

The Desperate Cry Out to God

Nehemiah 1

This morning we begin a sermon series entitled “Desperate.” We are going to notice from Scripture healthy, God-honoring ways to respond when we are desperate. Sooner or later, every single one of us will find ourselves in a situation that tempts us to despair, to lose hope, to give up.

- Your desperation might be related to career and finances; instead of satisfaction and security, you find yourself joyless and anxious.
- Your desperation might be related to your health; instead of feeling strong and invincible, you feel weak and vulnerable.
- Your desperation might involve relationships; people that should be giving you life and encouragement are opposing you and causing you grief.
- Your desperation might involve a habit of the flesh; instead of love, joy, peace, patience. . . self-control, you find yourself enslaved to anger, lust, anxiety, a critical spirit.
- Your desperation might involve tragedy or heartache in the life of someone you love (a family member, a friend, a brother/sister in Christ); you want so badly for their pain to end, but you’re helpless - there’s nothing (humanly speaking) you can do for them.

Sometimes our desperation is a minor annoyance; other times our desperation absolutely dominates our lives.

There are many unhealthy, un-godly ways of responding to desperation. Some curse God and lash out at others. Some escape through fantasy, drugs, alcohol, or busyness. Some become complacent and lethargic and just exist. We certainly see in Scripture examples of how we shouldn’t respond to desperation (King Saul, Judas, Job’s wife, etc.). But we also have many accounts in Scripture of people responding in healthy, God-honoring ways to their desperate circumstances. In this sermon series we are going to explore some of these Scriptures.

I hope that these Scriptures give us a fresh vision for how we can relate to God when we’re desperate. I even hope that these Scriptures deepen our faith in God Himself to the point where we’ll take some risks that perhaps we’ve never taken before. Some of you are desperate (present tense) and will be able to apply these Scriptures to your lives immediately. Others of you aren’t particularly desperate yourselves, but you know people who are; out of compassion you can come alongside them and help them respond well. It’s been said, “If you live long enough you will suffer.” Sooner or later all of us will need to know how to respond to desperation in ways that honor God.

One disclaimer as we launch into this series: we’re not presenting a formula; we’re not giving a checklist of things to do every time you find yourself in a desperate situation; we’re not saying that you’ll have exactly the same outcomes that we see in each account in Scripture (the outcomes actually vary). Rather, we’re presenting biblical examples of the types of ways we can respond when we find ourselves desperate. We will need discernment to know how to respond in each situation. But I want us to

understand that we have options - time-tested, healthy, God-honoring ways of responding to trials and sufferings.

The desperate can cry out to God with fervent, persistent prayer. (Nehemiah 1)
Nehemiah 1 tells us that desperate people always have the option of appealing to the God of heaven. The first couple of verses of Nehemiah 1 set the context.

1 The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month Chisleu, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, 2 that Hanani, one of my brothers, and some men from Judah came; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped and had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem.

At the end of chapter 1 we're told that Nehemiah was a cupbearer to King Artaxerxes. He was a trusted assistant and part of the king's household. Even though he was Jewish, he remained in exile in Babylon instead of returning to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and the city walls. While in the capital city of Susa, a relative of Nehemiah's named Hanani arrived from Jerusalem with several other men. At some point in the conversation Nehemiah inquires about the well-being of the exiles who had escaped captivity in Babylon and returned to Jerusalem.

Nehemiah's hope was that the city was being rebuilt and that the people were once again thriving in the city of David, Jerusalem. He surely would have had family members and friends living in Jerusalem. This wasn't a disinterested inquiry; as we'll see he cared deeply about Jerusalem and the exiles who had returned. But he got a very troubling report:

3 They said to me, "The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire."

God had promised not only to restore "a remnant" to the Land; He also promised (Jeremiah 23:3) that "they will be fruitful and multiply." The remnant, however, wasn't experiencing God's covenant blessing. Instead, "the remnant. . . are in great distress and reproach." Instead of dwelling securely in the Land, they were continually threatened by the surrounding peoples.

As for Jerusalem, Hanani reported that "the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire." Ezra 4 gives us a preview of this circumstance. When the returned exiles began rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem, the surrounding peoples tried to stop their efforts through intimidation, threats, and appeals to the king. They eventually got a decree from the king that stopped the rebuilding of the wall. Since we don't have a record anywhere of this partially rebuilt wall being torn down and the rebuilt gates burned with fire, Hanani is probably referring to the original destruction of the walls and gates that happened 140 years earlier. And so Hanani's report is that the returned exiles have failed. Things are little better than when they were dragged off into exile 586 b.c.

Notice the intensity of Nehemiah's response to this news:

4 When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

Nehemiah had an immediate, visceral reaction to the news that the work in Jerusalem had failed and that his fellow Jews were in "great distress and reproach." If Nehemiah didn't care about anybody but himself, he would have shrugged his shoulders and said, "I guess things didn't work out as planned." Honestly, sometimes that's our response to the suffering of other people. The suffering of others doesn't always make us desperate. Next week we'll talk about ways that we can **become** desperate (which is a function of thinking and feeling the way God does about ourselves and others).

But here we see that the news about Jerusalem devastated Nehemiah because he loved God and loved his neighbor as himself. The reputation of God was at stake, and his fellow Jews were in great distress. So he "sat down and wept and mourned for days." He was "fasting and praying before the God of heaven." Nehemiah responded emotionally, spiritually, and physically. Again, this isn't a formula that we **have** to follow when we're desperate; but this type of holistic response is very common in Scripture and is therefore a live option for us.

Weeping and Mourning. Nehemiah "sat down and wept and mourned for days." Some cultures are more expressive than others. Here in the States, we tend to be very repressed. We're often not comfortable weeping and mourning in public; and we're often not comfortable seeing others weeping and mourning.

My dad died in 1990. As I was leaving the cemetery after the graveside service I was understandably emotional, crying to myself. A family friend who was a few years older than me walked up and told me, "Don't cry. . . it's going to be okay." He was trying to be encouraging; he was trying to assure me that this wasn't the end of the world. But he gave me some bad advice, right? There are times when you need to cry like a baby. Some things are just that tragic and sorrowful.

One aspect of maturity involves expressing intense emotions in appropriate ways - sometimes over an extended period of time as Nehemiah did. We see this throughout Scripture. When **Job** experienced the loss of his wealth and his children, "Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped" (Job 1:20). When his body broke out in boils from head to toe, he sat on the ground for seven days. In the New Testament, when Peter denied knowing Jesus three times, he remembered that Jesus had said, "Before a rooster crows today, you will deny Me three times." Luke 22:63 tells us, "And he went out and wept bitterly." And we have the example of our Lord in John 11:35. When His friend Lazarus died, we are told that "Jesus wept."

When there's loss and when there's disappointment and devastation from sin, weeping and mourning are often an appropriate response. Don't be afraid of tears. Instead of bottling up our emotions and "getting on with life," we can respond with weeping and

mourning. Do you give yourself permission to weep and mourn? Do you allot the time needed to weep and mourn?

Fasting and Praying. Nehemiah also mentions that he “was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.” Fasting is the practice of going without food for a period of time. Various types of fasts are mentioned in the Bible - from partial fasts (abstaining from certain types of foods) to absolute fasts (when people when without both food and drink). Here we get the impression that Nehemiah fasted spontaneously as an expression of his anguish over the plight of Jerusalem. He combined fasting and prayer as a way to cry out to God.

My observation (and experience) is that when people fast because they’re “supposed to” (“They fasting in the Bible so we should too. . .”) that it has limited value. I end up counting the hours or minutes until I can finally eat some food again. I can’t wait for it to be over. But when a desperate person goes without food as a way of intensifying his/her praying, fasting has great value.

I like what Mark Batterson says about fasting; he says it’s a way to accelerate your prayers.

When you fast and pray in tandem, it’s almost like a moving sidewalk that gets you to your desired destination in half the time. Fasting has a way of fast-tracking our prayers. Because fasting is harder than praying, fasting is a form of praying hard. In my experience, it is the shortest distance to a breakthrough.

(The Circle Maker)

I would encourage you not to overthink fasting (and prayer for that matter). You don’t have to figure out exactly how fasting works. If you’re desperate enough, going without food for a period of time won’t seem like some heroic sacrifice that should impress God or others; going without food is a way to express that you’re serious about seeking God on a matter. When you feel a twinge of hunger you remember that you want God more you want food. In this way fasting focuses and accelerates your praying.

Nehemiah’s prayer is recorded in verses 5 through 11. We’ll read through this prayer making only a few comments. As we see throughout Scripture, we see Nehemiah humbling himself, confessing sin, and praying bold, faith-filled prayers. Nehemiah first acknowledges that God is great and awesome, a God who keeps His covenant commitments:

5 I said, “I beseech You, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments,

The request in verse 6 is a very common one in Scripture. In the Bible people didn’t take for granted that God would hear and answer their prayers. Here Nehemiah asks that God’s eyes and ears be attentive to his request.

6 let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father's house have sinned.

We know that in the new covenant we always have full access to God through Jesus. And yet it is appropriate for us to appeal to God as Nehemiah did, expressing that we believe He is a God who sees and hears and responds. Notice how honest and raw Nehemiah is in his confession of sin:

7 "We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.

In verses 8 and 9 Nehemiah reminds God of a promise He had made to Moses. God is not offended when we take Him at His Word. He's actually eager to prove that He keeps Word. Nehemiah's prayer reflects this:

8 "Remember the word which You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples; 9 but if you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.'

Notice the request based on God's promise:

10 "They are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand. 11 "O Lord, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your name, and make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man." Now I was the cupbearer to the king.

"This man" was King Artaxerxes. Nehemiah would ask him for permission to travel to Jerusalem and oversee the rebuilding of the wall. There was no guarantee that the king would respond favorably; he might have been suspicious or angry and punished Nehemiah instead of granting his request. And so Nehemiah asked God, "make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man [King Artaxerxes]."

Nehemiah 2 records the conversation Nehemiah had with the king. We read that Artaxerxes did indeed have compassion on Nehemiah; his heart went out to him when he saw his sadness over the condition of Jerusalem. He granted Nehemiah's request and even gave him an armed escort for safe travel. Nehemiah records that this response was the answer to his prayers to "the God of heaven."

It's possible to ask all sorts of unanswerable questions about Nehemiah's response when he heard about the plight of Jerusalem: Would God have answered his prayers in the same way if he hadn't fasted? Did he have to weep and mourn for days? We can't answer those questions with any certainty. But Scripture confirms that ***The desperate***

can cry out to God with fervent, persistent prayer. God loves to answer our prayers when we pray fervent, persistent prayers.

Living after the cross of Christ, we understand that those who believe in Jesus stand before God blameless in Christ Jesus. We have the freedom to come boldly into God's presence and ask for the grace and mercy we need.

This past week I listened to the podcast of a message given by a man named Christopher Yuan. He grew up in a strong Christian home in Chicago, but as a young man he became very promiscuous. Eventually he began using and dealing drugs in Atlanta. He was the prodigal. He had everything he always wanted: money, sex, and power. His parents visited him once in Atlanta. His dad insisted on giving him a Bible; when his dad left he threw it in the trash.

Instead of despair, his parents cried out to God on behalf of their son. They enlisted over a hundred prayer warriors from their church and their Bible study. His mother began praying a very bold prayer: "God, do whatever it takes to bring this prodigal son to You." In her desperation she fasted every Monday for seven years; she once fasted 39 days on his behalf. Some mornings she spent hours pleading for her son in her "prayer closet." A miracle from God was the only option she had. In desperation she cried out to God with fervent, persistent prayer (and fasting).

The miracle came in the form of 12 Drug Enforcement agents and Atlanta Police. After he was booked, he called home for the first time in years, and his mother's first words were, "Are you okay?" God's kindness leads to repentance. He was sentenced to 6 years in prison. A few days after he entered prison he looked in a garbage can and saw a Gideon's NT; he took it back to his cell and read the gospel of Mark. One night he looked up and saw written on the wall above his bunk, "If you're bored, read Jeremiah 29:11 - 'For I know the plans I have for you says the Lord - plans for welfare and not calamity, to give you a future and a hope.'" To summarize, he put his faith in Christ, got out of prison after 6 years, and now represents Christ in some amazing ways.

What type of person prays the way Christopher Luan's mom and Nehemiah prayed? Who would invest that type of time and energy in prayer and fasting? Someone who exercises true faith. Hebrews 11:6 tells us this:

6 And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

They believed that God exists ***and*** that He rewards those who seek Him. Some people seek God because they're supposed to or because they think it will make them feel better. But people of faith believe that ***God rewards those who seek Him*** - rewarding them by answering their prayers.

If you are desperate for God to do something that you can't do yourself, cry out to Him in prayer and fasting. And continue to saturate your heart and mind with Scripture. Each week we will supply five additional Scriptures for you to consider the following week.

You will find them at the bottom of the outline in your bulletin. This week allow God to convince you that He rewards those who cry out to Him with fervent, persistent prayer.

Scriptures to Read/Ponder this week:

Luke 11:5-13

Luke 18:1-8

Matthew 26:36-46

James 5:13-18

2 Samuel 12:1-23