

Hope Church South Haven January 11th 2026

Nehemiah 1:5-11

RENOVATE: Sacred conversations.

I'm not great at new year's resolution and I know I'm not alone. The **second Friday** of every new year is called QUITTERS DAY because so many people have already given up on their goals.

A few years ago, I made a *quiet resolution*: I wanted to learn how to pray differently. Even though I was praying regularly, **it did not come easily**. It was surprisingly hard for me. I began to pay attention and ask why. I UNCOVERED a deep and hidden lie shaping my expectations of prayer:

I came to believe that God only answered my prayers when I prayed for
other people.

I knew something had to change. I picked a catchphrase for that year. Something that would **remind me** and **guide me** and **gently nudge me** to *pray in a different way*. The catchphrase was:

People on sinking ships do not complain of distractions during their prayer.

I wanted to start praying like someone that was on a sinking ship. When the ship is sinking you know you need God. When the ship is sinking, your PRAYERS suddenly **get sharp and focused and free of distraction.**

Today is not about trying harder at prayer. It's about discovering how prayer changes everything. Nehemiah understood that kind of urgency. He was not working a spiritual improvement plan or to do list. He was crying out to God from a sinking ship of his own.

Just a reminder:

- Jerusalem's walls were still lying in ruins and they were surrounded by **hostile neighbors** on every side.
- The *Jews were scattered across the Persian Empire* and struggling with deep economic injustice.
- Nehemiah was surrounded by CHAOS and OPPOSITION and RELATIONAL ISSUES.

Verse 5:

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..."

- Nehemiah begins his prayer with adoration – **focusing on who God is** rather than on his own needs.
- He uses the name **יְהֹוָה** – covenant name of God. The God who *promised* to **be with His people and fight for them**.
- His praise is **not vague or generic**. It is specific.
- Standing in the ruins of Jerusalem after the exile, *his prayer sounds almost unreasonable*. He chooses to trust God despite in those circumstances.
- Nehemiah knows that only a powerful and faithful God can step into the wreckage of exile and **bring true renewal and restoration**.

Verses 6-7:

...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 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.

- Nehemiah's prayer moves into confession.
- He **openly admits** the sins of Israel. And he includes himself and his family. He is not playing the blame game. He stands **with the guilty people** rather *judging them*.
- His confession is specific and honest.
- Exile was not random bad luck but the **painful consequence of their disobedience** to God.

Verses 8-10:

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...

- Nehemiah then moves on to remind God of God's own promises. Not to twist God's arm. Not force God's hands. But as an **act of faith**.

I need you to be the God you promised to be.

- Nehemiah is choosing to trust the promises of God rather than *his own abilities and position and resources*.

- He knows Israel **do not deserve it**. But when they return from exile it would be like a NEW EXODUS – God bringing his people home again.
- Nehemiah knows that the RESTORATION is only possible by **God's power and grace**. Not by human effort or merit.

Verse 11:

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.

- **לִירָאָה** (*yi'rah*). The fear of God here does not mean PANIC OR TERROR. It is a **trembling respect for God's holiness and goodness**. It *leads to worship and obedience*.
- Nehemiah's prayer ends with a **VERY CONCRETE REQUEST**: that God would give him favor and success as he goes in to speak with the king.
- A *step of obedience* that **could cost him everything**.

Nehemiah prayed every prayer possible.

- He prayed in long and eloquent prayers.
- He prayed silent “arrow” prayers.

- He prayed one-line cries in the moment of need.
- He prayed for others and for himself.
- He prayed with people and alone.

Nehemiah was not just a man of prayer.

He became the man of his prayers.

How can Nehemiah's prayer-life help me pray in 2026 with the same urgency and clarity as someone on a sinking ship? To live fully awake to the need of this world? To live fully turned toward God? To live ready to act?

Prayer is simple.

- We make prayer way more complicated than God ever intended it to be.
- We've turned prayer **into a performance**. Thinking it's about *our words and our posture and how eloquent we sound*. So scared to make a fool of myself.
- Nehemiah showed us that prayer is wonderfully simple: you do not have to pray like anyone else. Just start talking with God.

⇒ You can PRAY **out loud** or PRAY by **writing** in a journal or **sing** or **play** an instrument or even **create** art. Whatever helps you to intentionally connect with God.

⇒ It can be habit or spontaneous.

- God is NOT MOVED by **techniques** and **long phrases** or **quoting Bible** verses to pressure him into action.
- God is MOVED by **truth**. God is MOVED by **humility**. God is MOVED by **authentic hearts**.
- Paul reminds us that even when we struggle to find the right words that the **HOLY SPIRIT** prays for us:

And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will.

Romans 8:26-27 New Living Translation

- We can pray **exactly as we are**. Without filters. Without fixing everything first.
- Because of the cross and resurrection, **I can be myself before God**.

- ⇒ Hopeless and hopeful.
- ⇒ Angry and at peace.
- ⇒ Conflicted and certain.
- ⇒ In tears and laughing.
- Nehemiah reminds us that God hears our prayers.

Prayer is simply talking to God. He speaks to us: we listen. We speak to Him: He listens. A two-way process: speaking and listening.

Mother Teresa

- Prayer is **not a performance**. Prayer is **not a test**. Prayer **doesn't have to be perfect.**

Prayer is proximity.

- The real struggle with prayer is that **we are distracted**. It's praying **half-heartedly**. It's *forgetting how close God really is.*
- Nehemiah reminds us that PRAYER is about **showing up**. AGAIN AND AGAIN. Putting ourselves before God. Living with the awareness that God is with us.

- This world makes it easy for us **to push God to the edge of our lives**. Between WORK and SLEEP and FOOD and SCREENS and SPORTS and RELATIONSHIPS, many of us only connect with God in a tiny slice of their day. If we do at all.

- But when we pray, that changes.
- When I pray **my attention shifts from me and back onto God**.
- When I pray my heart is slowly re-centered.
- When I pray I **reposition myself**. Stepping down from the throne of self and acknowledging that God is God. Not me.
- When I pray, I admit that I need God in my life. I need God to act. I need God to intervene. I need God to be God and do what I cannot do.

Your priorities must be God first, God second, and God third, until your life is continually face to face with God.

Oswald Chambers

Prayer has power.

- Prayer is not a spiritual feel-good routine or a way to manage my moods.
- It is an ENCOUNTER **with the living God**.
- It's an ENCOUNTER where something extraordinary happens.

- ⇒ When we pray, **we discover that our lives matter.**
- ⇒ When we pray, we discover that our voices are heard.
- ⇒ When we pray, we discover that *God invites us into his kingdom.*
- Nehemiah's prayers remind us that God **takes our prayers seriously.** That God weaves our prayers into his purposes in ways we do not understand.

László Tőkés was a pastor in Romania in the 1980s.

- ⇒ He led a small church made up mostly of Hungarian believers. This was during the **height of communism.** The government kept a close watch on churches and freedom to worship was almost nonexistent.
- ⇒ The pastor who'd been there before Tőkés was so scared of the authorities that he started preaching in support of the regime. He even wore a red communist star on his robe to prove his loyalty.
- ⇒ But Tőkés decided to **obey God and not fear the government.** He preached the truth about the INJUSTICE and the POVERTY and the DISCRIMINATION people were facing.
- ⇒ And the people listened. His small church of a few dozen started to grow. Then it doubled. Then tripled. Before long, thousands were coming.

⇒ This kind of growth got the attention of the secret police. They began investigating László. They threatened him. They targeted his family to try and silence him. **But he refused to back down.**

⇒ Eventually the authorities decided they'd had enough. They ordered that László be removed from his home and from the church.

⇒ When the people in his congregation heard of their plans they decided they weren't going to let that happen quietly. **About 200 believers surrounded his house forming a human wall. They prayed and sang day and night.**

⇒ After a FEW DAYS, the police finally broke through that living wall and arrested him.

⇒ But instead of scattering, the **people started walking toward the police station.** More people joined them. Hundreds became thousands. Until about 200 000 people filled the streets.

⇒ The communist government **called it a riot and they sent in soldiers.**

⇒ Shots were fired. Many were wounded, and around a hundred people were killed.

⇒ But the crowd didn't run. They stood in stunned silence – **until one pastor stepped forward and softly said: Let us pray.**

⇒ And right there, in the middle of the street, with soldiers still standing around them, *200 000 students and farmers and doctors and parents, fell to their knees and began praying the Lord's Prayer together.*

⇒ That kind of public prayer was illegal in Romania. **In that moment their prayers became an act of holy defiance.**

⇒ WITHIN DAYS, that prayer spread like fire across the country. *It reached the capital Bucharest.* And the **Romanian government fell.**

⇒ One man's courage and the prayers of a few believers launched the Romanian Revolution in 1989.

- Prayer is participating with God.
- Prayer is doing life with God.
- Prayer **moves the heart of God.**
- Prayer changes us and can change our circumstances.
- Prayer **can even shape and transform God's will.**

Prayer is the power by which that comes to pass which otherwise would not take place...God does indeed allow Himself to be decided by prayer to do what He otherwise would not have done.

The prayer life NEHEMIAH reminds us today:

We need to be people of prayer who become the people of our
prayers.

- When we pray for justice and mercy, we ourselves become the justice and the mercy this world so desperately needs.
- When **we pray that God will comfort someone in their grief**, we become the people who notice the need and hear the cries and speak the words of comfort.
- When we pray for forgiveness, we begin to release those who have hurt us and complicated our lives and threatened us. Setting them and our own hearts free.

Nehemiah reminds us that prayer makes us **participants in God's healing work**.

But when we stop praying, we stop changing.

When we stop praying, we stop being transformed.

When we stop praying, we become part of the *noise and the blame and the outrage of this world*.

- We rant and complain and point fingers and raise the temperature of EVERY CONVERSATION.
- We help **deepen the division** between us.

When I look at what is going on in this country – how deeply fractured this nation is – I'm seeing what happens when **believers forget to pray first**. When believers choose to **REACT INSTEAD**.

When believers are *finally desperate enough to pray*, all we really want is for **“our side” to win**. Praying that my kingdom come instead of asking God that His kingdom would come.

We pray:

God, make them come to their senses. Help them to think and believe and behave like me.

Whether you lean:

- left or right.
- Democrat or Republican.
- pro- or anti-immigration enforcement.
- liberal or conservative.

- whether you are driven more by fear or by anger.

Prayer is God's invitation to turn to him. To turn to him in **honesty**. To turn to him in **authenticity**. To turn to him in **humility**. To let Him change you!

The *question that kept swirling in the back of my mind* this week was this: What would happen if we really prayed for our country? Not with my ideas or ideologies. But really pray for this country with the **urgency of people on a sinking ship**?

- Not to get what I want politically.
- Not to have a leader removed or a movement canceled.

But praying and seeking God's will for the United States.

What would happen if we instead started praying:

God, help me to see what you see. To see your image in others – in Charlie and

Renee and ICE.

Help me to feel what you feel. That my heart breaks for the same things that

break your heart – justice and mercy and righteousness.

Help me to live like Jesus in this crazy messy beautiful world.

It does not mean that I must give up on my convictions or beliefs. But its an intentional choice to **shift my hope from political parties and personalities and movements** and *anchor it in God and his kingdom.*

Nehemiah's prayers remind me that this country does not need more opinions. Does not need the blame game.

It needs followers of Jesus who become the people our prayers say we want to be.

...if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

2 Chronicles 7:14 NIV