

“How to Pray”
Wednesday, February 27, 2008
Jake Bouma

I. Nehemiah | *Background*

- a. Nehemiah was a Jewish prophet who was also a cupbearer for King Artaxerxes in the city of Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire (c. 450 B.C.)
- b. After learning about the miserable conditions in Jerusalem and weeping over reports of the city’s poverty and ruin (he is Jewish, remember), Nehemiah persuades Emperor Artaxerxes to commission his return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city

II. Read Nehemiah 2:1-5

- a. Even though, as a cupbearer, Nehemiah is used to being in the presence of the king, it’s surely nerve-wracking for him to be directly addressed like this
- b. Then the king asks him bluntly “What are you requesting” – in essence, “Cut to the chase, Nehemiah.”
- c. Then we have the key words in verses 4-5, right before his response to Artaxerxes: “So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king...”
- d. This short, silent prayer is a beautiful image of prayer

III. I Thessalonians

- a. About 500 years later, around 50 C.E., Paul wrote a letter to the people of a church he and his companions Timothy and Silas had recently founded in Thessalonika in which he urged them to προσευχεσθε αδιαλειπτως (proseuchesthe adialeiptos), which translates to “pray without ceasing.”
- b. These two Greek words form one verse, and at first take, its hard to take them seriously. *Really? Are we to actually never stop praying? What about my email?*
- c. I think, though, that what Paul meant by saying, “pray without ceasing” was more along the lines of what his predecessor Nehemiah was up to.
- d. What if we prayed like Nehemiah? And what if we did it multiple times a day – say, five, ten, fifty times?
- e. Examples of Nehemiah prayers
 - i. “God, grant me strength,” “Lord, comfort my friend _____,” “Holy Spirit, surround me now,” “God, fill me with courage,” “God, hold my tongue so I don’t say what I really want to,” or *insert your own!*
- f. We’ve been talking about Nehemiah prayers in youth group, and I’ve been encouraging students to adopt the habit of praying frequently like Nehemiah. Some of them have been gracious enough to share their experiences:
 - i. **Lindsay** prayed a “Thank you” for giving her people (sometimes unexpected) in her life to support and encourage her in her faith journey
 - ii. **Brody** prayed and asked God for strength to make it through a day in which he wasn’t feeling well

- iii. **Jillian** prayed and asked God to be with the family of a fellow student whose father was going to be sent to Iraq
- iv. **Allison** prayed for a fellow student at a show choir competition who passed out and was taken away on a stretcher

IV. How NOT to pray

- a. Miroslav Volf: God is not a negotiator, and God is not Santa Claus
- b. "It is disadvantageous to treat God as a negotiator, both because God needs nothing that we have and because God asks more than we could ever give." Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge*, p. 33
 - i. We can't bargain or negotiate with God
- c. "A Santa Claus God gives simply so we can have and enjoy things; the true God gives so we can become joyful givers and not just self-absorbed receivers." Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge*, p. 28 (i.e. "Blessed in order to bless others." – Rob Bell)
 - i. We pray not just to receive for receiving's sake, but so that we make become, as Volf says, joyful givers. In other words, prayer is the precursor for service – just as Nehemiah prayed before he asked the king permission to return to Judah

V. Closing prayer

- a. A prayer written by the great theologian Stanly Hauerwas, which I've taken from his book *Disrupting Time: Sermons, Prayers, and Sundries*.
- b. "God, most days I think the hardest thing I have to do is pray. I can never decide how to begin – 'Dear God,' 'Lord,' 'Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,' 'Holy One of Israel,' – Jesus, all that seems like the same-old same-old. You have graciously given us your name, but I am not sure, and I expect most of us are not sure, what to do with it. I suspect that is my problem. I want a boring God, but when I get what I want I lose the ability to pray. So, come again, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, frighten me so that I will remember what a wonderful thing, what a miraculous thing, you have done to give us the gift of prayer. Give us your Spirit that we may learn to pray as one."