

11. PRAYER AND OUR LIVES

If I choose to make any Christian to squirm or feel small, all I have to do is ask them about their prayer lives. Because we all admit that we don't pray and read the Word of God enough. But enough for what? Are the length of prayer time and the amount of the Bible you read important to God or to our ego? So that we can boast to ourselves or to others how much we pray and read the Word?

God is not pleased with the length of our prayers or how many chapters of the Word we read. But He cares more for the hearts behind the prayers and reading His Word.

Tonight, we learn what is required in true prayer. Let's learn from the Word, so that we may pray to Him and have intimate times of our lives with Him through our prayers.

A. RIGHT START - CONFESSION OF OUR SINS

Nehemiah 9:1-2 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. Then those of Israelite lineage separated themselves from all foreigners; and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.

Now it is one day after the end of that memorial celebration. The spirit of revival has already roused the people from their beds for another unforgettable day of spiritual awakening.

This is the longest prayer recorded in the Bible.

The prayer was uttered in a context of humility and purity as they raised their voices in a fountain of confession for their sins and their fathers'. As a part of their heartfelt expression for repentance to God, we see them fasting, wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads. We don't see any of us doing these kinds of things in America, but it is a common thing to see in the Middle East. Fasting represents their hunger for knowing God was more pressing than the need to satisfy any physical hunger. With their loose fitting garments of sackcloth, they were expressing a profound sense of mourning, grief or humiliation because of their sin. By throwing dust or ashes on their heads, the people were symbolically identifying with death, uttering a feeling of the lowest depths.

As a strong commitment to purge themselves of leaven of sin, they separated themselves from all foreigners as an act of sanctification and confessed their sin over several hours.

B. GETTING INTO THE WORD

Nehemiah 9:3-4 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. 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.

First thing first, they read the Word of God and then worshiped the Lord their God.

The most important aspect of prayer is not asking God for what we needs. That is only a part of our prayers. It is acknowledging who God is, praising His mighty

name, and reminding whom we are talking to. Prayer is not for us to inform God what we want, but to remind us what a mighty God we serve and we are speaking to the very God who created heaven and earth.

Nehemiah 9:5-6 And the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabniah, Sherebiah, Hodijah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah, said: "Stand up and bless the Lord your God Forever and ever! "Blessed be Your glorious name, Which is exalted above all blessing and praise! 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.

C. GETTING A RIGHT PERSPECTIVES

We now see the Israelites are going to reflect what happened before and give thanksgiving to the Lord from verse 7-31.

Nehemiah 9:7-8 "You are the Lord God, Who chose Abram, And brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans, And gave him the name Abraham; You found his heart faithful before You, And made a covenant with him To give the land of the Canaanites, The Hittites, the Amorites, The Perizzites, the Jebusites, And the Girgashites-- To give it to his descendants. You have performed Your words, For You are righteous.

They reflected the creation of God in verse 6, but now they are revisiting the origin of the Israelites in verse 7 & 8 which we learned in the Book of Genesis.

Nehemiah 9:9-12 "You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, And heard their cry by the Red Sea. You showed signs and wonders against Pharaoh, Against all his servants, And against all the people of his land. For You knew that they acted proudly against them. So You made a name for Yourself, as it is this day. And You divided the sea before them, So that they went through the midst of the sea on the dry land; And their persecutors You threw into the deep, As a stone into the mighty waters. Moreover You led them by day with a cloudy pillar, And by night with a pillar of fire, To give them light on the road Which they should travel.

In verses 9-12, we discover the spectacular signs and wonders of Exodus.

Nehemiah 9:13-18 "You came down also on Mount Sinai, And spoke with them from heaven, And gave them just ordinances and true laws, Good statutes and commandments. You made known to them Your holy Sabbath, And commanded them precepts, statutes and laws, By the hand of Moses Your servant. You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger, And brought them water out of the rock for their thirst, And told them to go in to possess the land Which You had sworn to give them. "But they and our fathers acted proudly, Hardened their necks, and did not heed Your commandments. They refused to obey, And they were not mindful of Your wonders that You did among them. 1) But they hardened their necks, 2) and in their rebellion. 3) They appointed a leader to return to their bondage. But You are God, Ready to pardon, Gracious and merciful, slow to anger, Abundant in kindness, And did not forsake them. "Even when they made a molded calf for themselves, And said, 'This is your god That brought you up out of Egypt,' And worked great provocations,

In verses 13-18, we see they go through the latter part of Exodus and the meticulously prepared laws of Leviticus.

This is a typical pattern of backslider:

- 1) *But they hardened their necks* - We start to think that we are too good to take orders from God.
- 2) *and in their rebellion.* - Next step of this stupidity is our actions against the Word of God.
- 3) *They appointed a leader to return to their bondage.* - We replace our master Jesus to satan and putting ourselves into his bondage.

Nehemiah 9:19-21 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. You also gave Your good Spirit to instruct them, And did not withhold Your manna from their mouth, And gave them water for their thirst. Forty years You sustained them in the wilderness, They lacked nothing; Their clothes did not wear out And their feet did not swell.

In verses 19-21, we witness the Israelites making the 40 years of the Wilderness wondering because of their rebellion against God from the Book of Exodus to the Book of Deuteronomy.

In spite of their rebellion and disobedience, God chose to take care of them because of His goodness and faithfulness.

Nehemiah 9:22-25 "Moreover You gave them kingdoms and nations, And divided them into districts. So they took possession of the land of Sihon, The land of the king of Heshbon, And the land of Og king of Bashan. You also multiplied their children as the stars of heaven, And brought them into the land Which You had told their fathers To go in and possess. So the people went in And possessed the land; You subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, The Canaanites, And gave them into their hands, With their kings And the people of the land, That they might do with them as they wished. 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.

In verse 22-25, the Book of Joshua was narrated in a Reader's Digest version as they entered into the land of milk and honey.

Nehemiah 9:26-31 "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. Therefore You delivered them into the hand of their enemies, Who oppressed them; 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. "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; Yet when they returned and cried out to You, You heard from heaven; And many times You delivered them according to Your mercies, 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. Yet for many years You had patience with them, And testi-

fied against them by Your Spirit in Your prophets. Yet they would not listen; Therefore You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. Nevertheless in Your great mercy You did not utterly consume them nor forsake them; For You are God, gracious and merciful.

In verses 26-31, we go through the Books of Judges, Samuel, Kings and Chronicles while we hear them mentioning their ancestors' up and down obedience.

However, the important point of this journey through the Books of the OT is not what the Israelites accomplished, but how God treated them. Time after time, we see God's faithfulness, compassion, mercy and love for His people even though they committed sins after sins.

While I was preparing this teaching, I was thinking how America was acting toward God last 40 years. Don't think that we are better than these Israelites. How often do we sin against God? How often does He forgive us? It is because His mercy endures forever and His mercy renews every morning.

So far, we saw the Israelites lifted their voices to heaven to praise God and confessed their past sins and their ancestors' sins with genuine repentance.

D. MAKING HIM KNOWN

Now, we see their prayer switches time tracks from the past to the present for their petitions.

Nehemiah 9:32-37 "Now therefore, our God, The great, the mighty, and awesome God, Who keeps covenant and mercy: Do not let all the trouble seem small before You That has come upon us, Our kings and our princes, Our priests and our prophets, Our fathers and on all Your people, From the days of the kings of Assyria until this day. However You are just in all that has befallen us; For You have dealt faithfully, But we have done wickedly. Neither our kings nor our princes, Our priests nor our fathers, Have kept Your law, Nor heeded Your commandments and Your testimonies, With which You testified against them. For they have not served You in their kingdom, Or in the many good things that You gave them, Or in the large and rich land which You set before them; Nor did they turn from their wicked works. "Here we are, servants today! And the land that You gave to our fathers, To eat its fruit and its bounty, Here we are, servants in it! And it yields much increase to the kings You have set over us, Because of our sins; Also they have dominion over our bodies and our cattle At their pleasure; And we are in great distress.

It is not unusual for Christians to think this way, "Since we pray to God, now God is obligated to do what I asked Him to do." How wrong we are! He is not obligated to do anything. He chooses to do good things for us in spite of our wickedness and sins because of His love and mercy. If we really repented from our sins, ask for His help in our lives, one thing we must bring to surface is our commitment to God. That is what we are going to see here in verse 38.

Nehemiah 9:38 "And because of all this, We make a sure covenant, and write it; Our leaders, our Levites, and our priests seal it."

Can you sum up what we are committing ourselves to God in our prayers in one word? OBEDIENCE! God desires it more than our sacrifices and service to His Kingdom. He wants us to be obedient to His Word.

E. APPLICATIONS

As we look back what we learn tonight, we can see the four dimensions in the prayer God wants us to learn:

- 1) **PRAISING** - Looking up and recognizing who God is
- 2) **REFLECTING** - Looking back and confessing our sins and remembering God's faithfulness.
- 3) **PETITIONING** - Looking at the situation and asking for His interventions
- 4) **COMMITMENT** - Looking ahead and committing ourselves to be obedient to His Word.