

## **Introduction**

Welcome to our *Back to School with God* service! Today our emphasis is on getting ready for a new school year. We want to focus on our children and young people, and those who work in our school communities. They are very important to us, and we want to stand with them in prayer as they start a new school year.

Our Bible story is about a man called Nehemiah. He was a cupbearer to the king (hold up a wine glass or goblet). This cup tells us who he is. Let's think for a few moments of the kind of things people use in relation to schools, and the type of job they do. (Note: *Use volunteers, invited beforehand, children and adults involved in schools, to come out at this point and hold a prop. In turn they should state what 'job' they are representing and lead the opening prayer which follows.*)

Schoolbag: Pupil/student

Mop: Janitor/caretaker

Ladle: Dinner lady

Timetable: Headteacher

Text book: Teacher

Tablet/ Laptop: Admin. assistant

Whether we are at school, at home, or at play,  
God wants us to worship him with our lives.

If you are here today and are in one of these  
roles would you please stand because I would  
like to pray for you all.

## **Bible Reading**

### **Teaching 1: *Looking up!***

When was the last time you heard something  
that made you just want to hang your head?  
Sometimes we hear news which stops us in our  
tracks, perhaps makes us groan, start to cry... or  
maybe leaves us speechless. Hopefully not  
when someone told you it was time to go back  
to school after the summer!

Our Bible account has Nehemiah facing  
terrible news. Nehemiah worked for the King  
of Persia, although Nehemiah's family was  
not originally from Persia but from Jerusalem.  
As cupbearer to the King his job was very  
important: he protected and served the king  
by making sure his wine wasn't poisoned. One  
day his brother came to him with news from  
his homeland. The great city of Jerusalem was

in ruins...the gates burned, the walls broken down. Nehemiah's own people, the Jews, were 'in trouble and shame' (verse 3).

So what did Nehemiah do? We find it in verse 4 of chapter 1: *'When I heard these things, I sat down and cried for several days. I was sad and ate nothing.'* Weeping, mourning, fasting, praying. Is that what you would expect? After all, Nehemiah isn't in Jerusalem, he is in a citadel in Susa, a long way from Jerusalem. He has a good job, working for the king. Wouldn't it have been reasonable for Nehemiah to think, 'Yes, that *was* my homeland, but that's life! There's no use in harping back to the old days. Jerusalem has gone, and I have made a new life here. It's a shame, but I have other priorities now.'

But no! He doesn't do that. Nehemiah's heart is for God, not just for his own situation, comfort and wellbeing. He knows too much about the God he serves to hear news like that and not act. Nehemiah is far from thinking, 'It's not my problem!' His heart is heavy as he knows God is upset about this situation too. He cares about those God cares

for... the struggling, the weak, and those who have lost hope.

And so, instead of hanging his head... he **looks up**. He lifts his head to heaven. Do you notice how Nehemiah prays in verse 5? *'Lord, God of Heaven, you are the great God who is to be respected. You are loyal, and you keep your agreement with those who love you and obey your commands.'* Nehemiah starts his prayers this way not because he is aware of God's home address, but because he is fully aware that the God he is speaking to is totally in control; he is all powerful, a God who keeps his promises, who forgives, who restores and who knows every single thing. Nothing is a surprise to this God. He is the God of heaven!

This is the God we know in Jesus as our Saviour, our Redeemer, our coming-again King. Nothing is impossible for him. Can you see how it changes **everything** when we become aware of who God is? We can look away from just trusting in our own power! Knowing that, Nehemiah is spurred on in his prayers... his prayers aren't just bouncing off

the ceiling, they are going straight into the throne room of heaven, being heard by our all-powerful God.

Nehemiah had a good job. Things were going well for him; he was miles away in Persia. But he was so troubled and upset by what he heard that he wept and cried to God about it. Suppose you got news from your school. What would be good news, and what would be sad news that would make you hang your head? (*provide your own local example*). Who is struggling? The God of Heaven sees and knows. **No** situation is hopeless. We have a powerful God. Look up — and look to him.

## **Video      Time lapse of plant growing**

### **Teaching 2: *Praying Long and Hard!***

Some things take a very long time to happen. You need to wait a long time before you see a plant grow, or a chick turn into a hen. Our prayers are not always answered immediately. Nehemiah prayed **long and hard**. Chapter 1 verse 4 says, *For some days he mourned and*

*fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.'* It was about *four months later* that Nehemiah began to see his prayers being answered, when the king asked him what was wrong. Even when nothing seemed to be happening, Nehemiah kept on praying. Even when nothing seemed to be happening, God was at work.

Praying long and hard isn't that simple. George Muller lived in the 1800s. He is well known for setting up 117 schools which offered Christian education to over 120,000 children, many of them orphans. Every day he used to try and pray when he woke up. He said, "...after having suffered much from wandering of mind for the first ten minutes or a quarter of an hour...I only then began really to pray." Reading and thinking about the Bible *before he prayed* made praying much easier: "I did not, as it were, give myself to prayer but to meditation, yet it turned almost immediately more or less into prayer." He started to use the Bible as fuel for his prayers. This made a huge difference.

So how can we make sure we don't run out of steam with our prayers, especially when nothing seems to be happening? Reading the Bible before we pray reminds us of our own weakness compared to the greatness of God. We are then able to *look up*, like Nehemiah did. We are then able, like Nehemiah, to remember what God has done in the past and all the promises he has made. This then gives us the confidence to pray long and hard.

We can also learn from the way Nehemiah prays. Firstly, he says '**THANK YOU**' to God. What things can we say 'thank you' to God for today?; not just thanks for the things we have, but thanks for what God has done, and what he is like?

Nehemiah then says '**SORRY**' in verse 6: *'I confess the sins we Israelites have done against you. My father's family and I have sinned against you.'* For God to hear and answer, his heart needed to be right with God. We have a clearer way than Nehemiah of being put right with God, through the Lord Jesus. Jesus offers us forgiveness through the

cross, where he paid the price for our sin. 1 John 1:8 says, *"If we confess our sins, he will forgive our sins, because we can trust God to do what is right. He will cleanse us from all the wrongs we have done."* Isn't that marvellous?!

Made clean, we can then ask God for what we need. Nehemiah goes on to pray **'PLEASE'**... praying long and hard for something in particular. Nehemiah cared for Jerusalem and the needs of its people. He was thinking of real situations, and real people. He had particular things he wanted God to do. He didn't just pray 'God bless so-and-so', almost without thinking. He stopped and thought about what God would like to happen.

Praying long and hard isn't easy! Nehemiah prayed with passion: he was desperate for God to answer. So keep asking. Remember the way Nehemiah prayed, as we can use the same model of prayer today: **T** for thanks, **S** for sorry, **P** for please. The initials spell 'tsp', which is short for 'teaspoon', so they are called teaspoon prayers!



Think for a few minutes. Is there a situation at school which seems impossible? Is there something you are really worrying about? Is there a need for a new way forward; a change of heart or action, or attitude? Keep praying, long and hard. Faith in God means that we know he knows, he cares and is working away in the background in a way we cannot see. Even when an answer is slow to come, trust that God is at work.

### **Activity: test your reflexes**

### **Teaching 3: *Praying Short and Sharp!***

What is Nehemiah's natural reflex? It is prayer. He has the opportunity he has waited for; the king has asked him what he wants. Before he speaks to the king, however, he speaks to the King of Kings! We read in chapter 2 verse 4, '*First I prayed to the God of heaven.*' This is not the long, hard praying of the previous four months...this is a short and sharp arrow prayer quickly fired up to heaven. We know from what happens next in the story that God heard, and answered.

Nehemiah shows us that we should '*Pray at all times with all kinds of prayers*', which is what Paul urges us to do in Ephesians 6:18. Sometimes we need to spend time alone with God, pouring out our hearts to him. At other times we only have time for a short, sharp prayer for help.

God hears us when we are busy as well as when we are quiet and still. Nehemiah is a praying person *and* a doing person. When he heard the news he prayed, prayed and kept on praying, while still doing his work as cupbearer to the king. Nehemiah then moved on to a new task God gave him, to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. At the end of chapter 2 we see Nehemiah out and about in Jerusalem, seeing what God has for him to do and still praying about it. Prayer isn't just words, but action. Nehemiah did something: he got stuck in and worked hard. Prayer was part of everyday life, part of who he was.

Whether you are a pupil, a teacher, or someone else in the school community — this is God's work for you! Nehemiah helped others believe that with

God's help they could do it. God's help was needed because it was a challenge. There were enemies who laughed at them and tried to stop them.

**Imagine you are walking to school feeling worried about a difficult day ahead... say an arrow prayer. Imagine you are the teacher with a challenging class to teach... send up an arrow prayer as the children come into the room. Imagine you're the head teacher/principal at your desk taking calls and trying to balance the budget... stop and quickly pray for wisdom.**

In verse 20, despite the laughter of his enemies, Nehemiah declared, 'The God of heaven will give us success.' This is true for you too if you go back to school this week with God at your side, ready to work hard for him.

### **Response: Prayers for the school community**

In answer to Nehemiah's prayer, God sent people to help him. The crowd responded positively and shouted: 'let's start rebuilding!' He had people with him, cheering him on, helping him complete the task. As you get stuck into school, be strengthened by our prayers. We are here

today to support you, encourage you, and pray for you. Like Nehemiah, be confident that God is with you. May the God of heaven give you success!

Just like Nehemiah committed the project of rebuilding the walls into God's hands, as a church family we commit to pray for our schools and those in them.