Today we start a new sermon series on the book of Nehemiah. This will be eleven messages that will cover the thirteen chapters of the book. Through this series, we will learn about powerful prayer, teamwork, overcoming discouragement and distractions, setting up priorities, building a legacy, and looking into the future with hope.

The book of Nehemiah is a fascinating one with great lessons that apply to us individually anywhere in our lives and as a community, whether it is at church, work, school, or within our family.

The central theme in Nehemiah is that when we align ourselves with God’s wisdom and purposes, we can overcome any obstacle and have great success in our lives. You will notice that Nehemiah and his followers do what seems impossible because they were doing what God called them to do because they believed it was the right thing to do. Amazing things can happen when there is such conviction in our hearts, a calling, and a purpose.

And that is actually the title of this series, “Amazing Things Can Happen.” I know these messages will speak to us because, just as with Nehemiah, we have struggled with challenges and setbacks that discourage us from building our lives up. But we know we can’t give up on life. We must do something to make things better for ourselves, the people we love, and those around us. We should want that.

So, do you have a conviction that something needs to change in your life? What are your concerns? If you want to change things and make them better, you are alive and moving. First, however, there must be a sense of urgency that compels us to act. And the key is to have the proper perspective and a sharpened vision, so we know what to do. This is what Nehemiah can teach us about.

As we study the book of Nehemiah, we will learn powerful principles that will guide us in our lives. The first principle is prayer because that is how the book starts, with a prayer. Therefore, today’s message is Amazing Things Can Happen When We Pray. Here is the story of Nehemiah, chapter 1,

“The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. In the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem. They replied, “The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire.” When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven. 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 your servants, the people of Israel, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned. We have offended you deeply, failing to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, ‘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 under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place at which I have chosen to establish my name.’ They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great power and 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 in revering your name. Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man!” At the time, I was cupbearer to the king.”

The historical context of this story happens in the 5th century B.C. About 100 years ago, the Babylonians conquered and destroyed Jerusalem, and Nehemiah finds it still in ruins as he had lived in a foreign land of his life. The city and the Temple walls were all destroyed, their treasures looted, and their people taken away. A terrible reality of sadness, loss, and anger.

For example, just imagine that some people came into your home and not only robbed your stuff but also took away the doors, windows, and even walls of your house. Not even your pet was spared. You are not safe there anymore, but where else would you go if there is nowhere else to go because it did not only happen to you, but to everyone else in your country. And then, many years after that, some of your grandchildren that grew up away learn about it and are shocked by the news and begin to figure out what to do to give you back your home. That is what is going on here, and Nehemiah is like that grandchild.

In the face of such overwhelming and heart-breaking news, Nehemiah’s response was to pray. As he learns about the ruin of Jerusalem, he prays to God, “O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man!”

Nehemiah prayed like this for months, confessing the sins of Israel, asking God to remember his Covenant with his people, and asking God for favor and success to rebuild the city of his ancestors.

What do we make of all this? And what does it teach us about prayer?

We often pray when we need something, are afraid, or as our last resource (it would be nice if we did not wait until the last minute, though). This tells us something very significant: somehow, we know in our hearts that we are not alone and that there is someone out there that cares and can help us. For example, we often find refuge and strength in prayer when we feel lost with an ache in our hearts due to a tragic loss. Other times, prayer gives us discernment to choose wisely about actions we need to take. Whatever may be the case, the important thing is that we reach out to God.

This means that prayer, whether we are religious people or not, happens naturally when we are in dire need, want to do the right thing, and really want to connect with our Creator.

I understand prayer as the disposition of the mind and heart to open ourselves to God and the possibilities when we let God be in charge. Prayer is like saying to God, “Is it possible?” opening ourselves to whatever God has to say.

That is what I see Nehemiah doing, saying: “God, we need you. Only you can give us the strength and favor we need to accomplish such an impossible task.” If you notice, not only is Nehemiah opened to God’s possibilities, but there is also a clear sense of urgency because there is a grave concern that needs to be addressed. He had many reasons to be bitter and hopeless, have no vision, and be filled with fears, but he chose prayer to seek direction and strength to find possibilities in what seemed a hopeless cause. (Nothing is hopeless with God.)

This is a significant observation because when we pray, an amazing thing happens: we gain a divine perspective of things. All of a sudden, we are not facing life alone anymore because prayer connects with God. Prayer also widens and sharpens our vision about life, and we can see not only with more clarity but also a whole lot more. When we experience this, our fears and anxieties take a back seat in ways that are hard to explain, but what is true is that we are relieved of chains and are set free. All because we pray.

Here is an important question and observation: What made Nehemiah’s prayer so powerful? He was moved to pray with urgency by a concern. His was not a mundane and casual prayer.

Consider this. As the cupbearer of the King, he had a comfortable job that provided everything he needed. And yet, when one of his brothers returned from a road trip to Jerusalem, Nehemiah questioned “them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem.” Nehemiah was greatly concerned about what was happening in Jerusalem. He could have insulated himself if he chose to, but he didn’t. Instead, he requested to know the condition of his people because he cared.

This is an important point. It is so easy to stay uninvolved and unaware of what is happening around us if it does not affect us. Even though Nehemiah had never been to Jerusalem, he had heard stories about it and knew that his ancestors had been led away in chains when Babylon destroyed it. So, as he listened to the report, he tried to imagine the shame and began to weep. Deep compassion moved his heart. That is what makes prayer powerful: when it comes from the heart.

Friends, we can’t expect things to get better in our lives if we are not concerned about the problems we face and pray about them. We can’t expect things to get better around us if our hearts are indifferent to the plight we see. So often, we become complacent with the rubble and stop trying anymore. The only way we can improve our lives is by getting concerned about the things that dimmish us and committing to seeking direction and strength to change them.

That is the way Nehemiah prayed. He had a conviction that God was good and would respond to a just prayer. He was humbled in confessing the sins of his ancestors but also confident in God’s grace to help them. And ultimately, he was committed to the process and to helping in every way he could.

You see, the true measure of our concern is whether we are willing to commit to getting involved in what we are asking. Imagine praying to God, “Please, do this for me and tell me when it is done.” Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Pray as if everything depends on God, then work as if everything depends on you.” This means that a powerful prayer is one where what we ask, we are also willing to do.

Here is the good news and the invitation today: God always listens and wants to get involved in your life to bless you and give you wisdom and strength to make things better for you and those around you. Our part is to be moved by the needs and concerns and act with urgency to address them, to change things for the better.

What concerns you today? Do you have a sense of urgency? God is always listening.