know, some drugs don't work with everybody.

But these do. They work with everybody. Some drugs, it depends on your own constitution, your own makeup, whether the drug is going to be effective and might be effective for one brother or not for another.

These work for everybody. They're marvelous. First Chronicles 28, 20.

And if you don't mind, I'm going to read it to you from the Living Bible. This is what it says. Don't be frightened by the size of the task.

Be strong and courageous and get to work for the Lord. My God is with you. He will not forsake you.

He will see to it that everything is finished correctly. How do you like it? I think that's wonderful. I'm going to read it again.

Don't be frightened by the size of the task. Be strong and courageous and get to work for the Lord. My God is with you.

He will not forsake you. He will see to it that everything is finished correctly. I tell you, when the Spirit of God brings that home to your heart, it gives you real peace.

Peace that passes understanding. The second antidepressant is found in Psalm 126, verse 5. Very familiar to you. Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy.

He who continually goes forth weeping, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him. But oftentimes in the service of the Lord, you have known real, hot, hissing tears, haven't you? So doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him. It's the promise of God.

Cling to it. Isaiah chapter 49 and verse 4. Then I said, I have labored in vain. I have spent my strength for nothing and in vain.

Ever feel that way? I have. I've known that. That would be a very fair reflection of the emotions that were going through my soul.

Then I said, I have labored in vain. I have spent my strength for nothing and in vain. But you know, the sentence doesn't stop there.

It goes on to say, yet surely my just reward is with the Lord and my work with my God. My thing to be in vain. Don't see too much happening.

God knows all about it. And my just reward is with the Lord and my work with my God. And then I must confess that this has been a tremendous tranquilizer for me through times of difficulty and conflict and trial and wonderment.

Isaiah 55 verses 10 and 11 says, For as the rain comes down and the snow from heaven, and do not return there but water the earth and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes from my mouth. It shall not return to me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it. Why, that's great, isn't it?

Listen, you can't be engaged in getting out the Word of God and ever fail.

The Word of God ministered in the power of the Holy Spirit will never fail to produce results in hearts and lives. It's inevitable. You know, all the armies of the world are not able to stop the snow from falling.

Or the rain from falling. Not all the power of men and of demons can stop it. That's just the way it is with the Word of God.

It goes forth and it accomplishes the thing that God has sent it forth to do. Tremendous. The young man in our audience tonight, living in a foreign country, and as far as human sight was concerned, by chance a copy of the Word of God came into his hand.

He read the Word of God and he was saved without any human instrumentality. Marvelous, isn't it? And spent a couple of years after that without any Christian fellowship. Didn't know any other Christian.

Here's another tranquilizer. Jeremiah 31, 16. Thus says the Lord, refrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for your work shall be rewarded, says the Lord.

Praise God. Maybe some of you tonight are experiencing the death of a dream. Maybe the ministry that was so precious to you has beyond your control been cut off.

Claim this verse from the Word of God. Thus says the Lord, refrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for your work shall be rewarded, says the Lord. Romans 8, 31.

I'm so familiar to it. Romans 8, 31. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? Means who can be successful? A lot of people can be against us, but not successfully.

God makes the wrath of man to praise him, and the remainder of wrath he restrains. The waves, what is it? The waves may seem to be against us, but the tide is sure to win. Somebody said to Billy Graham, are you an optimist or a pessimist? Looking into the future.

He said, I'm an optimist. They said, why? He said, I read the last chapter of Revelation. God is going to win.

And that's true of us too. If God be for us, who can be successfully against us? He who spared not his own son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? 1 Corinthians 15, 58. You know it, and yet, the Lord can bring it home to you in a special way, in a time of need.

When it's just as if the Lord were speaking to you personally. Personally, therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast. Unmovable.

Always abounding in the work of the Lord. Why? Knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord. I tell you, I rejoice tonight to know, especially when I think of the kindness that is shown to me for Jesus' sake.

It's a great thing to know God is a good record keeper. And he will reward, and if he'll reward even a cup of cold water given in his name, how much more the labors of those people who strive to show us the kindness of God for Jesus' sake. Galatians 6, 9. Let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.

That's it. If we do not lose heart. This is what enables us to persevere and to plug on in spite of what may be happening.

Hebrews 12, 3 and 4. Once again from the paraphrase. Hebrews 12, 3 and 4. If you want to keep from becoming fainthearted and weary, think about his patience as sinful men did such terrible things to him. After all, you've never struggled against sin and temptation until you sweat great drops of blood.

But that verse does speak loudly to us, doesn't it? King James says, you have not yet resisted unto blood. He did. And so, when the going is rough and we're tending to be discouraged, it's a good thing just to look up and ask the Lord to give us a fresh view of his hands and feet and sides.

We've never suffered like that. We've never had to endure such contradiction of sinners against ourselves. How do you like those antidepressants? They're marvelous.

And they work. They've worked in my life and they've worked in your life. I know they have.

Another thing we can do in times of discouragement, in times of depression, is consider taking a break or a vacation. I think looking back over life, some of us had too spiritual to take a break. It's not spiritual at all.

The Lord taught it, didn't he? Come apart, rest awhile. Darby said this, A time of retirement is a very good thing in our service. This is written by a man who traveled for 26 years on the continent of Europe without unpacking his suitcase.

He said, A time of retirement is a very good thing in our service. It puts us before God instead of our work before us. It puts us before God instead of putting our work before us.

And it makes us feel too that our work is in His hands and not our own. I remember when I used to be ill every year, I always felt that if I had been near enough to God, I should not have needed it. That is, needed the illness.

Let me read that again. I remember when I used to be ill every year, I always felt that if I had been near enough to God, I should not have needed it. Don't be too spiritual to take a break.

I think a lot of people could have been saved for the mission field if they had just been willing to get away for a while, take a rest, take a break, and go back with their spiritual batteries recharged. Don't you think? What else can you do in periods of discouragement and depression except in life what cannot be changed? There are certain things in life that aren't going to be changed. You can cry to God three times and the answer will come back, my grace is sufficient.

My strength is made perfect in weakness. There is peace in accepting what cannot be changed. What else can you do in times of discouragement? Share your situation with a sympathetic, understanding, loving, mature friend.

Something else you can do, I'm just hurrying, is count your blessings. Count your blessings. I remember dear old Leonard Sheldrake saying years ago, when I tend to be discouraged, I just thank God I'm not in hell.

That's where I ought to be. That's kind of a cure, isn't it? He said that. When I tend to be discouraged, I just thank God I'm not in hell.

That's where I should be. And really, when you think of the blessings of the Lord, they're enough to just make you sing and shout. And finally, keep busy.

Don't mope. Physical activity, if you can, out of doors is a great antidote. A change from your regular work.

Tomorrow night, Lord willing, we'll go on to think about the problem of debris. We talked about discouragement tonight. That was one of the problems.

There was also the problem there was an awful lot of debris there around the walls. And I'd just like to suggest there's an awful lot of debris in evangelical Christianity today. And we're going to talk about it.

Shall we pray? Father, we thank you tonight for your loving compassion for the sons of men, for your people. We thank you that there's not a burden, not a tear, not a heartache, but you know all about it. We think of the dear ones gathered here tonight.

Think of the conflicts they've been through. Times of difficulty. Excruciating times.

And yet you've been with them all the way. And should there be some here tonight with heavy hearts, with a question of why written in their minds, we pray, Lord, that these scriptures will come home to them in power. They will claim the promises of God and go forth rejoicing in Him and in all He has done for us.

We ask it in the Savior's name. Amen.

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