

A Praiseworthy Petition Nehemiah 9:5b-37

Several weeks ago, we considered a passage from **Joshua 3 and 4** about the stones of remembrance. After the Israelites crossed the Jordan River, each of the 12 tribes had a representative who selected a stone from the middle of the Jordan River taking them to Gilgal where they camped where they erected a memorial. It was to be a reminder to future generations who hadn't experienced the miracles of God's provision in the wilderness, how God had kept His promise by bringing them across the Jordan River on dry ground, and how He would provide for them in the future if they followed Him. However, that generation failed to pass on to the next generation what God had done which set them on a path of destruction and deportation.

Oh, there had been some bright times in Israel's history when they followed the Lord. There were the judges who brought national repentance and obedience, but those only lasted for 10 or 20 or 30 years before they would fall back into disobedience. In the times of the kings there were some good kings who led the nation in obedience to God's law, kings like David, Hezekiah, and Josiah. But after they were gone, the nation returned to idolatry. If they had truly seen the Lord, they would have never returned to pagan worship, but they didn't.

Centuries later they were reaping the consequences of sin and separation from God. Yet even through in their history when they had forgotten about God, He had not forgotten about them. They were still His covenant people, the people of promise, the ones He had chosen out of all the nations of the world. King Cyrus of Persia issued a decree that Jews could return to Jerusalem and resettle their land. Ezra was sent back with this first wave of Jewish exiles to help in rebuilding the wall and in teaching them the law. He was a devoted priest and teacher of the law who had committed himself to careful study and to instructing them on what the law said and how they were to obey it (**Ezra 7:10**). Fourteen years later, another group of exiles returned to Jerusalem led by Nehemiah. His task was to rebuild the city walls

that Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed. It was no small endeavor, but by the gracious hand of God, they accomplished the rebuilding of the wall in 52 days.

More important than the rebuilding of the wall was the rebuilding of lives by keeping God's law. Ezra was called on once again to read the law. As the Levites explained its meaning and application, it resulted in a time of mourning and repentance. Nehemiah and Ezra along with the Levites who served as teachers, told the people that it wasn't a day of sadness but one of celebration. Last week I said that ***true confession will always lead to true celebration***. Personal confession led to national celebration. I also said that we cannot confess the sins of our nation unless we have first confessed our own sins.

I invite you to turn in your Bibles to **Nehemiah 9**. As we pick up the narrative, we see that after their celebration had ended, they had once again gathered. Reading **verses 1-3** we notice that there is still remorse and repentance. As a testimony of their sincerity and humility they spent time fasting, wearing sack cloth and ashes symbolizing great sorrow for sin. For 3 hours they stood listening while the law of God was read. And for another 3 hours, they spent in confession and worship. ***True confession will always lead to true celebration***.

From this moment on in their history, they would not fall back into idolatry. However, while that may be true, they traded one sin for another because they steeped themselves into legalism. They followed the letter of the law, but they missed the intent or spirit of the law.

As we come to our passage this morning, we read in **verse 4** that there were some Levites who were calling on the Lord while other Levites told those assembled to stand up and praise the Lord. They had moved from feasting and celebration in **chapter 8** to fasting and confession in **chapter 9**. The remainder of the chapter is a prayer. It's a great model for us when we pray.

Notice first as we look at **verses 5-8** their prayer was one of humility before God.

I. THEIR PRAYER WAS ONE OF HUMILITY BEFORE GOD— vv. 5-15

According to **Philippians 2:3-4**, humility is the lack of conceit or pride. The original meaning was to be of low mind. That doesn't mean that we think less of ourselves but to think of ourselves less by putting others before us.

I think most of you know we have two dogs, Lucy and Blaze. Whenever they want in, Lucy always has to be first. Before we even get the key in the door she's bouncing up and down on her front legs anxious to get in. Even if Blaze gets to the door first, which is usually the case, she cuts right in front of him. Humility lets others go ahead first.

Humility was a trait despised in Greek culture. They considered it weakness, but it is an attitude Jesus both demonstrated and exhorted His followers to live by, a trait encouraged by Paul for believers to practice.

The dictionary looks at humility as genuine gratitude, a lack of arrogance or pride, along with a modest view of oneself. But the humility described in the Bible is much more than that. Simply put, true Biblical, godly humility is having a proper view of ourselves in relation to God, that we are in sin and helpless without God. The humility God desires for us to have is grounded in His character.

Many verses in the Bible speak about humility. For example in **Psalms 25:9** it is the humble person that God teaches.

In **Proverbs 3:5-6**, it is the humble person who admits his need for God by following Him in all our steps, all our days and in all our ways. Pride says we don't need God and so go our own way. Humility strips away ego and arrogance so that the person trusts the Lord with all his heart. Humility says that we will follow His Word because it will always lead us along the right way as we let it guard our steps and guide our paths (**Psalms 119:105**). Humility trusts God to take control.

Proverbs 22:4 says that the humble person fears the Lord, holds Him in reverence. The humble person is

rewarded with honor and life. An example is Mordecai who shows us that humility is rewarded by being exalted. On the other hand, Haman who was proud was brought low. This principle is found in passages like **I Peter 5:6**.

James 4:6 tells us that God gives grace to the humble. The humble person draws near to God because He trusts God, while the proud person will be separated from God. Humility is among the character qualities that we are to put on and is essential if there is to be a spirit of unity in the body of Christ (**Colossians 3:12-14**). Seeking God in humility is required for God to hear our prayers (**II Chronicles 7:14**).

John Newton, author of Amazing Grace, said **"I am persuaded that love and humility are the highest attainments in the school of Christ and the brightest evidence that He is indeed our Master."**

It is this attitude of humility in which the prayer in Nehemiah 9 is offered. Again, it is the characteristic of humility that rightly sees God for who He is. Notice that they acknowledged God's person.

A. They Acknowledged God's Person In Their Prayer – v. 5b-6a

"Blessed be Your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. You alone are the Lord."

If we want to get God's attention, we need to remember who He is. It's not for His benefit, He already knows who He is. It's for our benefit.

As the judge enters the courtroom, the bailiff says something like "All rise. Hear ye, hear ye, the Court for the District of Livingston County is in session -- the Honorable Judge John Doe presiding. All having business before this honorable court draw near, give attention, and you shall be heard. You may be seated." Everyone present pays respect by standing in acknowledgement of his title and position. In his prayer of dedicating the Temple, Solomon began with an acknowledgement of who God was. **I Kings 8:23 "O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below."**

Similarly, in **Matthew 6:9**, Jesus taught that when we pray, we should begin with a recognition of God and His holy name.

In other words, there isn't any other person or thing that is higher than He is. No one is above Him and all praise and honor and glory and power is due to Him. The first three of the 10 commandments are focused on the very person of God. We are to have no idol, which is anything that we place higher than God and His name is not to be misused or taken lightly. When we don't revere His name, which is synonymous with His character, who He is, we in effect are putting other things on par with Him which is a form of idolatry.

As I consider their acknowledgment of God's person, I see two things.

1. The singleness of their prayer

They weren't praying to a variety of gods. It's been estimated that the Hindus have about 3 million gods to whom they pray. They have a god for everything. During some of the dark days of Israel's history, their idolatry led them to worship any number of different gods. One for fertility, one for their crops, one for prosperity and so on. Moses warned them in **Deuteronomy 4:28** that if they ever left serving God, they would end up worshipping **“man-made gods of wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or eat or smell.”**

In this prayer, their focus was on the only God who can see, hear, and answer. He is the living God. He is their God. **Do you acknowledge Him as God?**

The second thing I see in the humility of their prayer is the sincerity of their prayer.

2. The sincerity of their prayer

They were serious about what they were praying and why. **Verses 1-3** tell us about their attitude of confession. They had spent several hours broken before the Lord because of their sin.

In David's confession of his sins, we read in **Psalm 51:16-17** **“You do not delight in sacrifice or I would bring it; You do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken**

spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.”

In other words, He isn't looking for more church attendance on our part. He doesn't want more Bible reading or more generosity to try and merit His forgiveness and favor. He doesn't want religious rituals. He wants a heart that is broken before Him because of sin.

These Israelites were sincere in their prayer. They understood who God was, not just His nature, but the One who has control over them, the One who grants forgiveness. They also acknowledge that He is eternal and in His eternality, He never changes, but is always the same. It's a reminder to us that when we pray, we should show extreme reverence to God as we remember who He is. When we pray, come to Him in singleness and sincerity.

Next, in their prayer of humility they acknowledged God's presence.

B. They Acknowledged God's Presence In Their Prayer

In these opening verses of their prayer, it's an assumption on their part that God is with them all the time. We see it more directly in the verses to follow as they reflect on God's presence with their ancestors in Egypt through the miracles that delivered them, then in His leading through the Red Sea, followed by His provision in the wilderness along with His presence in the pillar of smoke by day and the pillar of fire by night. They give an historical summary of God's presence even in the difficulties they faced, that God was with them all the time, even when they wandered away from Him. He never left them nor forsook them. He does the same for us. He is with us in our difficulties, but will also be with us when we may stray from Him.

No matter how far away we may think we can run from God, He is always there. He won't abandon us even though for a time we may abandon Him. He will never leave us or forsake us. He is the one who walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death. As Betsie ten Boom said **“There is no pit so**

deep, that God isn't deeper still."

We may think that because of something we've done that God can't be near us, but I'm here to tell you from experience that He is always there and He hears the contrite heart.

The psalmist reminds us that **"God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in time of trouble."** (Psalm 46:1)

Psalm 34:17-18 "The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; He delivers them from all their troubles. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

That is where these Israelites were at. Be comforted to know and experience God's forgiveness and presence. Be encouraged to know that there is no place we can go that God is not already there. In their prayer, they acknowledged God's presence.

There is one more thing about their prayer of humility. They acknowledged God's power.

C. They Acknowledged God's Power In Their Prayer – vv. 6-15

First, it's a recognition of His creative power.

1. His creative power – v. 6a

They recognized that God created everything, that He merely spoke and brought everything in the heavens and on earth into existence out of nothing. Nothing that we see came into existence outside of His power. He said **"Let there be..."** and it happened just as He said.

It is not, as some believe theistic evolution, where He set things in motion and then let it evolve. He did not take existing matter and cause it to explode and expand. In the beginning there was nothing, and He brought it all into existence. His was a creative power.

Verse 6 then speaks about His controlling power.

2. His controlling power – v. 6b

Colossians 1:17 tells us that He is the sustainer of everything in creation. In other words, He holds it

all together. My theology professor used to say that if God were to forget about you for even just a second, you would cease to exist. He not only created it.

He created all the physical laws that hold matter together and keep us bound to earth rather than floating off into space. This God who keeps the planets aligned and everything in its place is the same God who holds your hand when life is too much to handle on your own. As someone said, **"God knows exactly how to hold us together."**

These Israelites acknowledged that He is sovereign over all of creation. They may not have understood all the scientific laws behind it, but they understood that God was the Creator. Nothing happens outside His power to keep it and control it. He really does have the whole world in His hands.

The third thing they acknowledged in their prayer is His covenantal power.

3. His covenantal power – vv. 7-15

God called Abram, later known as Abraham, out of a pagan culture to follow Him. For his faithful obedience, God established a covenant with him. That covenant was given to his descendants to inherit the land of the Canaan. Their prayer acknowledged that God was faithful to keep His promise.

Hebrews 6:17 "It is impossible for God to lie."

Hebrews 10:23 "God is faithful who promised."

Numbers 23:19 substantiates this truth. When God makes a promise, He keeps His word. His word is not a contract that can be broken by either party if something goes amiss. His Word is a covenant that is binding so that no matter if the other party, in this case Israel, didn't do their part, God would still be bound to do what He said. Because His nature is unchanging, He will keep His covenant. That not only means He will reward for obedience, He will also chastise when those to whom He has bound this covenant forsake Him. Because He has bound this covenant with His love, Hebrews reminds us that those He loves who violate the covenant He will discipline, but again to be clear, it is done out

of love. This covenant was one established out of grace.

Throughout this chapter we see the evidence of God's grace. There is grace in the selection of Abraham from among all other people. There is grace in His deliverance of Israel from Egypt. It was grace that provided for them in the wilderness. There is grace in the many times He delivered them from their enemies, even when they chose to wander from Him, but then return to Him. There is grace in the words of the prophets sent by God. And there is grace in their present situation of captivity. God's covenant is bound up in grace.

Theirs was a prayer of humility before God. It was also a prayer of honesty with God.

II. THEIR PRAYER WAS ONE OF HONESTY WITH GOD – vv. 16-37

True confession is admitting that God is right, and we are wrong about our sin. True confession is agreeing with God.

As we look at **verses 16-31**, we notice that they were honest about their past collapse as a nation.

A. They Were Honest About Their Past Collapse As A Nation – vv. 16-19, 26-31

Psalm 32:1-5

Psalm 51:1-10

David looked at his past sins and confessed them to the Lord.

Notice in Nehemiah, their lamentation of the past as they reflect on the history of Israel's past sins. **Read** Time and time again, they would falter and fail to keep God's commandments. The nation would collapse. They would cry out to God and He would deliver them only for them to turn around and do the same thing again. The cycle repeats itself.

George Santayana is credited as saying **"Those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it."** That certainly is the case with Israel. They didn't learn from their history in the wilderness that God

would protect and provide through His abiding presence.

They didn't learn from their history when judges were called on by God to deliver the nation from their enemies.

They didn't learn that when they obeyed God, He caused them to prosper and when they disobeyed, they received His punishment.

It's a sad commentary on the heart of the nation when we read in **Judges 2:10-12** **"After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, (referring to the generation of parents who entered the Promised Land under Joshua) another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what He had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. They forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the Lord to anger."**

In this prayer, they reflect on the past history of their nation and the misery it caused when their ancestors forsook the Lord to go their own way. As a result, the Lord handed them over to other nations, even though they were more wicked, who plundered the land.

When we pray, it's okay to reflect on the past, but keep in mind that we have the promise from God, that He is faithful and just to forgive our sins when we confess them. (**I John 1:9**).

Psalm 103:11-12 **"For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us."**

Micah 7:18-19 **"Who is a God like You, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of His inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; You will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities in the depths of the sea."**

The devil would like for us to dwell on past sins and lead us to believe that God would never forgive us for something we have done. He wants to heap guilt on us for our past. But remember that **“there is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1)**. Because of Christ we have been set free from the debt and guilt of sin. Don’t dwell on past sins to bring guilt or think they aren’t forgiven, but think about past sins in order to give thanks that they are forgiven and you stand before God righteous through Christ.

They were honest about their past collapse. But then we see that they were honest about their present condition as a nation.

B. They Were Honest About Their Present Condition As A Nation – vv. 32-37

Just because we are forgiven of sin doesn’t mean there won’t still be consequences for that sin.

The person may repent of robbing the bank, but they’ll still have to do time.

The person who cheats on a test will still fail, but will be forgiven if they repent.

The person who gets stopped for speeding will still pay a fine even though he seeks forgiveness.

I’m sure we can all think of something we have repented of but still had to pay the consequences.

In their prayer, they understood their sins deserved God’s justice but didn’t want God to consider them as any light or unimportant thing. They continued by saying that they were wrong, and God was right and just in punishing them. They end by saying that their predicament resulted in serving other kings who enjoyed the fruit of their labor rather than enjoying it for themselves. In essence, they were saying they deserved what they were getting.

When we confess our sin, let’s remember to include our present condition as the result of God justly giving us what we deserve. But notice the closing words of **verse 37**. I see it as a cry for God’s mercy much like the penitent sinner who cried out for God to have mercy because He was a sinner. **“We are in great distress.”** It’s a plea for God’s mercy, a plea for His deliverance, a plea for His compassion.

And in this we close. Notice that in their prayer of honesty, they were honest about their provision of compassion as a nation.

C. They Were Honest About Their Provision Of Compassion As A Nation – vv. 17b, 19-25, 32

It’s the same truth Jonah understood about God when he complained that God spared the Ninevites.

“I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.” (Jonah 4:2)

Lamentations 3:22-23

Be thankful that God doesn’t treat us as we deserve, but is slow to anger, giving us many opportunities to repent and turn to Him. Be thankful that He is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (**II Peter 3:9**)

Be thankful that He is a forgiving God.

Be thankful that He is a compassionate God.

Be thankful that He is a loving God.

Be thankful that He is a faithful God.

Be thankful that He is a never changing God.

His compassion abounds.

The word “abounding” suggests abundant and plentiful supply. In other words, there’s more than enough compassion to go around. His compassion is limitless and unending. No matter how much we sin or how far we may try to run from Him, His compassion is always available. It’s like every other part of His nature, it is in infinite supply. So when we sin and confess, we know that His forgiveness and compassion will be there to meet us at every turn.

In your prayers remember to come in humility and to be honest and remember that God is both forgiving and compassionate.

Let me leave you with this thought: God is in the business of restoration. He’ll do His part to restore when we do our part to repent. God pursues you because He is faithful even when we fail.