



Nehemiah 9:1-38

Setting Priorities for Revival through Prayer

How would you know when a revival comes to your personal life, your church, your community or nation?

Nehemiah 9:1-5 tells us what take place when revival comes to God s people.

What follows in the rest of the chapter is the longest recorded prayer in the Bible. It is a rehearsal of Israel s history of God s faithfulness and Israel s failures. The conclusion is a new covenant with God.

The people have been rejoicing at the completion of the wall and the reading of the Word of God. After three weeks they returned for further reading of God s Word and confession of sin.

HUMILITY BEFORE GOD (9:1-4)

"Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt upon them. The descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. While they stood in their place, they read from the book of the law of the Lord their God for a fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the Lord their God. Now on the Levites platform stood Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani and Chenani, and they cried with a loud voice to the Lord their God" (Nehemiah 9:1-4, NASB 1995).

The people are clad in sackcloth, and with dirt upon them (v. 1). That must have been quite a scene with the people dressed in a coarse goat s hair, and dirt covered heads.

They came together in a formal assembly to worship the LORD God. These people had a hunger for God. They came with empty stomachs and grieving hearts. The act was an expression of mourning, grief, and humiliation over their sins. By throwing the dirt on their heads they were symbolically identifying with death. The soul that sins will surely die, " wrote the prophet Ezekiel (18:4). The apostle Paul reflected on the fact and said, The wages of sin is death . . . "

They repented by putting away known transgressions. Verse two informs us they separated themselves from all foreigners. That was painful because many of them had married foreigners.

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These Israelites stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers (v. 2). There was open confession of their sins. There was no false humility, pretense or arrogant pride.

There was further reading of God's Word. "While they stood in their place, they read from the book of the law of the Lord their God for a fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the Lord their God" (v. 3).

How refreshing to be reminded that when revival comes there is the renewed interest in the Scriptures. The reading of the Word of God was instrumental in bringing the revival and now that it has come the people continue to read it. The great congregation of Israel stood in an open assembly listening to the reading of the Word of God, confessing their sins and worshipping the LORD their God.

From a high platform the Levites cried out to God in prayer. They called out to the people, "Arise, bless the LORD your God forever and ever!" (v. 5). What follows is a great prayer of confession and thanksgiving which encompasses the whole history of the people of Israel.

The atmosphere in this chapter is in sharp contrast with the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles where there was great rejoicing and celebration (8:17-18).

When true revival sweeps over the people of God, there is a profound awareness of the glory of God, conviction of personal sin, and repentance. There is also an awakened conscience of God speaking through His Word. In Nehemiah's day they had a hunger for God's Word, and sorrow for sin that resulted in a changed life.

The Word of God had a profound impact on the people. It brought conviction of sin and confession. The people spent at least three hours confessing before God.

God uses His Word to make us aware of sin and how to respond to it in our lives (Psa. 51:1-4, 10; 32:5).

The prayer covers four areas and reaches to a climax. There is prayer and adoration (vv. 5-6), thanksgiving and reflection on Israel's past dealings with God (vv. 7-31), prayer requests (vv. 32-37), and a prayer of commitment to a new covenant (v. 38).

Ray Stedman said that this chapter is like a great antiphonal chorus with one group confessing sin, another group answering them, extolling the glory and grace of Yahweh.

PRAYER OF ADORATION AND PRAISE TO THE LORD GOD (9:5-6)

"Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah and Pethahiah, said, "Arise, bless the Lord your God forever and ever! O may Your glorious name be blessed and exalted above all blessing and praise! You alone are the Lord. You have made the heavens, the heaven of heavens with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to all of them and the

heavenly host bows down before You " (Nehemiah 9:5-6).

The Levites teach us how to confess our sins before God and praise Him for His grace and forgiveness.

There is no if in true confession of sin before a holy and righteous God. You do not say to God, Now, if I have . . . It is always God be merciful to me the sinner. "Lord I did it. "Lord, I am the one. I neglected Your Word. I rebelled. I have been disobedient. "

Then the Levites . . . said, Arise, bless the LORD your God forever and ever! (v. 5). In your imagination you can see them standing up and shouting, Bless the LORD your God forever and ever! Oh may Thy glorious name be blessed and exalted above all blessing and praise! "

They praised the name of Yahweh! There is no other God but Jehovah or Yahweh. Thou alone art the LORD. When the Jewish person spoke His Name, He said it all. There is none other. There was nothing to be compared with Him.

The prayer exalts the Creator (v. 6). Thou alone art the LORD. Thou hast made the heavens . . . with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. "

What a great God He is! When you see the great images that come back from the powerful space telescopes does, it cause you to shout praise to your Creator? When you see the beautiful images from space that NASA releases, do you sing How Great Thou Art ?Do you know Him and worship Him? That is what the host of heaven does. Thou dost give life to all of them and the heavenly host bows down before Thee (v. 6).

After beginning their prayer with affirmation and praise to the LORD God, they reflect on His grace and give thanksgiving to Him.

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING TO GOD (9:7-31)

This portion of the prayer reflects on Israel's past history and God's dealings with them from the call of Abraham until the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. The prayer follows the history of Israel based on the early books of the Hebrew Old Testament.

Of interest in this prayer is that nothing specific is mentioned by any one of the kings of Israel and Judah. Not even King David is mentioned.

- Vv. 7-8 reflects on the call of Abraham and God's faithfulness to him and his descendents. "You are the Lord God, Who chose Abram And brought him out from Ur of the Chaldees, and gave him the name Abraham. You found his heart faithful before You, and made a covenant with him to give him the land of the Canaanite, Of the Hittite and the Amorite, Of the Perizzite, the Jebusite and the Girgashite —To give it to his descendants. And You have fulfilled Your promise, For You are righteous." God keeps His promises. Thank God he called, chose and drew us to Himself. We are here today because God in His sovereign grace has drawn us irresistibly to Himself. God loved us first, and drew us to Himself and saved us.
- Vv. 9-12 recalls the Exodus and God's deliverance with signs and wondrous power. God saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, and heard their cry by the Red Sea. There He performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and the people of Egypt. He led the people through the sea on dry land and with a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night guided them to the

on dry land and with a pillar of cloud By day, and a pillar of fire by night guided them to the Promised Land. Let s never forget that we have been purchased, redeemed from the slavery of sin to serve a living God. You are not your own; you have been bought with a price, the precious blood of the Lamb of God.

- Vv. 13-15 God gave the Law, the Sabbath, made provisions in the wilderness and commanded them to enter the Promised Land. "You provided bread from heaven for them for their hunger, You brought forth water from a rock for them for their thirst, And You told them to enter in order to possess the land which You swore to give them" (v. 15). Praise God for His providential care. He supplies all our needs according to His grace and tender mercies (cf. Philippians 4:13, 19).
- Vv. 16-18 The sins and disobedience of the people are reflected upon. They were arrogant, stubborn, rebellious, but even then God was gracious and forgiving. Even in the honest reflection on their willful disobedience there is an outburst of praise to God for His grace. "But they, our fathers, acted arrogantly; they became stubborn and would not listen to Your commandments. They refused to listen, and did not remember Your wondrous deeds which You had performed among them; so they became stubborn and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. But You are a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness; And You did not forsake them" (v. 16-17). Note the behavior and the words that describe the people: arrogant, stiff-necked, disobedient, refused to listen to God s commandments, failed to remember, chose rebellious leaders. When you rebel against God, you invariably want to go back to the evil that you were involved in. . . . They forgot all the bondage because they longed for the sensual pleasures of Egypt. That is how rebellion deceives, says Stedman.
- Vv. 19-21 God s faithfulness is recalled during the 40 years of wilderness wanderings. God does not forsake His people in the wilderness after they create the golden idols, but has compassion on them and provides guidance and instruction by His Spirit, and physical nourishment with manna. If indeed, forty years You provided for them in the wilderness and they were not in want; their clothes did not wear out, nor did their feet swell" (V. 21).
- Vv. 22-25 the people took possession of the Promised Land, expanded the boundaries, subdued the enemies, fortified the cities and the fertile ground. God drove out their enemies before them.
- Vv. 26-31 the prayer reflects on the rebellion of the people, killing the prophets and the exile. Even during the time the sovereign hand of God is acknowledged. Therefore Thou didst deliver them into the hand of their oppressor who oppressed them (v. 27a). The wilderness cycle of Judges, and even slavery in the Promised Land is reflected on. It is all because of their sin. Arrogance, idolatry, and rebellion are the causes of the chastisement of a compassionate and gracious God who was always willing to forgive. "However, You bore with them for many years, and admonished them by Your Spirit through Your prophets, yet they would not give ear. Therefore You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. Nevertheless, in Your great compassion You did not make an end of them or forsake them, For You are a gracious and compassionate God" (vv. 30-31).

God is the subject throughout the whole section. Note the words that describe His attitudes and actions toward the people. The emphasis throughout the section is on God s faithfulness in contrast to the unfaithfulness of His people. Everywhere we turn there is the sovereign activity of the LORD God.

PRAYER REQUESTS (9:32-37)

The prayer builds to a climax and now the focus is once again on confession of sin. They made an appeal for God's mercy.

Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who dost keep covenant and lovingkindness . . . (v. 32). Sin is never insignificant with God.

God is just in all His dealings with men. "However, You are just in all that has come upon us; For You have dealt faithfully, but we have acted wickedly" (v. 33).

Over and over again the failure of Israel was matched by a new outpouring of the grace of God. How true that is in our lives as well. This whole chapter is replete with pictures of God's faithfulness, God's goodness, God's grace, God's tender mercies, and God's blessings!

PRAYER OF COMMITMENT IN A NEW COVENANT (9:38)

"Now because of all this we are making an agreement in writing; and on the sealed document are the names of our leaders, our Levites and our priests" (v. 38).

The people made a solemn commitment in written form to the LORD God.

Nehemiah chapter ten records the names of the leaders who signed the agreement with God. It was a matter of obedience. They took upon themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God's law . . . to keep and to observe all the commandments of God our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes (10:29). Those who signed represented all the people living in Judah during the day of Nehemiah.

Moreover, they refused to give their daughters in marriage to the peoples of the land, or to allow their sons to marry non-Jewish people.

The Sabbath and the house of God became priorities in their lives. "We will not neglect the house of God" (v. 39).

These people got serious with God that day. It was a revival that would last until the coming of Christ four hundred years later.

Revival is not an emotional upheaval—it is a commitment to action. It is a walk with God.

SOME ABIDING PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

1. God's Word will not return to Him void. It will accomplish His purposes. He uses His written Word to bring revival. How tragic that we live in a day that does not take the Word of God seriously. The Bible is God's book and we need to proclaim it.

2. The only behavior that changes is observed behavior. The people took time to reflect on God's faithfulness and their own rebellious lives. They confessed their sins and signed a formal commitment to change their direction of their lives. They got serious with God. We have a personal responsibility to make a personal commitment to God and keep it.

3. God's grace is always greater than our sins. He is ready to forgive if you will confess to Him. There is cleansing in the fountain that flows from the Lamb of God.

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4. God is sovereign in the affairs of nations, and not just Judah in the days of Nehemiah. He is just in all of His dealings with mankind. "However, You are just in all that has come upon us; For You have dealt faithfully, but we have acted wickedly" (9:33). Have you confessed to God your sins and turned from them?

5. Take some time and reflect on God's faithfulness and goodness to you in your life. Jot down on a piece of paper how God has been faithful to you and your family. Pause and give praise to Him. Thank Him for your job, your promotions, your achievements, and your family. Give Him glory.

6. Revival affects every area of our lives: personal, family, social, professional, business, church, etc. Spend some time praying for revival.

Somewhere God got a bad reputation by some arrogant sinners. The truth is He is described in the Old Testament as the God of grace, tender mercy and loving care. This great chapter in Nehemiah reminds us just how compassionate, patient and forgiving He really is. Even when the people of Israel blasphemed God, He did not destroy them, but spared them and drew them back to Himself. Yes, He chastised them, but that is an expression of love. We don't deserve anything but death, but God in love sent His Son to die in our place to give us eternal life. God is patient, longsuffering, loving toward us. He is still compassionate, merciful, caring. What greater love that He sent His Son to die for you? Have you put your faith and trust in Him? Have you thanked Him for loving you?

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