

# The Conviction and Essence of Godly Prayer

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Preacher: Steve Murphy

[ 0 : 00 ]     Okay, before we pray, I would like to introduce today's guest speaker. We are very privileged to have a guest speaker with us today, Steve Murphy.

And if you recognize the surname, we share the same surname, and that is because Steve happens to be my father. My dad is in town for business, and when I heard that he was coming through Hong Kong a few months ago, I said, we'd love to have you preach and open God's Word to us this morning.

And so let me just tell you one or two things about my dad. Where should I start? I think that the enduring memory or probably the thing that sticks in my mind the most about my father is he is a man who, as long as I can remember, about 35 years or so, is someone who fears God and has loved His Word.

From a very young age, I remember walking through the house in the early hours of the morning, and there was my dad on his knees before the scriptures in prayer. He's a man that fears God and loves His Word. And my dad's also been an outstanding husband to my mom for almost 40 years.

And in addition to that, has been the greatest father that you could ever imagine. And I don't just say that. I genuinely mean that. And in addition to that, my dad is probably one of my very best friends.

[ 1 : 27 ]     And dad, I love you so much, and it's a pity that we get to live so far away from each other. My dad's living in Cape Town with my mom at the moment, but it's wonderful to have you in Hong Kong.

But I think there's one other thing that would be good for us to know is my dad, in some ways, has been involved in church leadership for much of his adult life. He's been an elder in many churches in many parts of the world, pastored a church in Vietnam for seven years, but has also been a businessman his whole life.

And currently he's the CEO of a big reinsurance and financial services company in Africa. And so has managed to balance this thing of having a vibrant faith and serving the community and also a busy work life, which I know in Hong Kong is often very difficult for us, right?

Work life in Hong Kong is very demanding. My dad is someone who's managed to manage that busy work life, serving in church, and also being a very faithful husband and father. And so dad, it really is a great privilege to have you sharing God's Word with us this morning.

I'm looking forward to it. So on that note, let me pray for us, and then we're going to listen to the reading of God's Word, and then we will listen to the preaching. So let's, will you join me as we pray together this morning?

[ 2 : 38 ]     Heavenly Father, great and glorious God, we come before you this morning to adore you and to praise your great name. Father, it is in worshiping you and ascribing honor and glory to your name that we align our hearts with what is true, and that we discover what it means to be fully human.

And so it is our joy and our privilege to worship you today. Oh, great God, maker of heaven and earth, you who created the galaxies and the planets, stars and moons and further space, you who billions of years ago spoke into existence that which we have not even yet discovered.

Father, we humble ourselves before you and we say that you are God and we are not. You are glorious and worthy of worship, and we do that joyfully this morning. How majestic is your name, oh God.

How glorious are your ways. Father, this morning we acknowledge our brokenness to you and we confess our sin. God, we get angry and we hold grudges.

We feel aggrieved when embarrassed. We feel sorry for ourselves when things don't go our way. And God, we are broken because we are sinners, and we confess this to you. We ask for your redeeming and your healing grace.

[ 3 : 49 ]     Father, this morning we thank you that, Jesus, because of your cross, you have purchased our forgiveness. We ask, Father, that as we confess our sins to you, won't you apply that forgiveness to us, that we may walk in the freedom of renewed and joyful relationship with you.

Father, cast our sin away from us. Wash us white as snow, we pray. God, this is our confidence. This is why we come before you, because of Jesus and his cross.

Thank you, Jesus, for dying for us. Father, it's not just sinners out there, those people that need you. We need you. And we rejoice in that this morning.

Father, this morning we also want to pray for the many parents in our congregation. We ask, God, that you come and you wash us with your love. God, deliver us from finding our identity and our validation in our children and their successes.

God, we do ask that you give us the wisdom to raise our children as you'd want us to. Help us to shape and shepherd their hearts, not just their behavior. Lead us, God, to teach them the gospel, not just how to act Christianly.

[ 4 : 57 ]     Give us, God, patience when parenting demands more of us than we feel we have to offer. Give us wisdom when we are out of our depth and don't know what to do. Give us peace, God, we pray, when we are overcome with worry and exceeding anxiety.

And Father, we pray for the children of this community. Unborn children still in their mother's wombs. Infant children, young children, grown-up children, adult children. God, we ask that you work in the hearts of every child, of every family in this church, God.

Whether such children know you and honor you or not, stir their hearts, God. Draw them back to you. Pour your love into their hearts. Open the eyes of their hearts that they may know what is the hope to which you've called them, we pray, God.

Father, pour out your spirit on our children, God. Turn the hearts of the children back to their parents and to you, O God. O Lord, we are desperate that our children know you and serve you and find their hope in you and rest in you.

Come and move in our city, God, and start with our families, we pray. Come and do this, God. Lord, we and our children need you, God, more than anything else.

[ 6 : 04 ]     Come and move, we pray, God. Hear our prayers, Lord. And finally, Father, we want to pray for our city. And God, this morning, we want to bring Island ECC, the wonderful church, before you.

God, we do pray that your God will move powerfully in that church, such that they will ever grow in their love for your gospel and their confidence in your word. We pray, Jesus, that you will be exceedingly big in the hearts of every member and all that they do.

God, that the honor of Christ in your name will permeate every meeting and every agenda. Lord, this morning, we pray for Brett and Shannon and Rick Bates and their families.

We pray for their team. Thank you for their passion for ministry. Thank you for their kindness towards all the churches in Hong Kong. We pray that they will continue to grow in the fear of the Lord, in love for your word, in confidence in the gospel, and in favor with God and man.

We pray this in your forgiving, reassuring, and steadfast name. Amen. Amen. Let's listen to the reading of God's word, and then we'll listen to the preaching. The scripture reading comes from Nehemiah chapter 1.

[ 7 : 19 ] Please follow along in your bulletins or on the screen. The words of Nehemiah, the son of Hecaliah. Now it happened in a month of cheese leaf, in the 20th year, as I was in Susa, the citadel, that Halani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah, and asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem.

Now they said to me, the remnant there in the prophets who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame.

The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire. As soon as I heard these words, I sat down, and 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 corruptedly against you and have not kept commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.

[ 9 : 24 ] Remember the words 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 utmost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen to make my name through 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 and give success to your servant today.

And grant him mercy in the sight of this man. Now I was cut barrier to the king. This is the word of God.

Well, good morning to you all. It's a delight to be with you. Thanks, son, for those wonderful words. Jenny and I have a bittersweet kind of experience when we think of Watermark.

[ 10 : 53 ] Sweet because Kevin and Claire are here and because you have been so gracious in extending a call to them. Bitter because we went back to Cape Town to be with them. And as we had been there four weeks, then they came here.

So there's a kind of, we love Watermark. We pray for you. We think of you muchly. But on the other hand, we wish they were back in Cape Town.

But as we console ourselves, we find the satisfaction that we would rather our children be in the uttermost parts of the earth, serving the purposes of God, rather than be making us comfortable in our own home nest.

And there is a much greater sense of security and delight and great confidence in knowing that your children, wherever they are, are in God's purposes rather than having them close by and maybe being missing the real heart of what God intends for them.

You do have a wonderful couple in Kevin and Claire. I don't say that unbiasedly. But you have in Kevin and Claire people who love God, love his word, and who know how to pray.

[ 12 : 11 ] The Lord gave us three promises concerning our three sons and that which spoke of Kevin was he was a man of prayer. And so you have a pastor who prays and a pastor who believes in prayer and turns to God when he's uncertain on anything and everything.

But you haven't come to hear me talk about my son. In 586, when Nebuchadnezzar left Jerusalem, he left a once proud city that had been, as it were, the center of the known world.

Until then, under King David, it had been the capital city of the region. And then under King Solomon, who had built his own palace and built the temple, had built two enormous structures that spoke of enormous wealth, of enormous ingenuity, and spoke of the favor of God upon that city.

Nebuchadnezzar, in 586, when he left it, left it ransacked, broken, and in ruins. The great walls, which had spoken of its stature, lay burnt and destroyed.

The gates were no longer serving any purpose whatsoever. And the temple itself had been ransacked. That magnificent building, into which so much wealth had been poured in its construction, was now just a collection of ruins.

[ 13 : 35 ] And it's helpful to understand the situation, because, so we can see the context. And so, the kingdom under David, and then followed by Solomon, split after Solomon.

When he died, the northern tribes, ten of the northern tribes, split into what was Israel, and Judah and Benjamin became, as it were, named after Judah, with the southern kingdom.

And because they had neglected God, because they had kind of treasured their relationship socially and kind of religiously, but had lost the essence of what relationship with the father was, and had drifted off into pagan worship and worshiping of idols, God sent the nations and punished them, Israel first.

And then some hundred years later, Nebuchadnezzar came and ransacked the city, and it was destroyed. And of course, what we must understand is that Israel came into being as a nation when that enormous night in Egypt, the angel of death passed over every home, and that which carried the bloodstain of a cross upon the lintels of every door, the angel of death passed over, then some 600,000 men and women, plus men, plus women and children left Egypt.

And then, in the 40 years that followed, God fashioned this disparate group of people into a nation. And he chose them as a nation so that through them, he could reveal himself as the God who wants to commune and engage with men and women.

[ 15 : 15 ] And the Jewish people, through the laws and the precepts and the principles and decrees of the father, became a distinct community, because God revealed his heart and his character, and they, assimilating those, they became distinctive.

And in a sense, God chose them to show to the nations what he will do with the people who will honor and serve him. Of course, they didn't do that very well. And now here, and that word that's used here as we look at the prayer of Nehemiah, as he starts to say, O Lord God, the great and awesome God, that word Lord is the Hebrew word for the God who rescues, the God who redeems, the God who takes out.

And its root is found in that night in Egypt when God redeemed by the blood of the Lamb a people to himself. And so Nehemiah, as he starts to pray this magnificent prayer, roots his approach to God in the character of the one who redeems, who heals, who takes what is broken, who takes what's enslaved, who takes what is powerless to free themselves, and his address is, you who are the redeemer, you who are the rescuer, I am making my approach to you.

And friends, this morning, we must never lose sight of the redemptive nature, the restorative nature of our God and what he has done through Jesus Christ.

He is the one who redeems. He is the one who restores. He is the one that takes what's broken and makes it whole again. We are, and Nehemiah roots his prayer, O Lord God, you who have that night in Egypt taken a people out to make whole again.

[ 17 : 17 ] I'm coming before you this time in Susa. I've heard of the destruction of my city. I've heard of its vulnerability. I've heard of its desperate state, both physically, socially, politically, spiritually.

And my appeal is to you, on the basis of what you've done in history, God come and restore. Friends, this morning, we must be reminded that we serve and know a God who has revealed himself through Jesus as the one who restores, as the one who makes whole.

Paul wrote so powerfully, it's one of my favorite verses, that he's not ashamed of the gospel. Why? Because it's the power of God unto salvation.

Now, of course, when we think of that, we can think of it in very small terms of, you know, it's the kind of salvation we put our hand up and God saves us. Paul's not talking about a decision and a hand in a meeting.

Paul's talking about the salvation which is able to take a man or a woman or a family or situation in desperate need. And God, through the power of the good news of Jesus, is able to redeem and to change and to transform and save and restore and make whole.

[ 18 : 37 ] That's the story of the gospel. That's why he wasn't ashamed. And friends, the glory of the gospel, the glory of the person of Jesus, is there is no situation.

There is nothing that's so desperate that the love of God through Christ Jesus and the dunamis, the power of the gospel, isn't able to change and to transform.

These are not intellectual theological doctrines only, though they are. But this should be the kind of living energy that guides and drives us.

That I'm living under the reign and the authority of one whose power is able to destroy the work of the evil one. That all the chains he might put upon me, the gospel, is able to do things differently.

So in looking at Nehemiah, we're looking at how God was concerned for his people. And of course, Nehemiah represents probably one of the greatest illustrations of building in Scripture.

[ 19 : 44 ] He goes to a city that's distraught, that's broken, that's destitute. And in 52 days, he restores its walls, he hangs its gates, and something of the security of the city is returned.

But of course, Nehemiah is not just a great builder of a city and restoring a Jerusalem that had been ransacked. He is a prototype of a much greater builder who was still to come.

He is a prototype. He's a prefigurement of the one who would walk through not the broken walls of bricks and stones and gates hanging limp, but would walk through the broken walls of individual men and women's lives whose gates and whose heads hang down with shame and guilt and inadequacy and touch them and begin to restore them and build a living temple out of burnt and disused stones that this world says are not sufficient.

And Christ is able to restore the glory of himself and his person in our own hearts and in our own lives. This is what we really must look for when we're looking at Nehemiah.

Now, there are three things I just want to highlight out of this magnificent passage. I want us to see that there is the first thing about his prayer.

[ 21 : 02 ] O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love. God, the one that we serve, is consistently preserver of what he said he would do.

The words of David as he was passing on, leaving the words to his son Solomon, he said that all that the Lord has spoken he has fulfilled with his hands. We have a God who doesn't just speak.

We have a God who delivers and performs that which he said he would do. Friends, are we possessed with this conviction? Do we understand that this church and serving God and loving him isn't a kind of religious exercise?

It's an experience with the divine. That he who speaks a word into our hearts is the one who fulfills it. I remember years ago when I was in business, I'd heard a sermon of a man who preached and he said, The problem with us as Christians is we trust God for such small things.

He said we trust him for houses, for promotion, for big cars and bigger jobs. He said these things are so small because God in the Psalms promised us, Ask and call unto me and I'll give you the nations.

[ 22 : 19 ] Now, let me ask you, how big is your dream? How big are you trusting God? How big are you trusting God? And I remember this kind of echoed in my mind, in my mind. And I was at lunchtime.

I can still see myself. I got down next to the couch in my office and I said, God, I want you to send me to a nation where our church movement is not part of. We've never been there.

And give me the chance to do something for you there. Fifteen years later, fifteen years later, I'd forgotten the prayer. And we were pastoring a church in Vietnam.

A funny, unqualified man from South Africa in a communist nation leading a church. God fulfills with his words, with his hands, what he promises with his mouth.

And so Nehemiah approaches God with this wonderful, Oh Lord God, the one who redeems, the one who saves, the one who sets free. And he knew there's a sense, there's a language of conviction, there's a language of intent, there's a language of expectation.

[ 23 : 25 ] This is not poetry. This is the burning urge and sense and conviction from his heart. Oh Lord God, the great and awesome God. He knew and understood that he was coming into the presence of one who was almighty.

The awesome God, the one who inspires all. A sense of wonder. You see, Nehemiah rooted his appeal for all that was to follow in the sovereign authority, the omnipresent, where God is always.

The omniscience, or the all-knowing God. And the omnipotence, the all-powerful God. He understood something of whom God was.

Jehoshaphat, when he was faced with the armies of the Moabites and the Ammonites, roots his appeal for help in the character of God when he says this. Friends, when we come to pray, do we come with the sense of assurance?

Are you not God? Are you not in heaven? And no one, no one can withstand your power. Do we understand the great privilege that we have as believers to come before him and to seek after him?

[ 24 : 52 ] And much in modern preaching has, in a sense, diluted who God is. And when we pray, we must always keep this transcendent understanding that God is God from infinity in the beginning to infinity in the end.

That's a contradiction in terms, I understand that. But I'm trying to just say, he is God over everything, everywhere, over all things. You know, we sometimes think, well, no one will see it.

God's seen it. He even knew our hearts before we began to enact that which was wrong or that which was good. He sees and knows everything. And what an awesome privilege.

And this is the conviction that gripped Nehemiah when he comes before the Father. Are you not? You see, when we dilute who God is, we've kind of, much in modern Christianity is focusing on the love of God, the goodness of God, which is absolutely wonderful and absolutely correct.

But we need to keep these things in tension. God is gracious and merciful and profound and patient beyond anything we ever understood and can understand.

[ 26 : 06 ] God is also the awesome, holy, authoritative force person that governs the universe. And we need to understand that the love of God and the sovereignty of God and the authority of God are in holy tension.

And it's not one or the other. God is God completely. And we need to revere him. And the manifestation of that was in Calvary.

The great love of God being poured out and at the same time the great judgment being poured out and despicably and scandalously and tragically experienced by his son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

We've lost the wonder and the majesty of him who's spoken to the darkness and light came. Who's spoken to that which was dead and life emerged. We've spoken to the confusion and order began to unfold.

We've forgotten the glory of the one who created all things. And so I want to suggest his conviction was rooted in an understanding of the awesomeness of the Lord.

[ 27 : 18 ] The awesomeness of our God. Who is able to make lots, everything out of nothing. Before whom the nations are counted as dust upon the scales.

Whose value and significance is but a drop in the bucket. Who gives life to the dead and calls into things that do not exist as though they did. He puts to death and he brings to life.

He wounds and he heals. He calls the stars by name and the vastness of the universe with stars beyond anything modern telescopes have even begun to consider.

He knows them all. He supervises and plots the connectivity of every single cell. Billions of them in the human embryo. As it's getting ready to birth a new child, male or female.

And whose steadfast love and affection endure forever and forever. Who hears the faintest cry and who responds. And who responds to the meekest approach at repentance.

[ 28 : 25 ] This is the awesome God whom Nehemiah came before and of whom we must never lose sight. He is God. He is God. The great almighty God.

As the Lord said, I am the Lord and there is no other. And how dare we presume that there be any other. As Isaiah said, he is the potter and we are the clay.

He takes Peter, the man who denies him. Three times. And then what does he use Peter to do? He uses Peter to write an epistle and he uses these magnificent words.

Peter writes to the church and he says, Think about it.

The person who denied him is the instrument and the very one Jesus through the Holy Spirit uses to pen forever and ever encouragement to the church.

- [ 29 : 31 ] To be ready to give a hope for the reason for the hope that is within you. That had been me, I would say, you're the last person to qualify. You denied me.
- No, I can't use you again. But God in his grace takes the one who failed and he uses him. You know that James and John, the sons of thunder. Now go read John's epistles.
- Letters. Full of the love of God. The patience of God. He is the one who restores. He is the one who redeems.
- He is the one who sets free. He is the one who means that we needn't be defined by what we were. We can be defined by what the gospel will make us. Friends, have we lost sight of the awesomeness of the one before whom we come to pray?
- Have we lost perspective of whom it is? The heavens declare the glory of God and the earth reminds us. Show us his handiwork, who he is.
- [ 30 : 37 ] We need to sometimes pause and just look at what God has done and created and placed around us to begin again to remind ourselves of the one before whom we come to worship.
- We're so caught up with our technology, so caught up with the images of videos and TVs and movies that we've lost the movie that really speaks life into our hearts and into our souls.
- The movie of the heavens and the wonder of creation. Let me ask you, how is your prayer time? Is it boring?
- Is it routine? Is it an exercise I've just got to get through? Clem Sunter was a leading senior person in the mining industry in South Africa.
- In the late 1980s, early 90s, there was a dreadful mining accident, which really was a result of negligence and shortcuts in the mines, which 189 miners were killed.
- [ 31 : 45 ] And it shook him. He was actually chief executive at that stage. It shook him so much that he actually asked to be relieved of that position, and he worked elsewhere in the group. And he developed a skill in scenario planning.
- It's not strategic planning. It's kind of trying to look at the scenarios in the future, and if this scenario works out, what do we do? And if this scenario works out, it's a different discipline, and it's kind of trying to see what happens in the future.
- And he became very good at it. And I was listening to him last year. He was talking at a conference I was at, and he shared a moment. He said one of the highlights of his life was in the last five years, as he had been invited by the Chinese Politburo to address them on scenario planning in Beijing.
- And he talks of how he was ushered into the Great Hall, and there they all were. And he was spending three days with them on scenario planning, economic and political possibilities, over the next five to ten years.
- And as I thought about it over the next two days, I thought, sure, isn't this amazing privilege to be able to address powerful men and women and government and the leading nations of the earth to speak about the future.
- [ 33 : 04 ] And as I was reflecting on it, I just felt God just kind of say, Stephen, you get a greater privilege every morning when you come before me in prayer.
- You get the privilege to speak to the creator of all the universe, the one who is God, who works and no one can prohibit it, who says, and that's it.
- You get the opportunity through my son and with the help of the Holy Spirit to come and beseech and to speak to me, not to consider scenarios, but to make appeals before me on things that need to be changed.



in you and your communities and in the earth. Friends, there is nothing that shapes you, your life, more than anything like prayer.

You might have been taught it's your education, you might be taught it's your bank balance, you might have been encouraged, it's a thousand other things, but that which most shapes your life, that which will most shape it for the future, is the way you engage and trust God and spend time with Him on your knees and seeking after Him.

[ 34 : 17 ] Nothing will shape you more than your time in prayer. Nothing will shape you for good and for righteousness more than your time in prayer. And that's the thing that we probably give the least attention to.

And we are the ones who are most bereft and suffer most because of it. James says, Do you understand that?

He was drawing his parallel, the prophet Elijah, and how he prayed and it didn't rain. Three and a half years and then he prayed and it started again.

The fervent, effectual prayer of men and women who trust and seek after Him can change the city of Hong Kong. If that can change nations, God through a community of people who will trust Him can bring more than we ever dreamt possible.

Do we come before Him as the great and mighty, awesome God? Do we address Him as the one who is able to redeem and to restore? Or do we see it as a duty that we must get by and finish?

[ 35 : 25 ] And so, I was listening two or three weeks ago to a man talking about attending a prayer meeting in our African, I guess townships is the way still to describe them, that they're poorer areas where under the old apartheid system, African people were confined to live.

And you don't just undo those things. There's still many communities like that. And this European white pastor was asking his counterpart, pastor from that area, an African man, saying, when I come to your prayer meetings in the townships, I'm always struck by this profound sense of energy and enthusiasm and conviction.

He said, even in the most fervent white prayer meetings, there's nothing that approximates what you focus, what I sense and experience amongst your people.

Have you got any explanation for it? The answer was tragically profound. He said, in the white communities, he says, you have so much that you, when you pray, you're praying to God as your last resort.

But for us, in the townships, we have nothing. And so we turn to God for everything and anything that happens or goes wrong or might happen because we are solely and completely dependent upon him and we have a history of him answering our prayers and working in us that we come with a sense of profound conviction.

[ 37 : 05 ] And Jesus said, how hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom and I think he was not just meaning it from a salvation perspective but he was also meaning it because we don't feel the need of him.

The second thing is, so he approaches God with a sense of conviction and awesomeness and power. The second thing he deals with, he deals with his sin. He's very emphatic about it.

Sin is an unpopular word nowadays. Has been for a long time. But what we fail to grasp is that sin, all sin and foremost is sin against God.

Before we sin on the horizontal levels with one another, before we disappoint each other, before we failed each other, we have already sinned on the vertical level.

Sin by definition, the word hamate, is not wrongdoing another person so much as it is assaulting the glory of God. Sin is primarily an assault on our vertical relationship and refusing to honor him for whom we were made and for whose glory we, and whose glory we should be reflecting.

[ 38 : 21 ] See, all relationships on the horizontal are the consequences of sin on the vertical. and all man's solutions at trying to fix the horizontal, if they ignore the vertical, are doomed to failure.

You know, we find all sound explanations if we had better economic situations, if people were better educated, if people were better trained, if people had better this, better that.

And those things are not wrong. Don't get me wrong. Those are good. We should pursue them. But if we pursue them exclusively forgetting that our hearts are broken, that our lives are broken, that the relationship with the Father has been broken, then these things in and of themselves will never be successful.

And especially for nations that put so much weight around the issue of education and training, let me remind you that Germany was the most educated nation in Europe in 1938.

Just made them a very well educated army in 1939. You see, the head full of knowledge doesn't transform the heart which has a tendency and bias towards sin.

[ 39 : 42 ] What we need is both the head and the heart to be transformed and changed altogether. The most effective antidote to sin is to see the glory and the awesomeness of God.

Because when we've seen that, then we cry out with Isaiah, I am a man of unclean lips. Holy, holy, holy. Sin is really setting aside the awesome authority of God and his power and his ways and his precepts to say, I choose another way, a more convenient and easier, a less humiliating, a more comfortable way or just avoiding things altogether.

The world sees sin in a much more diluted fashion. Sin is a kind of behavioral issue, you know. You hurt me and you shouldn't do that. It's not right. It's not good. And sin is far, far more serious than that.

It's an assault upon what God has said and what God requires of us and his people. To injure our fellow men is sin. Not because it hurts them but because it's violating the love of God has for all people.

You see, in Isaiah, in Psalm 51, David's great prayer of repentance where he cries out, I'm a man, creating me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me.

[ 41 : 09 ] He makes this statement in verse 4. He says, Against thee, and this is his prayer of confession concerning Bathsheba and Uriah. Bathsheba is committed adultery with Uriah. He had murdered and he says, Against thee and only thee have I done what is evil.

Didn't mean that it didn't matter what he did to Bathsheba or Uriah. He goes on to confess that but he recognizes that the primary sin was that he sinned against God and his failing to trust God to honor purity, his failing to try to manipulate and preserve his own name from being found out against God is what resulted in the murder and the adultery with Bathsheba.

And Nathan's challenge to him was, Why have you despised the word of the Lord? See, all sin comes from when we originally despised God's word, his precepts or his statutes or his rules or his ordinances because sometimes they're inconvenient, sometimes they're humiliating, sometimes they're awkward, sometimes they make us feel vulnerable.

But in that is where our security lies because God honors us when we respond to him and when we do things his way. Let me say this, if you will not face your sin before God and deal with it at the cross of Christ, you cannot, and if we cannot make confession before him, you will never make confession before people.

If we cannot face our weaknesses and our inadequacies before Calvary, you'll never face sin anywhere else and cope with it. It will always hound you, it will always intimidate you and ultimately it will always, always pay its wages which is death.

[ 43 : 02 ] Death of relationship, death of reputation, death of standing, death of honor, death of all the things that we pursued, sin comes and pays its wages.

Sin also always results in scattering because this, Nehemiah prays, he says, he reminds God of the promise that he gave to Moses. He said, if we didn't obey you, he promised to scatter us.

Let me say this, sin, sin always scatters. It always creates division. It always creates separation. It always destroys. Sin never builds up.

It never unites. It never gathers together. It never creates. It always breaks down and destroys. And you, we might be deluded at times to think, oh, we can just get away.

We'll paper it over. Sin will always expose the cracks at an inconvenient time later. The evil one is intent on destroying and devouring and breaking down.

[ 44 : 00 ] That is his intention. Right from Eden, when Adam and Eve were expelled, the garden, sin has been scattering and separating and dividing all the time.

And the antidote is to come and face our sin at the cross of Christ and allow him to deal with it and allow him to forgive us. Then we find energy and strength to face is practical outworking in the ordinary events of life.

And as I wrap up, the third point he comes to, he says, if you return, if you return. Remember the word you commanded your servant Moses saying, and then he talks about, but if you return to me and keep my commandments, if you return, if you return.

This is not the language of effort or legalism. This is like preserving and keeping, treasuring. If you treasure, if you keep, there are notes like all of us have from our children when they were young.

We have ours from Simon and Kevin and Drew, the little scribbled notes that they wrote, their first attempts at writing. We've kept those things. We've treasured them. They're valuable to us. They remind us of years long ago of innocence.

[ 45 : 20 ] They are valuable. And in a sense, Nehemiah, that's what God is saying. If you keep, if you treasure, if you long for, if you hold on to me and my precepts and my ways, if you do that, wherever you have been scattered, wherever you have gone, even as if to the uttermost part of heaven, from there I will gather you, I will draw you.

And it's the same words Jesus, in a sense, repeated, the same motion, the same conviction. Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I long to have gathered you as a hen gathers her chicks.

This is the language of passion and compassion. This is the language of restoration. This is the language of longing for being reunited and drawn together. How I long to restore you.

It's the language of extravagance. It's the language of abundance. It's the language of unmitigated mercy and grace. Wherever you are, if you want to return, I'm going to be there to draw you much more.

You don't have to get back on your own terms. You don't have to fight your way back. Just indicate you want to come back and I will draw, I will gather. All God wants is the cry of a heart, God be merciful.

[ 46 : 40 ] And he does the rest of drawing us to him spells, to himself. Irrespective of where you are, to where you have been gathered, to where you have been scattered, irrespective of what sin might have done in the lives past, God is able through Christ Jesus to do significantly and abundantly more.

Paul captured it beautifully, didn't he, in his letter to the Romans, that where sin has abounded, grace has much, much more abounded. I just want to say there is not a desperate situation in this community or in any community in Hong Kong that the gospel is not able to deal with.

There's not a single situation that the cross is not able to overcome. Sometimes things do go wrong, sometimes we are perplexed, sometimes we are devastated, sometimes we don't understand, but the cross always allows us to triumph because God is sovereign and he knows everything.

The earth has no song that heaven cannot heal. We sang those words beautifully this morning. The earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal.

And folks, let me just encourage you. It shouldn't just be the words of a song that should be the deep, deep drive that governs our behavior, our going out and our coming in.

[ 48 : 10 ] There's no sorrow, there's no awkwardness, there's nothing, no news that I can hear today that heaven cannot heal. Yes, we will feel pain, yes, we may feel confusion, yes, we may be terrified, may we be fearful, but God, I know this, that irrespective of what my emotions are doing to me, I know that the song of heaven is able to heal the pain that earth might deliver.

And that is why we're not ashamed of the gospel. It's the power of God. Nehemiah's prayer is about reminding God of God's word and praying it back to him, God's promises.

The promises that he would, and now listen to this, the promise was that if you repent, I will gather you to the place where I've made my name dwell. At the risk of being a little bit irreverent, think about it.

You're scattered to all parts of the earth, you've been destitute, you've been robbed of everything you have, you're beggars, you're forlorn, you've got nothing. And the promises, if you repent, I'll bring you back to the place where my name dwells.

Well, if you're a cynic, you say, what good is that? But actually, all of life, and all of our humanity, and all of our personhood, finds its significance, and finds its life, and finds its beginning at the centrality of the cross, and at the beginning of the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[ 49 : 43 ] God gathers us to himself, because in himself is where we find life, and where we find meaning, and where we find encouragement, and where we find strength. If we're going to try and find it anywhere else, we will ultimately always be disillusioned.

We will always be disappointed. We may be excited for a season, but sure, as eggs are eggs, as time passes by, we will begin to become disillusioned.

But when we find our life in him, when we find our meaning in him, when we find our purposes in him, when we find our direction in him, then we have that which sustains us through all of life.

See, until we start where it went wrong, which is in our hearts, it will never really ever come right. You may see improvements and changes.

You may recognize that you are better now than you were five years ago. But never mistake that the gospel is not about giving you a reconditioned, panel-beaten heart.

[ 50 : 48 ] The gospel in Jesus Christ is about a new heart and a new disposition and new leanings altogether. The gospel is able to sustain us and to strengthen us and to tie us and to draw us to himself and to make us all together new.

Ravi Zacharias tells a wonderful story of an interpreter who trained, interpreted to him in the Vietnam War in the 1970s.

And then, of course, after the Americans fled, these men were rounded up, went for indoctrination and training to try and correct them, change their thinking and their views.

And this interpreter, this young interpreter, was at the point of being broken. His interrogators wanted to turn him from his gospel-centered convictions to acknowledging communism as the answer.

And it went on for years and he was beginning to lose hope. He had no gospel, he had no material to read, and in a state of kind of desperation, he felt himself slipping and beginning to lose hope and lose faith.

[ 52 : 01 ] And the pressure was mounting and he realized they were putting him under pressure for a decision. And in a frail prayer, he said, Lord, if you're still there, if you are real, I need you to show yourself to me in the next 48, 72 hours.

That morning, the cells are opened and his chosen said, you are going to do the latrine duties, which was to clean out the buckets of the latrines of the seniors in the prison area.

The dirtiest and most unappreciated job in the whole camp. And as he's cleaning the latrines out, he comes to one bucket and he sees some writing on the paper and it's English.

Hadn't seen that. And so he looks a bit more carefully and he recognizes that it's scripture. One of the army leaders is using scripture as toilet paper.

And the words that he reads that first day are this, no, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

[ 53 : 14 ] For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things past or present are able to separate us from the love of God. He put his hand up.

He said, I want to do latrine duty every day. And every day he would take that torn paper and he would wash it, clean it. And he fed himself on what was for another person nothing more than toilet paper but for him the words of life that reignited his soul and his faith in the Father.

Folk, where's your conviction? Is it in yourself? Or have you seen something of the awesomeness of the one who redeems and restores? Will we come with prayers that are full of conviction not in how well we pray but in who we pray to?

And will we understand that as we just say the most fleeting of redemptive pleas, be merciful to me. He comes in ways to restore that we could never ever have imagined.

Amen. Let's stand as I close in prayer and then worship team will come up. Great and awesome God, we come with bowed hearts and bent heads before you this morning and we say that there is no one like you.

[ 54 : 45 ] You are God. Forgive us of the way we trivialize you, the way we make you so small, the way we reduce you.

And Lord, into our hearts and into our minds explode something of your awesomeness and your magnificence, your bigness and your hugeness towards us and change us and transform us.

That these vessels of clay might become instruments which sing the songs of Zion, which shine and reflect the glory of the greatest Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And may our lives, Lord, be reflective of something that builds more than just brick and stone, but is used to extend your kingdom and build broken lives once again that might house the praises of Zion.

Father, these are the things for which we ask in Jesus' precious name. Amen. God bless you all.