Secret #10

Send God Heavenly Telegrams

The Prayer Life of Nehemiah

Come with me back to the year 445 B.C. Nehemiah, a Jew who has risen to royal prominence in the Persian Empire as the official cupbearer to the king, is meditating on the history of his people over the last century and a half. The thoughts are painful. He ponders the nightmare of 586 B.C., when King Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian army marched into the holy city of Jerusalem, destroyed the sacred temple, and forced the Jews into exile.

But the Lord had his plan. Just as the prophet Jeremiah had predicted, the captivity lasted seventy years, after which the Jews were free to return home. Their first matter of business was to rebuild the temple. From that time until Nehemiah's day—more than seventy years—almost nothing had been done to restore the walls of Jerusalem.

One of Nehemiah's brothers came from Jerusalem to visit him. He explained that the Jewish people were distressed and mistreated because the walls and gates of Jerusalem had been burned to the ground.

Hearing that, Nehemiah could do only one thing—pray. When we compare the opening verses of chapters 1 and 2, we learn that his prayer continued for four months.

Then King Artaxerxes called Nehemiah to sample his wine. Grief for his people covered Nehemiah's face. This appearance was dangerous because Scripture says in another place that it was against the law for anyone to appear sad or upset in front of a Persian king (Esther 4:1–2). Secular history reports that King Artaxerxes was an unpredictable man

who placed himself at the mercy of his whimsical feelings. He could have sentenced Nehemiah to death if he had been in the mood.

When the king noticed Nehemiah's sorrow, he inquired about it. The man of God admitted that he was troubled over the condition of his nation's capital. God's hand was on the king, for his heart went out to Nehemiah, and he asked him what he wanted to do about his burden. At that point, Nehemiah probably wondered, *Is this God's open door to send me to Jerusalem? Is this the answer to my four months of prayer?*

He jumped at his opportunity and asked for permission to travel to the holy city and rebuild its walls. But just before he made his request, he breathed a prayer to God. The king never noticed it. Nehemiah's lips didn't move, his head didn't bow, and his eyes didn't close. No one knew anything about this prayer until years later, when Nehemiah wrote of this moment as follows: "The king said to me, 'What is it you want?' Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king" (Neh. 2:4–5).

This prayer was sandwiched between the king's question and his cupbearer's answer. I think that it was the shortest prayer in the Bible. It might not have contained any words at all. It was what James Montgomery had in mind when he wrote:

> Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,
> Uttered or unexpressed;
> The motion of a hidden fire
> That trembles in the breast.
>
> Prayer is the burden of a sigh,
> The falling of a tear;
> The upward glancing of an eye,
> When none but God is near.
>
> —James Montgomery, 1818

Nehemiah's prayer jumped out of his heart on a moment's notice. We could call it a dart prayer, a missile prayer, an arrow prayer, or a heavenly telegram. This wasn't the only time he prayed this way. Scripture records nine other heavenly telegrams that Nehemiah sent to God. They are found in the following passages:

- Nehemiah 4:4–5
- Nehemiah 4:9
- Nehemiah 5:19
- Nehemiah 6:9
- Nehemiah 6:14
- Nehemiah 13:14
- Nehemiah 13:22
- Nehemiah 13:29
- Nehemiah 13:31

The only telegrams I've ever received are the imitation ones sent out by those phony sweepstakes companies, informing me that I've won something—if I'll pay a fee to receive it. But if someone should ever send me a real telegram, I'll know instantly that it must be important news.

I think that's the way God looks at our telegram prayers. He takes them seriously as important business. Therefore, I want to recommend them to you.

Why Should We Send God Heavenly Telegrams?

It's always good to have reasons for the habits we practice, and here we can point to several. First, *the heavenly telegram is the most convenient form of prayer.* We can pray this way at any time and in any place.

Nehemiah was involved in the most important conversation of his life when the king asked him about his sadness. He knew he didn't

have quality time to pray, and he had *no* time to get down on his knees. But he knew how to send God a heavenly telegram.

Whenever I teach God's Word, I know that I'm in the thick of spiritual warfare. The Devil would like my listeners to daydream or at least take my words with a grain of salt. I'm also aware that the goal of preaching, which is to change lives, is beyond the power of my human strength. So while I'm speaking to my people, I'm saying to the Lord, "Let them hear your voice" or "Give them eyes to see" or "Don't let Satan have his way in their lives!"

I advise you to pray that way when you're sharing Christ with a nonbeliever. Don't just bear witness; intercede in prayer, too. Because you're doing both at the same time, your requests must be brief—but they'll also be blessed.

Second, we should send heavenly telegrams because *they keep us in continuous fellowship with Christ.* You might be in an office, a school, or out on the road all day. But no matter how busy you are, you can still fill your day with prayer.

The United States Supreme Court has outlawed prayer in public schools, but they can't possibly outlaw heavenly telegrams. As long as there are math tests, there will be prayer in schools! Students will be sending heavenly telegrams that say, "Help me, Lord!" or "Clear my mind, Lord!" or "Let me show what I've learned."

Talk about a busy man! While he was rebuilding Jerusalem's wall, Nehemiah had to work with one hand and fight off enemies with a weapon in his other hand (Neh. 4:17). He said, "My work is too important to stop. . . . I cannot afford to slow down" (Neh. 6:3 CEV). He worked so hard that he and his helpers completed the project in a mere fifty-two days (Neh. 6:15). Yet in spite of his busy schedule, Nehemiah was able to saturate the entire endeavor with prayer.

The apostle Paul told us to "pray continually" (1 Thess. 5:17). Many Christians wonder how that is possible. If your prayer life is so narrow that you won't speak to God unless you have a season of time in which

to do it, then Paul's command is impossible. But if you make a habit of shooting up dart prayers to the Lord, you can remain in constant fellowship with him.

Third, we should practice brief prayers because *they are effective.* Although Nehemiah's prayer in the king's presence was merely a lifting of his eyes to heaven, it was so powerful that he remembered it twenty years later when he wrote his book. King Artaxerxes not only agreed to let Nehemiah leave for Jerusalem but also gave him army officers and troops to protect him and enough timber to rebuild Jerusalem's wall and construct a house for himself. He even appointed Nehemiah governor of Jerusalem.

Moreover, by granting Nehemiah's request, the king unknowingly fulfilled the first part of Daniel 9:25. This action set in motion a specific time period before the coming of the Messiah. So it was through this dart prayer that a prophecy of Jesus Christ was fulfilled.

Jesus told about a scoundrel who prayed, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). So few words, but God heard every one of them and forgave all of the sins that man had committed (Luke 18:14).

When our Lord was dying on the cross, one of the thieves who was crucified next to him said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). In both English and the original Greek, that prayer was only nine words long. But it evoked this response from our Lord: "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

So don't assume that brief prayers have no significance with God. He cares very much about our faintest prayers and loves to answer them. Even little prayers about small things bring great results. Eternity alone will reveal the wonders God is accomplishing right now in answer to the heavenly telegrams we send up for others and ourselves.

Another reason to launch prayer missiles is that *they prevent us from showing off.* Nehemiah never performed a miracle, yet he overcame enormous opposition as he served his Lord. His life might not impress

us as much as the life of Moses or Elijah, but his prayers were just as mighty.

Jesus warned us not to place our prayers on parade. He told us not to heap up needless phrases or to pray in public places to be admired (Matt. 6:5). All too often in conversational group prayer we feel the temptation to impress people with our petitions. But this pageantry of prayer is nonexistent when you send a telegram to heaven. It's so short and usually silent that other people won't notice it.

A final reason to send God heavenly telegrams is that *they can be a Christian antidote to Satan's poison.* Have you ever stopped to think that when someone pronounces God's damnation on another person, he or she is praying for God's judgment? That's a perversion of a dart prayer. We need a Christian countermeasure to check this profanity. Why not cultivate the habit of saying, "God bless you"? Especially if we used to call down God's *curse* on others, now that we're converted we can pray for his *blessings* to rest on them.

Even the Devil launches his "flaming arrows" against people (Eph. 6:16), so we Christians should be sending up heavenly arrows. When Satan shoots an arrow of temptation against us, we can shoot an arrow prayer to God. When someone utters a curse, we can counter it with a plea for God's blessing.

When Should We Send God Heavenly Telegrams?

We can send God a heavenly telegram anytime, but I think that on certain occasions they are especially appropriate. First, we should send a heavenly telegram *when we want to thank God.* "Thank you, Lord!" is an arrow that we should shoot up to heaven often.

When I visit and pray for suffering people in the hospital, I almost always breathe another prayer of thanks to God as I walk out of the building. On several occasions, I've been the patient in the hospital, confined to a bed. I know something of what it's like to be

the sufferer. So I'm grateful when I can be the visitor, encourager, and minister.

Every time a certain man in our church takes either the bread or the cup of the Lord's Supper, I hear him say quietly, "Thank you, Jesus." He can't help himself! The next time God sends you a blessing, take a moment to say, even if it's only in your heart, "Praise the Lord!" or "Thank you, Jesus."

At the Last Supper, Jesus took the cup, representing his shed blood on the cross, and gave thanks for it (Matt. 26:27). That has to be the greatest example of thanks in Scripture. If our Lord could thank the Father for his death at Calvary, surely you and I should be able to thank him in any situation.

Second, heavenly telegrams come in handy *when danger is near.* In Nehemiah's fourth chapter, a mob riot nearly broke out because his enemies didn't like the progress he was making on the wall. As he recounted his danger, Nehemiah wrote, "But we prayed to our God" (Neh. 4:9).

Think back to when Jesus' disciples were caught in a storm at sea in the middle of the night. They rushed over to Jesus, woke him, and cried out, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!" In response to that brief petition, Jesus stood up, rebuked the wind and waves, and the sea became perfectly calm (Matt. 8:25–26).

Again, recall when Peter was walking on the water toward Christ. After a wave slapped him in the face, he began to sink. But as he was going down, he called out three words: "Lord, save me!" And in the next instant, Jesus rescued him from a watery grave (Matt. 14:30–31).

Years ago I was driving toward an intersection where the light was yellow. I had a tough decision to make: whether to slam on the brakes or to try making it through the light. Another car was heading toward the same intersection at a ninety-degree angle to me. Its driver could see that her red light was about to turn green, so she didn't slow down.

I was in the intersection when the light turned red, and she was

entering it at the moment it turned green for her. She hit the rear fender of my car. I had three passengers with me and was terribly embarrassed. I pulled over to the side of the road, and before we stepped out of the car, I pitched up a dart prayer to God. "Lord, thanks that we're not hurt, and please let the people in the other car be free from injury, too."

God gave a surprising answer to that prayer. The two women in the other car were unhurt. A police officer witnessed the accident but issued neither the other driver nor me a ticket. And because the same insurance company covered both the other driver and me, neither of us had to pay a deductible on the claim!

A friend of mine fell about ten feet from a tree in his backyard. He later told me that in that instant before he hit the ground, he prayed, "God, help me!" And sure enough, he escaped injury.

When danger threatens you, lift your spirit to God. Your prayer can reach heaven and back before the crisis hits.

Third, we should remember to pray this way *when discouragement sets in.* Two occasions are included in the story of Nehemiah when discouragement threatened him. In chapter 4 of the book, his enemies ridiculed the builders, accusing them of using charred stones. They laughed and said that if even a fox walked on their newly constructed wall, it would collapse.

That's when Nehemiah shot up a dart prayer. In it, he admitted to God that the builders had been demoralized (Neh. 4:4–5). But in answer to his prayer, the heavenly Father gave them fresh strength to persevere.

In the sixth chapter, Sanballat sent a servant to slander Nehemiah in front of the other workers. He concocted a story about Nehemiah's wanting to overthrow the government and become a king. Our friend answered that he knew his enemies were trying to discourage the laborers and abort the work. Then he prayed, "Now strengthen my hands" (Neh. 6:9).

That prayer is only four words long in both Hebrew and English, yet God did strengthen his hands and save him and his men from

discouragement. In *The Living Bible,* the prayer is placed in a parenthesis. The Holy Spirit wants us to see that we can pray under our breath whenever discouragement hits.

What threatens to sink your spirits? Maybe you're already discouraged. Have you prayed about it, even with a brief, heavenly telegram? If you feel like quitting in a task the Lord has given you, admit that and ask God to infuse you with fresh strength. If Nehemiah had given up, the Jerusalem wall would have remained in ruins, the Jewish people would have missed their revival, and the book of Nehemiah would never have been penned.

Think how much we have to lose by throwing in the towel when God has told us to persevere. We owe it to him to pray when discouragement threatens to devour us.

Again, we should shoot up a dart prayer *when chaos reigns.* The last chapter of Nehemiah's book illustrates this point. So many mixed marriages had occurred among his people that the children growing up couldn't speak Hebrew. They were conversing in a hodgepodge of languages. Even the grandson of the high priest had married into the family of Nehemiah's worst enemy, Sanballat, who had tried to overthrow the rebuilding of Jerusalem's wall.

In the face of this confusion, Nehemiah shot up this arrow prayer: "Remember them, O my God, because they defiled the priestly office and the covenant of the priesthood and of the Levites" (Neh. 13:29).

We find another example of this from the life of Moses. In the fourteenth chapter of Exodus, Moses and the Israelites had just escaped from Egyptian slavery. As they left Egypt, they ran up against the Red Sea while Pharaoh and his army were closing in on them from behind. Moses and the people of Israel seemed to be in a doomed position, but by faith Moses promised that the Lord would fight for them.

Then God asked Moses, "Why are you crying out to me?" (Exod. 14:15). Oddly, no record exists that Moses cried out to God at all. He had been talking to the Hebrews, not to the Lord.

Or so it seemed. While Moses spoke to the people, he was also praying in his heart. And God granted his prayer by parting the Red Sea. This was another dart prayer that was not recorded in words. Maybe it had none. It might have been only a frightened look up to heaven, as if to ask for help. No one knew anything about Moses' prayer on this occasion, yet God performed a miracle in answer to it.

Maybe your life is a shambles right now. When you feel the chaos threatening from all sides, take a deep breath and let out a prayer to your Lord.

When the housework is endless and the children mess up their rooms faster than you can clean them, send a wire to God, pleading for patience.

When the checkbook won't balance and the bills are backing up on you, don't be so frantic that you can't lift up a prayer.

When someone is getting on your nerves and you're ready to blow your stack, quickly ask the Lord to help you keep your cool. He is a God of order, so we should go to him when our lives are in disorder.

Action Steps

Now that you understand Nehemiah's favorite form of prayer, follow through in two ways. First, *practice sending God your own heavenly telegrams.* Nehemiah's example is one that we should follow, not just admire. Here are some suggestions for when and how you can pray this way.

- When you wake up, breathe this prayer: "Good morning, Lord!"
- When you get in your car, before you turn on your engine, pause and pray, "Lord, keep me alert at the wheel and safe on the road."
- When you see an enemy, pray, "Father, let your love flow through me."
- When you talk to a nonbeliever, tell the Holy Spirit at the same time, "Reveal Christ to this person."

- When you come to your place of work, begin by saying, "Use me, Lord, for your glory."
- When a friend comes to your mind, make this request: "Father, meet this person's need, whatever that may be."
- When you walk into your church, pray, "Prepare my heart, Father, for whatever you want to say to me here today."
- When you come to the end of your day, lift your eyes to heaven and say, "Thank you, Father, for the many ways you showed me grace today."

Once you get into the habit of praying this way, *don't limit your prayer life to heavenly telegrams.* This wasn't the only method of prayer that Nehemiah practiced. I remind you of his four-month prayer in chapter 1 of his book. We might compare dart prayers to between-meal snacks. They satisfy us for the time being and fulfill a need, but we wouldn't want to live on them alone.

Still, cultivate the habit of sending heavenly telegrams. They touch God's heart because they come from ours.

Study Guide

1. What do all of the heavenly telegrams that Nehemiah sent up tell you about his relationship with God?
2. Which of the reasons given in this chapter to send up heavenly telegrams most appeals to you? Why?
3. The word *remember* occurs often in Nehemiah's heavenly telegrams (Neh. 5:19; 6:14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31). In each of the following verses, what does God command us to remember?

   • Exodus 20:8
   • Deuteronomy 15:15
   • Ecclesiastes 12:1

- Luke 17:32
- 2 Timothy 2:8
- Hebrews 13:7
- Jude 17

4. The heavenly telegram in Nehemiah 6:9 is "Now strengthen my hands." For what specific task that God has given you do you need to pray, "Strengthen my hands"?
5. Read the disciples' dart prayer to Jesus in Mark 4:38. Two verses later, Jesus rebuked them for having no faith. How do you think their dart prayer would have been different if they had shown great faith?
6. Read the dart prayer in Luke 23:42, and note its answer in the next verse. In Luke 23:39, the other thief who died with Jesus also sent him a dart prayer in which he asked for salvation, but Jesus didn't save him. Why not?
7. Read Jesus' heavenly telegram in Luke 23:34. Did God forgive Jesus' murderers as he requested? If so, when?
8. Compare Stephen's heavenly telegram in Acts 7:60 with that of Jesus in Luke 23:34. If you had been Stephen—dying as a martyr for your faith in Christ—for what do you think you would have prayed?
9. In Jesus' dart prayer in Luke 23:46, he committed his spirit into his heavenly Father's hands. What specific trial or problem do you need to let go and entrust into your heavenly Father's hands?
10. In each of the following verses, what do the hands of either Jesus or God the Father do?

- Mark 10:16
- John 10:27–30
- Romans 10:21
- Hebrews 10:30–31
- 1 Peter 5:6

Secret #11

Give God Your Best

The Prayer Life of Daniel

Six-year-old Josh asked his friend Megan if she'd like to trade her bag of candy for his bag of marbles. Megan gladly agreed. Josh went home to get his bag of marbles and realized that he couldn't bear to part with some of them. So he took three of his favorite marbles and hid them under his pillow.

Josh and Megan made the trade, and Megan never knew that Josh had cheated her. That night Megan slept soundly, but Josh had no peace. Wide awake, he couldn't help wondering, *Did Megan keep her best candy, too?*

Like Josh with Megan, many of us wonder, *Has God given me his best?* The cross on Calvary's hill assures us that he has. It also guarantees that God will continue to give us his best. That's the promise of Romans 8:32: "God did not keep back his own Son, but he gave him for us. If God did this, won't he freely give us everything else?" (CEV).

Rather than ask if God has given us his best, we should ask, "Have I given God *my* best?" Someone in the Bible who gave God his best was Daniel. His prayer life serves as an example. In six ways it illustrates how we can give God our best in our prayer lives.

Pray As a First Resort

In the second chapter of Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar was frightened by a nightmare and asked his wise men to tell him both the content and the interpretation of his dream. When they confessed their inability to tell the king his dream, the king sentenced them to death.