



PRAYER WITH FEET

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It's good to be back with you this morning. As you might have heard, we were in Yakima last Sunday for my grandmother's 90th birthday celebration. It was really special to be there with family to honor her.

One of my favorite moments of the day was when she sang for us with her friend Dewitt, who is 97. She assures us there is no romance going on there. The two of them have begun singing duets for residents of their retirement home. This has been a brand new thing for her to do, so it was a treat to get to hear them. And their voices actually blended really well.

After the party was over, Grandma gave a speech at dinner. She talked about what a profound impact moving into her new retirement home has had on her. It's an assisted living facility, and she thought she would be the one being assisted. But as she looked around, she saw people in much worse physical, mental and spiritual places than she was and she felt this new sense of calling to meet the great needs she saw.

One day she went to an exercise class there, and the woman next to her said, "Virginia, can I talk to you?" Grandma said, "Sure, how can I help you?" The woman's unexpected reply was, "Could you give me a hug? I'm so lonely." So my Grandma hugged her, but she felt convicted, because that woman lived right next door to her in the same hall.

That encounter and the responses people have given to her singing have given her a new purpose in life. She has caught a vision for taking the love of Jesus to the people of that retirement home, and it was humbling to see her energy and drive for serving God.

She challenged all her kids and grandkids saying, "It doesn't matter how old or young you are. Make yourself available to God and he can use you."

I want to be like that when I'm 90. I want to be like that when I'm 42! To me, that embodies the message of Nehemiah that we're looking at – make yourself available to God for his use. We can join with God in what he is building – whether that's in our own lives, here at church or out there in the world wherever he has placed you.

When we last left off with Nehemiah, he was sitting in Persia, hearing the news that the city of Jerusalem was a wreck. That tragic situation touched his heart so deeply that it grew into a call to leave his government job and go get his hands dirty actually doing something about it. God grabbed hold of Nehemiah in a big way.

There's only one catch: the king had signed a law BANNING any reconstruction of Jerusalem. So here's Nehemiah, the king's loyal servant, wanting to go against his master's orders. He not only has to convince the king to let him leave his job to go do the work -- he has to hope the king will reverse his previous order. That's where we pick up the story.

Nehemiah 2:1-9

In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before; so the king asked me, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart."

I was very much afraid, but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"

The king said to me, "What is it you want?"

If you ever go to the Great Wolf Lodge, the best water slide by far is the one they call the Howlin Tornado. While you're riding on an inner tube built for four, and it starts out pretty easy and you think hey – this isn't too bad. But then you have this sudden drop into this giant funnel. At that point you're committed. You go rocketing around and around, sort of circling the drain, spiraling in closer and closer and finally shooting through the opening at the bottom.

I picture this conversation between Nehemiah and the king as being like the Howlin Tornado. He sort of gingerly leads into the conversation, just wearing a sad face. Then the king starts asking questions, and suddenly Nehemiah is committed. The discussion spirals tighter and tighter, until it finally comes down to the central question: What is it you want?

Getting to that stage is essential for moving forward. It's like prayer. We often start out vague and never really get to the central issue. What is it we want? If our prayers aren't specific, then we won't see specific answers.

We pray generic prayers all the time. "O Lord, please be with my friend Derek in a special way today." But what does that mean? And how would we ever know if God answered? Author David Jeremiah compares the way we talk to God with the way we hire a babysitter. When you go and pick up Betsy to watch the kids, can you imagine saying to her, "O Betsy, would you please be with my children in a special way tonight?" No. You'd say, "Betsy, the kids need to be in bed by 9. They can have one snack. Make

sure they get their homework done. Here's where we'll be if you run into any problems. Any questions?"

Obviously, we can't take that analogy too far. God isn't here to follow our instructions, but it does make you realize how silly some of our prayers must sound to him. The more we can define what it is we're asking, the more we'll be able to see his answers.

What is it you want? A few years after Karin's Uncle Rick passed away, her aunt Barb found that she was still dealing with intense feelings of grief and loss. One day as she was praying, she cried out to God, "I just wish I had somebody who knew me like a husband." And she felt as if God responded by saying, "What is it you want?"

She thought about it and said, "I want to be able to tell someone I just wish I had my blue earrings back." A few days earlier she had cleaned up her car, and she remembered scooping them up with the trash, and she hadn't been able to find them since. She was sure they were gone. It was just one of those little frustrations in life that she had nobody to talk to about anymore.

Shortly after her conversation with God, she sat down on the couch with a bag of chips and spilled them all over. As she reached down into the cushions to clean them up, what should she find there but her blue earrings. When she got specific with God, he gave her the gift of a specific answer. And she burst into tears because it was such a direct confirmation that he saw her and heard her cry.

Charles Spurgeon once said, "There is a general kind of praying which fails for lack of precision." Are you being precise in prayer? What is it that you are wanting from God today?

When the king asked Nehemiah what he wanted, Nehemiah got VERY precise. Here's what happened:

The king said to me, "What is it you want?"

Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it."

This is worth a quick interruption, because this is one of my favorite moments in the Bible. I love how Nehemiah is able to be in the throne room of God at the same time he is in the throne room of the king. He is carrying on a dialogue on two fronts at the same time, fully aware of God's presence with him in that stressful situation. The 17th century archbishop Francois Fenelon said, "One moment will suffice to place yourself in God's presence...If you wait for convenient seasons, you will run the risk of waiting forever."

If prayer intimidates you as something you have to set aside large chunks of time for, then come at it a different way. Try the Nehemiah approach of going to God in the

middle of life. Identify the stress points in your day and then talk to God right while you're facing them. Find the downtime in your day and take advantage it – when you're on hold, waiting in line, etc. I went to a meeting with John Clum the other day, and while I was riding in his car, I saw he had a Scripture verse taped to his dashboard. That's a great way to remind yourself of God being with you throughout the day. It's not a matter of having time for it – it's a matter of practicing it. Nehemiah does that over and over again.

Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, "How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?" It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time.

I also said to him, "If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?" And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests. So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king's letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me.

There is an ancient Chinese legend about a pear in the shape of a baby. Supposedly if you found this pear and ate it, it would give you magical powers. Well legend has become reality. A news story this week included pictures of what looked like a miracle of nature.

But there's more to the story than that. This pear was carefully cultivated. A Chinese farmer knew the legend and thought it would be fun – and profitable -- to actually grow some. So he developed a mold, and when the pears are still very young, he puts the molds on them for several weeks while they're still pliable. And they simply grow into that form.

You hear that and you go, "Oh that's cheating. That's not really a special pear. That man made it." And maybe it isn't special in the magical sort of way. But you kind of have a choice: you can wish and wish for a baby-shaped pear to appear on its own in the wild and wish your whole life. Or you can take what you know about farming and pears and do something to help it become a reality.

I read this story of Nehemiah, and one of the things that stands out to me the most is how he participates in the process of God answering his prayers. Sometimes we act like it's cheating if we do anything without a big revelation from God first. Nehemiah was far more practical. He had no qualms about how his actions fit in with God's. This is why I called this sermon prayer with feet. Nehemiah prays for God's leading and intervention, but he doesn't just wait around as he waits on God. As he leans on God, he does everything he can to see the vision become a reality.

Prayer is meant to accompany our own involvement, not replace it. Please don't hear me wrong: I'm not saying God helps those who help themselves. His grace is freely given to all of us, regardless of our ability to perform. That's the whole premise of the gospel.

But there is a sense when it comes to pursuing God's calling on our lives, it's a call to quit being passive. We can't put the burden on God to make us more obedient. BEING obedient requires ACTING obediently. It is not God's job to hand us answers while we remain unchanged.

And Nehemiah is so good at demonstrating total dependence on God without neglecting his own part. While he expects and needs answers from God, he also shows that he's willing to participate. This willingness shows up in at least three ways. First, Nehemiah is willing to **Take the trip**. As I mentioned a couple weeks ago, there were a lot of miles standing between Nehemiah and Jerusalem. To do anything about the situation over there, Nehemiah had to be willing to relocate. He was willing to be moved.

As much as we may want things to be different in our lives, we don't so much want to be different ourselves. It's easy to pray, "God please change my circumstances." or, "God please change the way that person is treating me," or, "God please take away the temptation." It's much harder to say, "God, please change me." That requires a willingness to take the trip emotionally and spiritually.

We'd rather have God bring what we want to us rather than having to get up and go toward it. We'd rather say, "Lord, help me to obey you and let it be easy and comfortable."

Journeys by nature take us out of familiar territory. They're unsettling and disorienting. Roads can be bumpy. But getting to a place of change requires that willingness to go. And the best stories in life about love involve risk and sacrifice. Jesus certainly didn't ask to be comfortable. He took the trip for us and asks us to do the same..

Secondly, Nehemiah was willing to **Take the responsibility**. He told the king, "Let me go so I can rebuild it." He wasn't going there to just see the damage or supervise a crew. He himself was going to go to work on the problem, putting his own name on the line. If it didn't get done, he wasn't going to pin it on anyone but himself.

Back before Ariel Sharon became Prime Minister of Israel, he was a vocal opponent to the government's peace making efforts with Palestine. As an outsider, he was very critical and attacking. But when he became Prime Minister, something happened. His position changed and he became an advocate for peace. People were stunned. And when they asked him what had happened, he said simply, "It looks different from here."

Responsibility changes the way you see the world. When you are taking ownership for dealing with a problem, everything looks different. I talk with so many people who struggle at just this point. When somebody HASN'T accepted responsibility, it's easy to see, because the way they talk is full of blaming and fault-finding and criticism. Whether

it is a personal problem, a relationship problem, a church problem, a school problem, a job-related problem or whatever, take the pulse on your own vocabulary. Are you pointing fingers at who needs to change? Are you being critical of everyone around you? Or are you saying, "I'm going to own my own stuff, my own concerns.. I'm going to take responsibility for what I can." When you're busy doing your own work, there's less time to be critical of other people.

Nehemiah went so far with his sense of responsibility to even make a plan. He not only had a passion for the job, he took the time to think it through and map it out. If you're wanting to act more responsibly, are you also making a plan? What are your next steps going to be?

This is one I struggle with. I like to try to put that piece of it back on God. "You tell me what to do, Lord, and I'll do it. I'm happy to be responsible, but you make the plan." But that's part of the responsibility. Sometimes that's the hard part, because we don't know how to get where we want. It takes work to think it through and trace out the steps. But if we do that and hold it loosely before the Lord, he will help us with it.

Proverbs 16:3

*Commit to the LORD whatever you do,
and your plans will succeed.*

Where are you needing to take responsibility this morning? Like Nehemiah, we need to step up and say, "I'll do the work." As he did that, the king posed another question to him: How long will you be gone?

As Nehemiah answered him, he also showed a willingness to **Take the time**. Scholars estimate that the construction project took approximately 12 years for Nehemiah to finish. He wasn't going to be able to knock out the wall in a couple of weekends.

I point this out because even when we're willing to be moved and we're willing to do the work, we sometimes expect that we'll be rewarded for that willingness with a quick payoff. Our energy and passion for working at something can burn out when we're imagining more immediate results. We need to see our calling as a marathon, not a sprint, and pace ourselves accordingly.

When I was in seminary, I had a mentor who was pastoring a 100 year old church in downtown Seattle. It was steeped in layers and layers of tradition and was dying a slow death because the old guard just would not change. This pastor told me when he had taken the job, he had pushed and pushed for immediate changes to try and force some life back into the place. Only it wasn't working. The ship was too big and too old to turn around that quickly, and it was just causing a lot of frustration and pain for everyone.

But then he said he had a revelation. He saw that he needed to quit thinking about a quick fix and instead view it in terms of generations and geometry. Rather than looking for a 180 degree flip, he thought about just nudging the church a little in a different

direction. He said he realized that he could draw a different trajectory for the church in that nudge. It might look small right now, but as you drew the line further out, the church could be in a much different place in future generations. And that gave him hope and the strength to keep going.

Hebrews 10:36

But you need to stick it out, staying with God's plan so you'll be there for the promised completion.

Nehemiah was willing to take the trip, to take the responsibility and to take the time. And it was in the context of demonstrating that willingness that God so graciously answered his prayers.

Nehemiah received three tremendous gifts from the king. And as I read it, I see the king as really standing in for God here. His response to Nehemiah was the tangible sign of God's response. His blessing was evidence of God's blessing. And I believe that what he offered matches what God offers each of us as we pursue our calling with him.

The first thing Nehemiah requested was **Permission**. He asked the king, "Are you willing to let me go and do this?" Everything from that point forward depended on that piece of it.

I love the way the king words it. He doesn't really even say yes. He just says, "How long do you need?" It is a response that is full of affirmation.

It's been said that good parenting is saying yes whenever you can, not shutting down your child unnecessarily. That's how God parents us. He loves to say yes to us, not grudgingly, but full of affirmation.

2 Corinthians 1:20

For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ.

Jesus opened so many doors for us with God we can't even begin to fathom the number. You may be wondering, "Well how will I know if God is saying yes and giving me his permission to do something?"

In a word, it looks like freedom. Sometimes it will be through external confirmation. When Karin and I were praying and praying about planting a church, we had no peace about actually leaving our old church. We were waiting and waiting. We had friends who would ask us why in the world we hadn't taken the leap, but we just had no internal freedom. But then, after we went through the formal church planting assessment process, leaders from that gathering told us, "It's time for you to step out." Their word was the "yes" we had been waiting for and confirmed what we were feeling inside.

Just as often, that sense of freedom will be completely internal. I was just talking with a woman this week who had been having no peace about a decision she had to make. She

prayed and prayed, and finally felt God grant her the permission she needed to move ahead. But she waited for that peace. Author Lyell Rader once said, “If you can’t pray a door open, don’t pry it open.”

That may sound too subjective – to just pray and listen to your heart. But that is how Scripture says we can tell. If we pay attention to what is happening in our spiritual life, we’ll know when God is saying yes.

1 Corinthians 2:14-16

Spirit can be known only by spirit — God's Spirit and our spirits in open communion. Spiritually alive, we have access to everything God's Spirit is doing, and can't be judged by unspiritual critics. Isaiah's question, "Is there anyone around who knows God's Spirit, anyone who knows what he is doing?" has been answered: Christ knows, and we have Christ's Spirit.

God loves to give permission, but he doesn’t stop there. Nehemiah asked the king for more. He asked for **Provision**. Will you supply my needs? Nehemiah needed timber. He needed passports. He was counting on the king for the resources to do the job.

That’s something we can count on God for as well. If he’s going to give us his blessing to go and do something for him, we can be sure that he will never send us empty handed. Like the great verse from Philippians puts it:

Philippians 4:19

And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

One of the requests Nehemiah made really struck me:

And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?

He ends with a request for his own residence. You might think wow. That’s a little brash. Asking the king to take care of your personal needs as well as the job?

But I think that’s extremely important. Nehemiah did not neglect his own needs for the sake of the larger job. All too often people sacrifice family or personal wholeness for the sake of “the ministry.” But that’s a toxic approach to a call. Listen, if you are sensing that God is asking you to do something that is going to be damaging to yourself, your marriage or your kids, then it isn’t God who is asking. It is personal pride, ambition or something else, but not the Lord.

Pete Scazero tells a story of a time when a couple came from out of town to visit their church and invited themselves to lunch afterwards. Pete wanted to say no, and his wife Geri REALLY wanted to say no, but feeling obligated to “do the right thing” they invited them over.

The couple would not leave. They stayed and stayed for hours. At one point, the husband said, "I'm not talking too much am I?" And Pete just lied and said, "oh no."

After this had gone on forever, Geri finally said, "I need to excuse myself – I need to check on our daughter."

She went from room to room and couldn't find her. Their daughter was three at the time, so not being able to find her was unusual and not a good sign. Geri and Pete both started looking and getting more and more frantic, until they finally went to the back yard, where they saw to their horror that their daughter was in their pool, standing on her tip toes to keep her mouth above the water so she didn't drown.

And Pete was just sick. He realized in his desire to do ministry he had neglected taking care of his daughter, even to the point of putting her life at risk.

God's provision is for our good as well as the good of what we're doing. He is not only concerned about the work he can get out of you – he's interested in your own health and well being as well.

The king supplied everything Nehemiah was asking for, and then he also gave him something he hadn't even dreamed of requesting.

The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me.

Unprompted by Nehemiah, the king offered him **Protection**. This was going to be a job fraught with danger and risk. The king knew Nehemiah would face opposition and difficult conditions, so he went out of his way to guard his safety.

God does the same for us.

Isaiah 52:12

*For the LORD will go before you,
the God of Israel will be your rear guard.*

God has our back. We have no idea sometimes what battles are raging around us in the spiritual realms. We tromp through life oblivious to the dangers we face. But Jesus sees. One of his great prayers for us in the Garden of Gethsemane was for our safety.

John 17:11, 15

Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name -- the name you gave me... My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.

The comforting thing to know is that no prayer of Jesus goes unanswered. We can know beyond the shadow of a doubt that as long as we remain in this world doing God's work, he will protect us.

As we close our time together this morning, I want to leave you with two prayers to think about. The first is about where your heart is at this morning. Maybe you've already told God this before, but take a moment to say it again today:

God, I am willing to...and then fill in the blank. Is it to take the trip – to be moved? Is it to take responsibility and own the work? Or is it to take the time and be patient with the process?

Take a moment right now to pray that.

Now think about the request you'd like to make. God I need from you...

Are you waiting for his permission? Do you feel like you're lacking freedom to go forward? Ask him for a yes. Are you needing his provision and resources that just don't seem to be there? He will supply.

Maybe you're in a scary spot and you need his protection. We can walk through the valley of the shadow knowing that he is with us. Jesus has your back today. Ask him to be your Protector.