

Luke writes these words concerning Jesus: “he was sought after by all the people.” This is a normal response by the people. Jesus represents a new word, a new hope and new possibilities. His voice controls the wind and waves, he heals the sick, the blind see, the lame walk and he speaks as one who has authority (who knows what they are talking about). However, with this comes the temptation to conform to the will of the people. The pressure on Jesus must have been great (remember Jesus was tempted as we are – the difference is that he did not succumb to the temptations, see Hebrews 2:17-18). One of the reasons why Jesus was able to stay “above the fray” from Luke’s perspective– ***“But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places to pray”*** (5:16 NIV).

I chose the Nehemiah passage because I see in Nehemiah some keys or directions to prayer. Here Nehemiah gives us a lesson in how to pray. First, we must admit that we stand in need of prayer, that we need directions. Nehemiah has risen to a powerful position in exile. He is cupbearer to the King. His job carries a great weight of responsibility. Exile has been good to him. He is not worried about his future, his next meal. He lives in luxury. We would say life has been good to him and in a difficult situation. It would have been easy for him to forget about his people, Israel.

However, word comes to him about the situation in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is still his city. The situation is not good and Nehemiah enters into a period of intense prayer for the city and its inhabitants. He acknowledges the sins or how things got the way they were: *“...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 house, have committed against you”* (6-7 NIV). He acknowledges they have not followed directions.

We are lost until we admit we need directions. Now, lots of men have a bad reputation about not asking for directions! I admit that this is occasionally true. However, I have no problem stopping so that the navigator can go and ask for directions! Nehemiah acknowledges that Israel lost its way. His prayer is for not only himself and his family but also for the entire nation. Like Daniel (9:5) he admits the sins of the nation. His prayer is not for God’s blessing but for God’s grace, forgiveness and restoration. We stand in need of prayer.

The second action of Nehemiah, we just mentioned: the need of confession or repentance. He admits they have failed to follow the instructions of God. I thought about the after school program. Diane will give simple, concise directions to the group. She will repeat the directions, maybe even writing them on the overhead. “Put your name and date on the paper.” She will ask the students to repeat the directions. We will then break in groups and immediately all will ask, “What are we supposed to do?” I wonder if this is how we are seen by God most days. We read the word, get the directions and then head off in the wrong direction or forget what they were in the first place. One way to define prayer is our acknowledging our need for direction and then seeking the way God would have us go. Acknowledging that we failed to follow them the last time we asked. I like 2 Peter 1:12 (my paraphrase): “I know you know

but as long as I am around I am going to keep reminding you of what you should be doing, what you know.”

The third clue I find in Nehemiah concerning prayer is that Nehemiah knew the promises of God. Nehemiah is not asking God for something that God has not promised. Deuteronomy 30:1-5 (NIV):

*When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the Lord your God disperses you among the nations, and when you and your children return to the Lord your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather and bring you back. He will bring you to the land that belonged to your fathers, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers.*

Israel has failed to follow directions. They have been scattered around the region, to the ends of the earth. Yet, there is a way back. Directions have already been given to bring them back to the land God promised. The map is there—a way back to God—they just need to turn and follow directions!

Then Nehemiah does something that I think we often fail to do. He puts his prayers into action. We pray that the hungry be fed but then don't give money or food to food banks nor do we volunteer to help in our soup kitchens. We say we want all to be healed and then we rebel against programs that will provide health care to those in need of it. We pray for peace and then refuse to get along with our neighbor next door or in the next pew. We can carry the list on and on – but you get the point – we pray but don't put any action to our prayers. Nehemiah puts his prayers into action. He waits for the right time, he has prayed for it. When the king gives him an opportunity he shares his concerns about Jerusalem with the king and with boldness asks the king to let him use lumber from the king's forest to rebuild the city! Talk about boldness!

There is nothing wrong in telling God what we would like. Maybe the adage: “Want to make God laugh? Tell God your plans,” is not a good one. If Scripture is correct and God is in partnership with us, God wants to hear from the other side of the partnership. Jesus, Luke tells us, “often went to a lonely place to pray.” Here was Jesus in dialogue with God. Telling God his hopes and dreams. Remember the Garden prayer? Jesus asked that the cup might pass from him. Is there another way? What if? But then he was willing to follow the directions set forth by God. We should tell God our plans. Let God know our hopes and dreams. But then, we need to be willing to listen to God's side of the equation. Nehemiah was willing to put God's plans into action. Jesus sought a solitary place to pray. They both stopped and asked directions!

What are your plans for tomorrow? Have you shared them with God? Your plans and God's may be close. We must learn to stop and ask directions. It is, as the spiritual puts so simply, “It's me, it's me O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.”