

Revival Prayer

Nehemiah 9:1-9:37

Back in January of 1996, Joe Wright, senior pastor of the 2,500-member Central Christian Church in Wichita, was invited to offer the opening prayer at a session of the Kansas House of Representatives. Joe Wright had been invited to serve as the House's guest chaplain by Rep. Anthony Powell, a Wichita Republican who was also a member of Wright's church. Accordingly, Pastor Wright composed a prayer, read it at the opening of the legislature on January 23, and departed, unaware of the ruckus he had created until his church secretary called him on his car phone to ask him what he had done. Wright said afterwards: "I certainly did not mean to be offensive to individuals, but I don't apologize for the truth." His staff stopped counting the telephone calls that came from every state and many foreign countries after the first 6,500. Here is his prayer:

Heavenly Father, we come before you to ask your forgiveness. We seek your direction and your guidance. We know your word says, "Woe to those who call evil good." But that's what we've done.

We've lost our spiritual equilibrium. We have inverted our values. We have ridiculed the absolute truth of your word in the name of moral pluralism. We have worshiped other gods and called it multiculturalism.

We have endorsed perversion and called it an alternative lifestyle.

We've exploited the poor and called it a lottery. We've neglected the needy and called it self-preservation. We have rewarded laziness and called it welfare. In the name of choice, we have killed our unborn. In the name of right to life, we have killed abortionists.

We have neglected to discipline our children and called it building self-esteem. We have abused power and called it political savvy. We have coveted our neighbor's possessions and called it taxes. We have polluted the air with profanity and pornography and called it freedom of expression. We have ridiculed the time-honored values of our forefathers and called it enlightenment.

Search us, oh, God, and know our hearts today. Try us. Show us any wickedness within us. Cleanse us from every sin and set us free. Guide and bless these men and women who have been sent here by the people of the State of Kansas, and that they have been ordained by you to govern this great state.

Grant them your wisdom to rule. May their decisions direct us to the center of your will. And, as we continue our prayer and as we come in out of the fog, give us clear minds to accomplish our goals as we begin this Legislature. For we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

I was reminded of Joe Wright's prayer as I read the prayer in Nehemiah 9 this week. This prayer is a masterpiece of biblical quotations, images and phrases. The Levites, who led the people in this prayer, knew the Scripture and retold the story of their people's relationship with God. This is a prayer of confession. Their prayer of confession has two elements: they **confess who God is**, and in light of who God is, **they confess their sins**.

If you were here last week for Chapter 8, you will remember that the Jews were filled with great joy as they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles. They had such joy because they heard God's word, understood it, applied it to their own hearts, and obeyed God's word by doing as it said. As they built their booths and worshipped God, a great revival began to sweep over the land. Hearing God's word led them to pray, prayer led to worship, worship led to obedience. They were determined to do whatever it took to make things right with God.

I've been helped in my study of this passage by Warren Wiersbe. I'm going to borrow his outline this morning:

I. The Greatness of God (1-6)

II. The Goodness of God (7-30)

III. The Grace of God (31-37)

Let's begin by reading this chapter:

1 Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads.

2 Then those of Israelite lineage separated themselves from all foreigners; and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.

3 And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for one-fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God.

4 Then Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, and Chenani stood on the stairs of the Levites and cried out with a loud voice to the LORD their God.

5 And the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabniah, Sherebiah, Hodijah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah, said:

(3 part responsive reading of rest of chapter)

"I thank you God for the reading of Your Word today. May it produce in us that same fruit of repentance and righteousness as it did in the days of Nehemiah. Amen."

I. The Greatness of God (1-6)

It is still the seventh month, where chapter 8 began. Now it has been 24 days since the people had first gathered at the Watergate to listen to God's word. On this day they were fasting, wearing sackcloth, and had put dust on their heads. These were common signs of mourning and repentance in the Bible.

Verse 2 tells us that they had "**separated themselves from all foreigners,**" from those who would have a bad influence on them. As they came together to hear "**the Book of the Law of the LORD their God.**" maybe they came across Leviticus 20:26: "**And you shall be holy to Me, for I the LORD am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be Mine.**"

Israel's history tells the tragic story of what happens when believers don't make a break from the ways of the "world." Some of us are too cozy with the things of the world as well. God wants us to live distinctive lives that draw people to the

Savior. Someone has said that *separation without devotion to the Lord can become isolation, but devotion without separation is hypocrisy.*

As we learned last week, they couldn't wait to hear the Word of God. In verse 3, we read that they spent three hours reading the Bible and then three hours in confession and worship. The order here is significant. They read; they confessed; they worshiped. When we read the Word, we begin to see we have come short of the glory of God. It makes us come face-to-face with our own sinfulness. As we confess our sin, we begin to understand more about God's grace and mercy. As we experience God's forgiveness, we'll break out into whole hearted worship.

Verses 4 and 5 explain how they conducted this service. The Levites divided themselves into two groups. Some were standing on the stairs on one side of the assembly and the other group stood across from them. These two groups called back and forth to the congregation, one group confessing the sins of the people, the other praising God for His greatness. It's like an antiphonal chorus. The first group "cried out." The second group focused on God's character as they spoke. Cries of guilt are followed by shouts of praise for God's greatness, goodness, and graciousness. Tears of grief form the lyrics of lament while tears of joy transpose the anthem of adoration.

In verse 5, the "worshippers" invite the people to, **"Stand up and bless the LORD your God Forever and ever!"** Before they come to a time of necessary confession, they first praise the LORD who alone can hear, pardon and change them. The LORD our God is **"forever and ever."** He never changes and will never go back on His word because He is eternal.

Their prayer continues with praise in the last part of verse 5: **"Blessed be Your glorious name, Which is exalted above all blessing and praise!"** Prayer should always begin with praise for God's nature and character as well as His mighty works. Humble adoration is really the heart of true prayer. Jesus taught us to pray, **"Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name."**

Is that how you approach God, with praise and adoration? Today would you glory in the incomparable magnificence of our grand God?

Verse 6 starts off with a clear statement of God's greatness that is grounded in the opening verses of Genesis: **"You alone are the LORD; You have made heaven, The heaven of heavens, with all their host, The earth and everything on it, The seas and all that is in them, And You preserve them all. The host of heaven worships You."** There is no one like God. The evidence for His greatness is seen in His works of creation as Psalm 19:1 clearly states: **"The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, And night unto night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor language Where their voice is not heard."**

During the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, many people wanted to get rid of Christianity forever. On one clear night an atheist boastfully proclaimed his predictions to a poor peasant: "Everything will be abolished: churches, Bibles, and the clergy. Yes, even the word, 'God' itself! We shall remove everything that speaks of religion." The peasant gave a quiet chuckle. The atheist wanted to know what the believer was laughing about. The peasant then pointed to the

stars and replied, "I was just wondering how you're going to manage to get all of those bright lights out of the sky!"

It's always best to begin with the greatness of God. If we focus too much on what He gives to us, or on what we want Him to do for us, we may find our hearts becoming selfish.

Do you see God as great this morning? How does your life show it?

II. The Goodness of God (7-30)

Most of this chapter focuses on the goodness of God. In verses 7-30 God is very clearly the focal point, as the word "You" (Thee or Thou in the KJV) is 54 times in just 30 verses. God is the subject of every sentence. The theme is God's gracious gifts. The word "give" is used in one form or another at least 19 different times. Verse 8, **"To give the land of the Canaanites... To give it to his descendants."** Verse 10, **"gave them just ordinances and true laws."** Verse 15, **"You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger."**

This part of the prayer rehearses the history of Israel, revealing God's goodness to His people and their repeated failure to appreciate His gifts and obey His will.

God's goodness is seen in at least four ways in Nehemiah 9.

1. Forming (7-18). In verses 7-18, the prayer begins with how God formed the nation of Israel. He **"chose Abram, And brought him out of Ur," "And made a covenant with him."** Then, when God's people were suffering in Egypt, verses 10-11 say that God made a name for Himself by dividing the sea and releasing His people from bondage. In verse 13, they recall God's goodness in the giving of the Law and in verses 14 and 15, they praise God for how the newly formed nation was given possession of the land that was promised to them.

After this protracted praise time where the focus is on God for His goodness, the choir of confession sings out words of guilt in verses 16, **"But they and our fathers acted proudly, Hardened their necks, And did not heed Your commandments."** This is followed by a reply from the other side of the choir loft in verse 17: **"But You are God, Ready to pardon, Gracious and merciful, Slow to anger, Abundant in kindness, And did not forsake them."** They are guilty but God is good!

2. Leading (19-21). After forming the nation, God was committed to lead His people on a daily basis even when they disobeyed Him. We see that in Verse 19, **"Yet in Your manifold mercies You did not forsake them in the wilderness. The pillar of the cloud did not depart from them by day, To lead them on the road; Nor the pillar of fire by night, To show them light, And the way they should go."** Verse 20 says that God gave His Spirit to the people to provide for their spiritual needs and food and water to meet their physical needs. Verse 21 tells us that for forty years, as the children of Israel wandered in the desert, their clothes did not wear out and their shoes still fit.

God's goodness is seen through His forming of the nation and by how he led them on a daily basis.

3. Providing (22-25). He also provided them with everything they needed. He helped them defeat their enemies and gave them kingdoms and nations. He multiplied their numbers by blessing them with children. Verse 25 is a good

summary of how God showed His goodness by providing for their needs: **“And they took strong cities and a rich land, And possessed houses full of all goods, Cisterns already dug, vineyards, olive groves, And fruit trees in abundance. So they ate and were filled and grew fat, And delighted themselves in Your great goodness.”**

Did you catch that? God gave them much more than they deserved. The land was fertile. Their houses were already furnished. The water was already running and the fruit was just waiting to be picked. They had everything they needed. They **“delighted”** in God’s great goodness, which literally means that they “luxuriated” in God’s provision.

In a similar way, God has given us everything we need as well. 2 Peter 1:3: **“His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness,”** (2 Pet 1:3 NIV).

That leads to a question. Are you “delighting” in God’s goodness today? Or, are you taking Him for granted? Are you focused more on what you don’t have?

4. Correcting (26-30). After singing God’s praises for His wonderful provision, the other choir hangs their heads and sings in a dirge-like manner. They remembered how their forefathers acted in the Book of Judges: **“Nevertheless they were disobedient And rebelled against You, Cast Your law behind their backs And killed Your prophets, who testified against them To turn them to Yourself; And they worked great provocations.”** They defied God. They knew what the LORD wanted because He had made it very clear. Even though every one of their needs was met, God’s people exhibited a rebellious spirit and tried to eliminate both the message and the messengers. Instead of praising God for his goodness, they blasphemed Him. As a result, verse 27 tells us that God corrected them by handing them over to their enemies.

I want you to notice how God’s goodness pervades His personality. God does not abandon them to their oppressors. The second part of verse 27 rings out: **“And in the time of their trouble, When they cried to You, You heard from heaven; And according to Your abundant mercies You gave them deliverers who saved them From the hand of their enemies.”**

Then again, the “Confession Chorus” rises to its feet and sings what sounds like a requiem in verse 28: **““But after they had rest, They again did evil before You. Therefore You left them in the hand of their enemies, So that they had dominion over them;”** Then the Praise singers answer this way: **“Yet when they returned and cried out to You, You heard from heaven; And many times You delivered them according to Your mercies.”** By the way, aren’t you glad that God delivers each of us, **“many times,”** NIV, “time after time?”

The levites then belt out these somber words in verse 29: **“And testified against them, That You might bring them back to Your law. Yet they acted proudly, And did not heed Your commandments, But sinned against Your judgments, 'Which if a man does, he shall live by them.' And they shrugged their shoulders, Stiffened their necks, And would not hear.”** Again God corrected them by sending their enemies to rule over them.

But all of this was done because He is a good God. He demonstrates that fact clearly through His forming of the nation, by leading them, by providing for them, and even by correcting them.

Corrie Ten Boom writes: *“Deep in our hearts we believe in a good God. Yet how shallow is our understanding of His goodness. How often I have heard people say, ‘How good God is! We prayed that it would not rain for our church picnic, and look at the lovely weather!’ Yes, God is good when He sends good weather. But God was also good when He allowed my sister Betsie to starve to death before my eyes in a German concentration camp.”*

Some of us mistakenly thank God for His goodness only when things go the way we want them to go. The real challenge and test of our discipleship, is to thank Him for His goodness even when we experience pain and loss.

God is great and He is good. There’s one more part of His character that is given prominence in this chapter He is gracious.

III. The Grace of God (31-37)

The “praise team” sings out again in verse 31: **“Nevertheless in Your great mercy You did not utterly consume them nor forsake them; For You are God, gracious and merciful.”** God does not treat His people as their sins deserve. Because He is a God of grace, He is good to His people even when they are not good to Him. In His mercy, God didn’t give them what they deserved; and in His grace, He gave them what they didn’t deserve.

Drop down to verse 33: **“However You are just in all that has befallen us; For You have dealt faithfully, But we have done wickedly.”** The “grief team” finishes this chapter by singing about the wrong things the people had done, and how they are slaves to others because of their sins. Did you notice the change in pronouns here? Instead of focusing on “their” sins, the people now say, **“we have done wickedly.”** Until we can personally own our specific transgressions, we will miss out on experiencing the grace of God.

The closing stanza ends on a jarring note in verse 37, **“we are in great distress.”** The people recognize that generation after generation; the same sin problems seem to come back. Some of you here this morning are brave enough to admit that you are in great distress. You have your own history of good intentions that fell apart. You’ve seen the cycle of sin in your life where you mess up, and then repent and confess, and then walk with God and then sin and repent and confess all over again. And God delivers you time and again.

God doesn’t just offer help from heaven. He offers help from the inside to those of you who are born again. It is possible to change. God himself invests in us in ways that we discover over a lifetime. We don’t have to stay in the sin cycle. Jesus has joined us in the process, and that’s the indescribably good news. We have a royal, a divine, permanent Companion.

Listen to how the writer of Hebrews describes Jesus’ ministry to us in 4:14-16: **“Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come**

boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Instead continually struggling, failing, and feeling miserable in our guilt, in the midst of the battle, let's draw near to him. Let's covenant together. God isn't sitting back waiting for us to fail. There is grace, mercy, companionship and strength through Jesus; not just when we have tears of gladness; but when we have tears of grief. So let's draw near to Him.

This entire chapter speaks of grace. God demonstrates His greatness and His goodness and what do the people do? They turn from Him. They run from His word. They persist in doing things their own way. In short, they sin repeatedly. At any point, God could have said, "That's it. You've messed up too much. You're on your own." While He did send some correction into their lives, He never stopped loving them. When they sinned, God exhibited His grace. Or as Romans 5:20 puts it: "... **But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more.**"

Friend, no matter what you've done or who've you become, it doesn't matter. Jesus wants you to come home. In verse 38, it says that the people made a "**sure covenant, and write it.**" The NIV calls it a "binding agreement." A covenant is:

1. Personal. What do you need to do this morning? First of all, do you personally see God as great, as good, and as gracious? If not, determine to lock into these truths and to never doubt them again. Personalize your faith by making it real.

2. Practical. Secondly, based on who He is, what is the Holy Spirit prompting you to do right now? What practical step does He want you to implement?

3. Public. Thirdly, how can you make your decision public? You could share it with one of your brothers or sisters here in the church. If you're a believer and have never been baptized, you could take that step. If you need to join with our church you can take that step. Or, you could come forward during our invitation for confession or for conversion.

I believe strongly in the Word of God and in the Holy Spirit's ability to apply His Word. Let the Holy Spirit speak to you about how to respond now.