

A Model Prayer of Intercession

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Reading: Nehemiah 1:4-11.

It seems to me as though this prayer can be gathered up in six different features, or characteristics, and you may discover what they are as we read together. "And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days; and I fasted and prayed before the God of heaven". Wept; mourned; fasted. That is certainly anguish, passion, travail; but it is the first feature of intercessory prayer. That is where all intercessory prayer begins, in a state of heart like that. We have spent some time in seeking to make clear that everything in the Book of Nehemiah is a result of this passion, this concern for the Lord's interests; that it all comes out of prayer; and that prayer is the prayer of travail. We have to stop every time and ask ourselves first of all, 'Does the spiritual state amongst the Lord's people give us deep heart sorrow? Have we ever wept for the testimony? Have we ever mourned over spiritual conditions of the Lord's people?'

Knowing the Lord

Now the next thing, verse five: "And said, I beseech Thee, O Lord, the God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love Him and keep His commandments". What does that represent? Here is a very important law operating in true intercessory prayer; a knowledge of the Lord; that is, knowing the Lord; knowing what kind of God we are dealing with. You will find that as this prayer develops, that knowledge of the Lord comes out much more fully, for Nehemiah takes the Lord back to His own word in the Book of Deuteronomy, and shows that what the Lord had said then to His people has literally come to pass here, and he bases his prayer upon that. What the Lord said in effect was: 'If you forsake My commandments I will scatter you among the nations, and you shall be no people to Me', and Nehemiah says: 'You keep covenant'. 'Moreover, You said that if we came back to Your commandments You would re-gather us' (Deut. 28:64 to 30:13). You see he knows the Lord. There is passion, anguish, travail, but he knows the Lord; that is the background.

Persistence

"Let Thine ear now be attentive, and Thine eyes open, that Thou mayest hearken unto the prayer of Thy servant, which I pray before Thee at this time, day and night, for the children of Israel Thy servants, while I confess the sins of the children of Israel..." (Neh. 1:6). Let us look at the central clause: "... which I pray before Thee... day and night". That is persistence in prayer, perseverance; if you like - importunity. It represents the unwillingness to let this matter pass lightly, to let it be taken without seriousness; it means that he is holding on to God about this thing. Of course, much more may gather round it, but intercessory prayer is not a thing which is fulfilled by rushing into the presence of God, saying something, and rushing out again. Intercessory prayer which brings in the Lord's purpose is something which is a continuous burden, day and night.

Here, again, our hearts are greatly challenged I am sure. I do not know how many will be able to stand up to this challenge. That is for us to decide before the Lord, as to whether, in waking moments in the night, spontaneously our heart goes out to the Lord; it may be only a sentence, only a cry, but it represents the fact that that is our ever-present burden, that that thing is there all the time. You might think of a thousand and one other things when you wake up in the night, but the first thing is a heart travail to the Lord concerning His interests, His testimony: "... which I pray... day and night"; this thing is ever present. There is persistence, continuation. That is a feature of true intercessory prayer, that we have travail, and we have understanding or knowledge of the Lord, and then we have persistence or importunity.

Vicarious Repentance

Now we go to the next thing in verse 6: "... while I confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against Thee. Yea, I and my father's house have sinned" (6b). Identification is in confession of this kind. When a man is found confessing what is not wholly his responsibility, something for which many others are responsible as well as himself; when he is confessing it as though it is his sin, that is identification; and when it is confession of this kind, it is acknowledgment, and it is repentance. So I think we may speak of this as the feature of confession. If we were using a phrase instead of a word, we would speak of vicarious repentance, repenting in the behalf of others. But confession is sufficient, it carries with it all that.

We have tried to tell ourselves in this message that we must not regard ourselves as something apart from the rest, some thing that is detached, and that looks on at things in any kind of judging, condemning, critical way,

as though we had no part in it; but, being members of one Body, if one member suffers all the members suffer with it, and the suffering is the suffering of the whole Body. With Christ I am quite sure that is true, that He suffers in the measure in which any part of His Body comes short, because He needs the whole Body, in fullness, for the fullness of His expression and realization. So that He suffers, and if the Body is in any part coming short we are suffering in the suffering of Christ. Is not that what the Apostle meant when he said he was filling up that which was lacking of the sufferings of Christ? That is real intercession; prayer of confession and identification.

Faith in God's Word

"Remember, I beseech Thee, the word that Thou commandest Thy servant Moses, saying, 'If ye trespass, I will scatter you abroad among the peoples: but if ye return unto Me, and keep My commandments and do them... yet will I gather them... bring them unto the place that I have chosen, to cause My name to dwell there'" (Neh. 1:8, 9). What I saw in this word was faith, because it is bringing God's Word as the basis, taking up a position in God's Word and saying: 'I believe that, I stand on that'. You find so often that is the ground of effectual prayer.

I was impressed the other day in reading Psalm 119, and underlined the occurrence of that phrase: "according to Thy word". "Quicken Thou me according to Thy word"; "Strengthen Thou me according to Thy word"; and so on. David was pleading with God on the ground of His Word, and fastening his faith in God. God and His Word are alike, they are immutable; they are unchangeable; they are established and faithful, and if we can come with the Word of God under our feet, we have a ground of confidence; the ground of a sure faith, and it would be a very good thing for us to be more exercised along that line - "Quicken Thou me according to Thy word". That is faith in God's Word; the Lord honours that, and when we come to Him we should have a ground of confidence.

Now Nehemiah is simply bringing the Lord to His own Word, and oh, how true it was to the Word of God! Turn to Isaiah 58. Now Isaiah lived long before Nehemiah's day (the arrangement of books, of course, may throw you out in that, but he was long before Nehemiah's time) and Isaiah spoke this word: "If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger... If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on My holy day", etc. Then what? "... thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in". That is Nehemiah. Well, Nehemiah brought the Lord to His Word, and the Lord actually fulfilled Isaiah 58, through Nehemiah. You see that is the ground, pleading the Word in faith.

Utter Surrender

Now finally in verse 11: "O Lord, I beseech Thee, let now Thine ear be attentive to the prayer... of Thy servants... who delight to fear Thy name..." The fear of the Lord, when you study it in light of the whole Word of God, simply means that you utterly yield yourself to God's will; that God's will takes pre-eminence; and when the Lord Jesus said: "Father... remove this cup... nevertheless not My will, but Thine, be done" (Luke 22:42), He "was heard in that He feared" (Heb. 5:7b). That was utter and absolute surrender to the will of God whatever the cost; that is the fear of the Lord, the beginning of wisdom.

Here then, as the central thing in this eleventh verse, you have delight in the Lord. You can use one word, either abandonment or consecration, whichever you prefer. Hear the prayer of Thy servants "who delight to fear Thy name". That is abandonment to the Lord, consecration to the Lord; and we know quite well that in intercessory prayer we never get through until we come to that place where everything that is personal, our own delight and satisfaction, is set aside and the Lord's interests alone govern our hearts.

There is, I think, a transcendent cry in this prayer; and for true intercessory prayer we must come to that place. You have prayed, you have been importunate, persistent, passionate, travailing, and you have stood upon God's Word, and yet withal there may be some little fragment of your own desire that gives heat to the travail. However right your position may be as to the Word, the Lord has to wait until every bit of personal interest has been ruled right out, and then when we come down to the place where it is true that it is only the Lord's good pleasure that is in view and that the Lord can do what He wills, all the desire is that His will shall be done and our delight is in Him, to fear His Name, to be utterly abandoned to His will, then we have a clear way with the Lord, we are then through in the spirit of prayer.

You see we get so far and the last thing the Lord has to say to us is: 'Are you in this? Have you some personal interest in this matter?' Then our hearts have to be searched as to whether it is our own desire or whether after all it is only the Lord's personal pleasure and delight, and if the thing we ask is not for the Lord's pleasure we do not want it. When we come there we have a clear way and the prayer is complete.

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So you see we have a model prayer of intercession here, and you will be able to understand by this little analysis what we meant when we said that in order for the ejaculatory prayers to be effectual - those ejaculatory prayers that come out later - there must be this deeper background of prayer where everything is like this. You construct all other prayer upon this foundation, and because this is the foundation, all other prayer is here. Everything has been sifted out beforehand.

I trust this meditation will bring to our hearts anew the Lord's desire that the instrument to be used in a peculiar way for His satisfaction shall be a prayer instrument after this sort. Everything that is brought to us by way of light has to be prayed in and prayed out; prayer has to be behind and before in the fulfilment of our ministry.

The Lord write that in our hearts.