

Hey, how are we? Are we doing okay? If you have your Bibles, let's go to Nehemiah, chapter 1. If you're a guest with us today and don't have a Bible with you, maybe you don't own a Bible, there should be a black hardback one somewhere around you. If you don't own one outright, that's our gift to you. Please feel free to take it. If you just left yours all wrinkled up in your car, you can use that one here, but then leave it here. I don't want to add to your collection in your backseat. If you don't own a Bible, seriously, why don't you take that as our gift to you.

I think before we dive in today we have to establish how it is we are to look at the men and women in the Bible. There's a way to look at the men and women in the Bible that's going to be helpful to us, and then there's a way to view men and women in the Bible that's not just *not* helpful but actually harmful. What our tendency is is to not look at the men and women in the Bible as ordinary people but actually *extraordinary* people, so that as we watch God move in them and through them, we're able to look at them like you *should* look at Jordan. Are you tracking with me?

Basically, what we do is we look at the men and women in the Bible like we would look at Jordan in basketball, like we would look at Steve Jobs in business, and like we would look at Mozart in music. So just to unpack that a little bit, just in case you're not tracking with me, here's what I would say. Michael Jordan is the best basketball player who has ever lived. I have no ears to hear from anyone else something other than that. If you come up to me on the fiftieth birthday of MJ and try to throw LeBron out there...church discipline. I'll convene the elders, and we'll go to work.

When you're talking MJ, you're talking about a level of play that transcended *his* time and even to this day. Like Jordan is Jordan. Right? A hundred years from now, two hundred years from now, if the game is still being played, there will be Jordan. There are a lot of dudes in the league, but there's Jordan. Then Steve Jobs' business creativity. You might be brilliant at business, but that man convinced us computers were cool, and then look what he did to us. I mean, I can't even get angry. It so blows my mind.

He literally developed a product and then would just slightly tweak it and make us rebuy it. And we loved him for it. We liked that he did that to us. We didn't even go, "Are you serious? The camera just has better pixels?" We were like, "Give me the 4. Give me the 4S. Give me the 4S1." We just kept doing it. We loved it. Right? So this is a man that if history continues as then, we'll always look back at Jobs. And Mozart. I know there are different styles of music. I probably could have dropped other things in there.

When all is said and done, I love Michael Bleecker, our worship pastor here, I love John Warren up in Denton, Isaac Wimberley in Dallas, and Randy Fuller in Fort Worth, but here's what I would wager. I would wager 200 years from now people aren't getting together to listen to Bleecker. A hundred years from now the best musicians out there aren't going to gather for a "Glorious Day" reunion. That song we just sang, "God is a Warrior," was written by Isaac Wimberley. Great song, biblical song, pulled right from the text, absolutely true about the nature and character of God. A hundred and fifty, two hundred years from now, I just don't know that it's going to be on a classical music CD you're studying to.

What we do is we approach men and women in the Bible as though they're *that* type of person and not *us*. When you do that, the stories in the Scriptures actually serve as kind of a burden that weighs on our expectations and on how we view God. We exalt the role of man and diminish the role of God and, in so doing, rob ourselves from the courage and the power that is made available to us in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Here's the thing. If you really pay attention when you read the Bible (and I don't think we do), they're us. Some of them come from busted-up homes. Some of them come from really great homes. Almost all of them have serious life issues. Really, if you're paying attention, God's great glory is seen in who he *does* use. These are very ordinary men and women. God extraordinarily works through ordinary men and women. That is a fascinating truth.

If you view the Bible, and then, God help us, if you view other people around you as having better opportunity... Now let me be straight here. We have different gift sets, don't we? Can we be straight about that? There are certain things you have been gifted by God to do that if I worked at it with all my might I would never be able to hit it like you can hit it. I'm not talking gifting; I'm talking the availability of the presence and power of God. That's available to all of us.

We all start with the same baseline. We're all sinners in need of salvation. The Holy Spirit who lives in you is the same Holy Spirit who lives in me, if you're a believer in Christ. This is who we are. We've been adopted into the household of faith, where the power of God is made available to all who have submitted their lives to him. It's important we see that as we continue on in the book of Nehemiah, because if we're not careful, my fear is you're going to go, "Well, I'm glad that worked for Jordan. I could practice the rest of my life and I couldn't hit that shot."

It's not true, and it really diminishes the power and might of God and his ability to move powerfully in ordinary people. The Bible is simply filled with ordinary people. You have this one guy who's God in the

flesh, but other than that, it's just ordinary guys. Some of them are unbelievably gifted in government and business, and some of them aren't very gifted at all at much, yet God powerfully uses them.

Two weeks ago we looked at what happened when Nehemiah heard Jerusalem was desolate, that the walls had been torn down and the gates had been burned. We did a little bit of work on what it means to not have walls and gates. It basically paints a picture of anarchy. When he hears, he's 800 miles away in the palace of the king of Persia. I just have to guess (you can Google this) he's living all right for himself. If you're cupbearer to the king of Persia, you have a pretty sweet gig. You're sampling the best wine, eating the best food, and unless someone tries to kill the king, you have a pretty plush gig.

I have to wonder even historically, since everyone knew there would be a wine-tester, if your attempt would be to poison the king that way. So great job, 800 miles removed from the atrocity that is Jerusalem at this point. He doesn't know the people who are there, but he catches wind that his people, his ethnic, covenant community (not just his ethnicity, but also his covenant community), were in danger and in despair and suffering greatly. We see his heart just can't handle the weight of that, and he begins to weep and pray. He's devastated by the news.

We tried to answer the question two weeks ago, "Is this *descriptive*? Is it historical? Is this just something God wants us to see that happened? Or is this *prescriptive*? Is this God's desire for all of us as children of God, to operate in a way that's filled with empathy toward one another and compassion for the world around us? Is it the expectation of God that we should walk with one another, first and foremost with a covenant community of faith, the church, the bride, in a way that's empathetic and compassionate, and then from there does it overflow out of those walls and into the world around us?"

We showed with a great bit of detail it *is* God's expectation of us that we would be people who are marked by empathy and compassion, that our hearts are moved by the sorrows and losses of others, that we are people, men and women, who enter into the fray. We don't avoid it. Where we see sorrow or we see loss or we see difficulty, we don't turn a blind eye to that, but we engage *into* that. That's what we've been called to as the people of God. We have been shown that mercy, so it is God's expectation that we extend that mercy.

Then this week he's going to show us how to pray. Again, the reason I wanted to point out that Nehemiah is ordinary is that prayer is one of those really weird things. I've said this over and over again. We all know we should. No one in this room right now is going, "Wait a minute. Are you saying...? You cannot be saying that as a Christian I'm meant to pray." I just don't think anyone is doing that. We *know* we should, but we've taken this poll (about seven times since I've been the pastor here) about how well we're doing at that, and we generally have a consensus in the room that we stink at it.

Nehemiah is going to show us some things I think will help, and I think the idea that Nehemiah is not Jordan... He's not even Kerr He's not even out on the wing. He's not Pippen. He's not Rodman. He's hardly on the team. He's like the really hyper white guy on the bench who's like, "Yeah! Yeah!" He's *that* guy. That's kind of Nehemiah in the game. So I want us to look at how he interacts with the Lord, because I think it'll be helpful for us as bit players ourselves.

Nehemiah, chapter 1. We're going to pick it up in verse 4. **"As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days..."** If you don't remember what the words were, the words were that Jerusalem had been destroyed. So he wept and mourned for days. **"...and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.**

And I said, 'O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you.

Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, "If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there."

They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name..." Now listen to this next part. This is where it's going to get interesting. It's going to tie us to the next section. **"...and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man."** We immediately find out who this man is.

"Now I was cupbearer to the king. In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. And the king said to me, 'Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart.'"

How does he know Nehemiah isn't sick? Well, if you're sampling the king's wine, you don't have the flu. Right? *Sniff.* "Yeah, it's fine. You'll be all right." If you're the cupbearer of the king, you're in good health

when you put your lips on his glass. He knows this can't be physical illness, so he knows it must then be a sadness of the heart. Then look at what Nehemiah says.

"Then I was very much afraid. I said to the king, 'Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?' Then the king said to me, 'What are you requesting?'" Watch this. **"So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king, 'If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it.'"**

You have two things happening, two different types of praying that are occurring. You have a big block of prayer. In fact, we read early in this chapter that day and night he was praying. You have this kind of set-aside block of prayer. If you have a background in church, in your teenage years you were taught it. It was called a "quiet time," that you are to set a part of your day aside for the sole purpose of being in the Word of God and praying.

I always thought we probably should have named it something other than "quiet time." That sounds a little bit like discipline, like you're in trouble. "You get in the corner and think about that." We probably could have done better at that, but it's called a quiet time, a set time of your day you are to just commune with God in Bible study and prayer. But if we notice, that's not all Nehemiah did. We find this rhythm of pulling aside and getting alone with the Lord daily throughout the Scriptures, and especially throughout Christian history. It's a spiritual discipline to do so.

What I want you to notice is also on top of this communion with God that was day and night, this set-aside time, you also had these kind of rifle-shot prayers. He just prayed, "Give your servant favor with this man." He's at work. That's important. He's not at church; he's at work. He poured the glass of wine. He sampled it. He already said he was afraid, maybe even popped a cup, and then poured a little bit more, waited to see if it was poisonous, and then took it to the king. Then the king said, "You look sad. What's up?"

"Well, may the king live forever. My loyalty is with you. Why should I not be sad when the graves of my fathers lie in ruin?"

"What are you requesting of me?"

"Okay, God. I prayed about this earlier today." It's a rifle-shot prayer at work. So you have these two kinds of prayers being established here, where you have a built-out set of time just between you and the Lord, and then you have these little rifle-shot communications throughout the day. Now, if we were honest, for relationships to really flourish and have a lot of vibrancy, both of these are necessary.

I take my wife out on dates. I've just found that to be helpful. On our dates we have a single rule we break every time. That single rule is we're not talking about the kids. That's kind of standard. We're not talking about the kids tonight. We have three of them. We're just in a stage of life where part of date night *will* be addressing the kids. On date night, the hope is for me to try to pull on her heart, see what's going on in there, and for her to pull on mine to see what's going on in here.

We don't double date. That's not date night. We might go out with a couple, but that doesn't count. It's her and me with the sole purpose of, "What's going on in there?" Our last one was Valentine's Day. We sat at Valentine's Day, and here's what went on. She shared some things that were going on in her heart. I'm not sharing that, because that's hers not mine. It's mine to pray and to love. It's yours to not know. But for me, here's what we talked about. On March 5 I'll go in for an MRI, so we're inside the month now.

If you're new here, I battled primary brain cancer several years ago. It's an incurable form, which means they eventually think it's going to come back and get me, so we just continue to do scans until it comes back. I think I've been healed by the Lord. We'll see in the end who's right and who's wrong. You can applaud that. I could very well find out it's back. When all is said and done, that starts a battle of anxiety. When I get within the month, I start to really battle anxiety.

I just have to lay it at his feet. "There's nothing I can do. You're God; I'm not. It's not a bad thing to die. I belong to you. I'm going to lay it at your feet. My preference is this, but you're God." I have to lay that. Here's what I've learned. That anxiety creates in me a low-grade agitation with everyone. I do right to lay that before the Lord, but what I find is that my well of patience almost vanishes when I'm walking in that anxiety. I have a constant low-grade agitation. I'd already felt it churning up.

If you have a loved one, who does your agitation come out towards? Strangers? Sometimes, for you crazy ones. But for most of us, our agitation pours out on those who are closest to us and those we love the most. So what happens is I begin to be short with Lauren. I begin to be short with my children. I begin to just lack patience and grace because I'm in this spot. So I'm sharing this with Lauren, and I'm asking her to hold me accountable. "I've already talked with my boys about it. They're praying for me. Here's what I'm going to try to do to keep ever before me that I'm aware this is going on."

Then yesterday she totally Jesus juked me. I'm sitting at my computer answering emails, and she came up behind me. I had been short that morning. She just put her hands on my shoulders and started rubbing my shoulders and praying for me. It made me angry. I was like, "Don't you even. I was... Oh, dang it. Okay." I want to go after my wife's heart, and I want her to know mine. That's necessary for vibrancy in relationship.

But that's not all we do. We also have these little rifle-shot touch-base-during-the-day-type of questions, or this kind of conversation, where I'm just like... I mean, I wrote a little note. She was singing here in Flower Mound this morning. She has in-ears she has a little case for, and I folded up a little note and put it in her case. Again, I'm not going to tell you what that note said. That's just one little spot. And she will often ask me, "How are you doing today? What's going on today?" and I'll answer.

She has my calendar, so when I get home she doesn't say, "How was your day?" I'm a man. I'll respond, "Good." She'll go, "How was lunch with *this person*? How was your meeting with *this*?" and then we'll have those conversations. Surely you know the relationship breaks down if Lauren says, "Hey, how was your lunch?" and I say, "Why don't you save that for date night? I have you on the books, baby. When we get together at date night we'll have this conversation. For now, just write it down and we'll discuss it then."

That's not going to work, and it's also not going to work if all we have are little one-offs and we don't have any time for her and I to pull aside and really sync up with one another. Both are required for a vibrancy of relationship. So surely it's not a stretch for you to understand your relationship with God would flourish if you had both and would suffer if you lost either one of these pieces.

It's funny how one feeds the other. If you have a set time where you're saying, "I'm going to pray, I'm going to lay these things before the Lord," wouldn't it make sense that it would overflow as you... Let's take that guy at work you don't like. Let's take him, whoever he or she is. You have that person at work you kind of struggle with being kind to, having compassion for, showing patience toward.

If in your prayer time in the morning you say, "Lord, help me with this person. I just do not care for them. I know you love me and I have ugly stuff in me, but I just lack patience with this person," and then you say, "Amen," and you get in your car, and there's Bill walking up to you as soon as you walk in, you're aware, "I've laid this before the Lord." Now you can Nehemiah rifle shot and go, *Here we go, Lord. Here we go.* "Bill, how are you? Are you doing all right? No, I can't have lunch. Good to see you this morning, though, Bill. Blessings," and then run and lock your door and hide behind the desk. Those little blocks bleed out into the rest of your life.

If human relationships work this way, how much more do our relationships with our heavenly Father work this way? Here's what I'm saying. If you don't have a set block or you don't rifle shot prayer, I'm not saying you're not a believer. I'm just saying the vibrancy of your relationship with God has suffered. You're not robbing God; you're robbing you, because to behold Jesus, to have a relationship with God, is to be transformed by him. I fear so many of us are stuck in bad patterns simply because we won't connect with the relational component we've been rescued into. If you're thinking morally and not relationally, you're thinking wrongly.

Just for my own morbid curiosity, let's chat. How many of you would say, "Matt, I'm great at rifle-shot prayers. It's easy for me throughout my day just to every once in a while go, 'Lord, help me here. Lord, kill this guy in the left lane going 50. Lord, help me with this. Lord, protect me.'" You lay in bed at night, and as you fall asleep you say, "You're good to me, God. I love you," but if it came to a set-aside disciplined time with the Lord, that's where you struggle. How many of you would say, "Great at rifles; horrible at setting aside time"? Okay.

Now, I've also found there are "Type A's" who actually struggle with the exact opposite. They nail that 25- to 30-minute time, and then as soon as they're done, an hour or two later they have no idea what they prayed, what they read, what they considered. They struggle with the rifle shot, but they excel at that. "I will get my 25 minutes in here, my 30 minutes in here, my whatever here, but I really struggle with..." How many of you that's you? You're great at the time, but then you just forget as soon as you say, "Amen." How many of you stink at both? "I just genuinely stink at both." Okay. Well, safe place.

Now, I want to say this, because I believe it's true and it's helpful. You will live your life or it will live you. You are never going to fill your spaces with prayer...ever. If you get an hour to kill, if an hour opens up... I don't even know if that would happen in your world. It rarely happens in mine that "I have an hour here with nothing to do. How should I fill it?" If that happens to you, you will never fill that with prayer. You're going to catch up on *The Walking Dead*. You're going to do whatever else it is you do, but you're not going to fill that hour with prayer.

I'll tell you why. Because there is a war, a spiritual war and tear occurring about you connecting relationally with God. If all God is is an ambiguous idea to you that you love...you love the *idea* of God, but not necessarily love God and have a relationship with God...transformation is slow or doesn't happen at all. So you begin to be churchgoers who are not walking in the fullness of life God has brought about in Christ.

But if you connect relationally with God, if you set aside periods of time to pray and consider and then from there have that overflow into the rest of the areas of your life, now we're moving. Now transformation is occurring. Now you're a bit dangerous to what is evil and dark in the world. If you don't think our Enemy has a vested interest in us *not* praying, then you're walking in some foolishness. That's why you *don't* fill your space with prayer. That's why this *is* a struggle.

So here's the way I want to encourage you this week. If you're one who struggles with setting aside a block of time, you're going to have to say, "This is when I'm going to do it." If you don't, you're not going to do it. Here's what I would encourage you. Don't try to go Jordan. Don't go, "I'm going to set aside an hour a day

this week." Go for it if you want, but I'm saying I've seen guys come into the gym and set aside an hour of hard labor and then haven't ever seen them again. They're somewhere in an ice bath.

What I would do if I were you is set aside 5 or 10 minutes. You have 5 or 10 minutes. Set aside 5 or 10 minutes just to pray to the Lord, and part of that prayer needs to be, "Help me be mindful of you during the day." One of the things I do is pray my calendar. I'm praying for the meetings I'm going into. I'm laying those things before the Lord, so that when those meetings come, I get to circle back around and do the rifle shot and go, "Okay, Lord, I laid these things before you. Recall to my mind, strengthen my heart, give me the courage I need," and then I move into the meeting.

You need to get in your head now, "This is when I'm going to do that," or you're not going to do it. Then don't make it law. If you make it law and you miss for this reason or that reason, then you broke the law and you're not going to have a tendency to go back, if it's just, "This is when I set aside time to pray." Listen. I'm going to throw this out there. I miss sometimes. I have my little block that occurs right after I get up in the morning, and there have been times, because of situations or scenarios or other things, I miss that time.

I don't think in that moment God is like, "You make me sick." I think the blood of Christ covers that, and I'm going to rifle shot prayer that day, and I'm going to wake up the next morning and start over, and the mercies of God will be new. God will not be disappointed, although I do believe he's a jealous God who longs for time with us. You'll have to set out a little section to do this, or it's simply never going to occur. You don't need to view it as law, and you don't need to view it as "Jordan-esque." You need to start somewhere small and let it build. That's how everything good works.

Then maybe you'll get up to like a Calvin and Luther, praying an hour and a half a day or something. All right? I don't know. But it should start small and sustainable, and let the Lord grow it from there. Don't overestimate your own awesomeness. If you can take the posture, "I really stink at this," then you can set up goals that are attainable. If you think, "I should be able to do what people who have been following Christ for 30 years should be able to do," then I love you, but you're a fool.

One of the reasons Nehemiah is able to pray like he is able to pray is he has some really staunch beliefs about who God is. Some of the things we see in this prayer is he believes God is a covenant-keeping God. He believes God keeps his promises. That's what he believes about God. If you ask Nehemiah, "What do you believe about God?" he says, "I believe God keeps his promises."

You also see in the prayer Nehemiah believes God actually hears his people. Don't blow past that, because if you believe God actually hears you, you actually pray. Then he believes God is powerful. God's hands aren't tied, that he's not praying in vain, that God is able to act. Though God will at times say, "No," he has

never said, "I can't." Then he believes God is merciful. All those things are clearly seen in Nehemiah's prayer. He believes these things about God.

Now, I'm going to throw this out here, knowing full well some of you are not believers in Christ, some of you are nominal in your belief of Christ, and some of you got dragged here by a friend in the attempt that they would leave you alone now that you've come and tried it. But here's what I'll tell you. This is true. You couldn't even argue with me. Everyone in this room is a theologian. Every one of you. Theology is simply the study of God, and everyone in this room, even the most hardened atheist, has a view of who God is and what God is like, even if that view is there *is* no God and he's like nothing because he's not.

Then from our beliefs about God, we begin to create doctrine. We begin to develop systematic theology, what we believe God to be like. Now here's where I want to warn you. If your beliefs about God are rooted only in you and what you think, you have created an impotent, cheap, weak god who will never be able to sustain you. If you created your own god, let me guess what he's like. He gets you what you want. He doesn't say no to you often. Is that not the definition of a cruel parent, a parent who never says no to his child?

We have Valentine candy at the house right now. My children are addicted to high fructose corn syrup. It's really starting to be an issue. I mean, they itch. It's getting bad. So we've had to say no multiple times. I'm not saying no to candy for breakfast because I'm a bad dad. I'm saying no to candy for breakfast because I'm a *good* dad. In the same way, a god of your imagination will not give you what you need, because you don't know what you need. You know what you think you *want*.

All you'd have to do is pay attention to your life to see things you've wanted and have received have let you down or not been what you thought they would be. Almost all of us have made that prayer. "If you'd just give me..." and you got it, and then a month later, a year later, you were like, "Do you want this back?" I can't tell you how much time I've spent with 20- and 30-somethings who are frustrated with God because God did not give them something God never promised to give them. It's epidemic. Where there's an ignorance of Scripture, there are beliefs about God that are unfounded except in the imaginations of man's heart. Then you get something like a genie, not a God.

Where does Nehemiah get these beliefs about God? One of the things you see here is that Nehemiah in that long prayer we just read is literally just quoting Scripture. In Deuteronomy 7, verse 9, Moses writes, **"Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations..."** That's almost word for word what Nehemiah prayed. "You're a covenant-keeping God."

Maybe you're a skeptic here and you're going, "Oh, so the Bible supports the Bible. How convenient." I promise you; it wasn't convenient at all. It's 40 different authors over a period of several thousand years on three different continents and multiple different languages all painting the same picture of God's saving work among men. It is not convenient; it's divine.

Deuteronomy now is being clung to by Nehemiah, and he's saying, "You're a covenant-keeping God, and I know it because your Word says you're a covenant-keeping God." Then in Deuteronomy 4, you get a real gritty text, but one that actually helps Nehemiah in his present circumstance. Deuteronomy 4, starting in verse 25. It says this:

"When you father children and children's children, and have grown old in the land, if you act corruptly by making a carved image in the form of anything, and by doing what is evil in the sight of the LORD your God, so as to provoke him to anger, I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you will soon utterly perish from the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess.

You will not live long in it, but will be utterly destroyed. And the LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the LORD will drive you." Very chipper text here. **"And there you will serve gods of wood and stone, the work of human hands, that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell."**

This is not a text we would put on a tee shirt, and yet it's bringing immense comfort to Nehemiah. Nehemiah says, "You told us this would happen." Nehemiah's confession in his prayer is, "We have acted corruptly against your law. You told us this would come if we turned our backs on you. You are the one true God, and we have chosen things that were not God to serve, and in serving things that are not God as though they were God, you did exactly what you said you were going to do."

Now let me say this for you. The reason hard texts are important is we live in a broken world. If anyone should never be surprised by disease, death, natural disaster, injustice, hardship, tribulation, and trial it should be the believer in Christ who knows the Word of God says such things are a reality. What makes the prosperity gospel, the health, wealth, and prosperity gospel, so damning is it creates a type of utopia that is foreign to the world we actually live in.

To know such things are possible has us place our hope in a place where hope can be fulfilled, and not have us put our hope in a place that it most definitely cannot be fulfilled. "If I love the Lord, bad things aren't going to happen." Well most people in the Bible died badly. "Well if I put my hope in Jesus, all of my business dealings are going to work." Well no, but what you'll have is him, and he's enough regardless

of what comes your way. Then he goes on, and this is the bulk of Nehemiah's prayer out of this Deuteronomy text. Verse 29 says:

"But from there you will seek the LORD your God and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul. When you are in tribulation, and all these things come upon you in the latter days, you will return to the LORD your God and obey his voice. For the LORD your God is a merciful God. He will not leave you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers that he swore to them."

So Nehemiah's confidence, even though he's fearful in going into work and saying to King Artaxerxes, "I want to go rebuild what you guys sacked and destroyed a couple hundred years ago," is that God said if his people would turn their faces back to him and seek him, he would grant them a restoration of Judah. So he wants to go back. Where's this confidence coming from? The Word of God.

What we see Nehemiah doing in his prayer life is praying through chunks of Scripture and letting the Word of God roll back up to God. Not because God needs to be reminded of what he said, but rather *we* need to be reminded of what he said. The persistent prayers of the saints before God are not to remind God, but rather to remind *us* of what God said. So what I thought we could do in our last 10 minutes here together is do maybe a lab.

Maybe some of you are so far removed from college or didn't go to college so you don't know what a lab is. A lab is simply putting into practice what you're learning in the classroom. I thought what we could do is actually just do some of this, let the Word of God drive our prayers. I want to show you a little bit about how that works, and then I want to turn you loose to do a little bit of it before we conclude with Communion and singing unto the Lord.

So if you have your Bibles, let's go to Colossians, chapter 3. Everyone will need a Bible for this. I'm just going to start in verse 1. If you don't have one and one is not around, you can just listen to me. I'll pray these first parts, and then in the last five or six verses maybe you can keep praying what we cover. So in Colossians 3, starting in verse 1, here's how it reads. You want to read the Bible slowly. To read four chapters and not remember what you read is not a win.

Colossians, chapter 3, starting in verse 1. It says, **"If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God."** What I would do in a case like this is I would just read that sentence. I would go, "Okay, what does it mean to be raised with Christ? Okay, that means I was dead and he made me alive. That means I'm a believer in Christ." He starts this, **"If then you have been raised with Christ..."**

I'm going to already just celebrate the fact that I've been raised with Christ. God saved me. I'm surrounded by a world that's unaware of God. I am not one of those. He has pulled me out of the muck and the mire. He has rescued me. I would start praying out of the book of Colossians prayers of praise for the saving work of God in my life. He didn't have to save me. He chose to save me. Then the second part of that sentence is, "Seek the things that are above." So now I'm in my heart. "Am I seeking the things that are above?"

I know how I answer that question. "Yes, I am, and I'm nailing it." I need to now ask for the Holy Spirit to do the work of illumination. I need to pray, like David prayed in the Psalms, "Search me and know me. If there's stuff in here, let me see it." I need to pray, "Lord, are there areas of my life, are there places in which I am not seeking the things that are above, where I am much more seeking the things that are below?" I would very much find out, even today, there are many areas of my life that are consumed with *not* things that are above.

Then look at verse 2. "**Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.**" Now immediately I'm on this, "How much of my mind space is on things that are above, and how much of my mind space are things below?" I could tell you here's how I would always answer that question. What are you thinking about when you're going to bed at night, and what are you thinking about as soon as you wake up in the morning? That's your god. That's what's driving your life.

When you're laying in bed at night, that thing you're thinking about as you're falling asleep, that's what's driving you. When you wake up, that first thing to register, that's what's driving you. Maybe it's a conflict you're in right now. Maybe it's the Lord himself. Maybe it's some lust of your flesh. Whatever is in your mind is usually driving you. When you go to bed at night, when you wake up in the morning, those are times where you're alone. So this text would start to really press on me. "Where is my mind? What am I thinking about? Am I set on you, your stuff, your things, or am I consumed with things that are below?" This would lead me to do a lot of confessing and repenting.

Then he's going to throw grace on us in verse 3. "**For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.**" Relationally, the Lord and I really start clicking here, because here's what happened. "Yes, you saved me. Praise you. Thank you. Please forgive me for not being as concerned with your kingdom as I should be. Father, please forgive where my mind is, how much of my attention is going in this direction, how indifferent I seem to be over here." Then I get verse 3, that I am hidden in Christ, that when God sees me he sees Jesus. Once again, the gospel covers my shortcomings and failures and I'm back at worshipping and thanking God for salvation.

Now look at verse 5. **"Put to death therefore what is earthly in you..."** Then he gives us a list. Lists are so helpful. **"...sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness..."** So now I'm reading and I'm considering, and I'm not just considering external action. If you're church folk, you probably nail external actions, but what God is interested in is internal state of the heart. You might not have any sexual immorality that's outside of your heart and mind, but you might have tons inside of your heart and mind. That you would do business with God at this point, seeking forgiveness, asking for help. Then he continues with yet another list. We'll look at verse 7.

"In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all."

So again, you're going to want to walk through that. One thing that jumps out in this passage to me is, first, he calls my old life my "former life." I immediately begin to remember some of the guys I was partying with in my younger days have had things go a very different way than they've gone for me. I have two of those guys who have died of overdoses and one of those guys who's spending a little bit of time as a guest with the government right now.

I'm not trying to draw my life like I was thug life-ing it, because I wasn't. You just take the party scene to its nth degree and it ends badly. But the Lord was like, "That's not happening to you, Matt. I'm not letting you go that route." He rescued me, so I could now seriously point to all that and go, "That was my former life. That's not me anymore. That's not who I am. My life is hidden with Christ in God." Then I get to look through this. I've already confessed to you. I have some anger issues right now. I have some low-grade aggravation that works itself out in anger. So I need to confess that before the Lord. I need to ask the Lord for peace.

You would just slowly walk through this passage and confess what needs to be confessed, ask for help and mercy where you need it, trusting and believing he grants mercy. Then that would take us to verses 12-17. Verses 12-17 are all about putting on. We just talked about taking off, and now he starts talking about putting on. He's going to say, "Compassionate hearts." If you lack compassionate hearts, this is where we ask for it. This is where we confess we do.

The next one is kindness. Maybe you're a jerk. When you get stressed out, what you do is become a jerk to your spouse, to your coworkers, to those around you. This is the place where the Word of God meets you where you are and says simultaneously, "Don't," and "Let me take you to where you can. I want to give you

kindness. Let's leave you *lacking* kindness, and let me move you *to* kindness." Our prayer is, "Help me put on kindness. Forgive me for my lack of kindness, and help me walk in kindness."

Then we just work our way through this text. Where have we not forgiven people we need to forgive? You see that there. Where have we not put on love, and on and on we could go. Where have we failed to worship the Lord in gladness of heart, to sing unto the Lord? Where have we lacked these things? So here's what I want to do in the lab. I want to give you just a few minutes here to spend some time praying in and around this text, Colossians, chapter 3. I'm going to let you do that, and then we'll go from there.

I want our church, The Village, to be marked by a people who pray, yes, in set-aside chunks, but also let us be marked by prayer in such a way that our relationship with God flourishes and we're transformed as we behold him from one degree of glory to the next, as 1 Corinthians says. Let's go. Colossians, chapter 3. Let's get after it. Lab time.

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