

Sermon – 11/01/2009 am

Nehemiah's Prayer

Study Text: Nehemiah 1:4-11

Nehemiah was the cupbearer or wine taster to King Artaxerxes, the king who ruled in Babylon from 465 to 424BC. In 445BC a fellow Jew called Hanani came from Jerusalem and Nehemiah asked him what it was like in the city of Jerusalem. Two parties of exiles had returned to the city by this time and the temple had been rebuilt. But the walls were broken down and the people were not able to worship freely.

Nehemiah was a man of action but above all he was a man of prayer. Like Daniel he would have prayed three times a day facing towards Jerusalem. It was not simply that Jerusalem was his home place – it was the holy city. It was the temple city where the people of God worshipped. Nehemiah longed to worship God in the place that God had ordained for his presence to reside. His heart was filled with sorrow when he heard that the people there were suffering distress and shame. He wept and mourned, he fasted and he prayed.

In the providence of God we have the words of Nehemiah's prayer in our hands and we can learn a great deal from his prayer. There are not many prayers recorded in the Bible, apart from those of David in the Psalms. Daniel's prayer is recorded in detail (Daniel 9) and we have seen Ezra's prayer (Ezra 9). The prayer of our Lord Jesus Christ is of course found in John 17. And there is also the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray, the so called Lord's Prayer.

How did Nehemiah pray? What did he say to the Lord? Some people do not pray because they have nothing to say to God, but others struggle to know what to say. Sadly some think that only certain Christians can pray, but prayer is essential to the life of every believer.

Prayer is often seen as asking God for things but this is only one aspect of prayer. Nehemiah had a need and he makes his request – in the second half of verse 11. What then is the rest of his prayer about? What is the pattern we find in Nehemiah's prayer?

Acknowledge God

Lord God of heaven, O great and awesome God (1:5). The first thing Nehemiah does in his prayer is acknowledge God. He declares who he is praying to. He is speaking to someone and that someone is the Lord God of heaven. He is talking to the great and awesome God, not to a friend next door. He is praying to God, not having a chat with Daddy as some modern teaching describes prayer. Nehemiah prays with great humility, not forgetting that God is in heaven and he, God's servant, is on earth.

How did Nehemiah know that God is great and awesome? He could have looked at the earth and into the heavens and seen the hand of God in creation. 'The heavens declare the glory of God and stars proclaim the work of his hands'. Nehemiah does not explicitly refer to God as the creator as the Psalmist often does (Psalm 24, 95), but this is implied in the words 'great and awesome'.

Nehemiah not only looked to the creation but he looked to the revelation of God in his word. In Deuteronomy 7:21 he read *for the Lord your God, the great and awesome God is among*

you. Daniel prayed the same words because he looked at the same written revelation of God (Dan 9:4). We learn about God from what he has revealed in his word. That is why reading the Bible goes hand in hand with prayer.

We often hear people speak of the ‘power of prayer’. They may simply be using shorthand but the truth is the power belongs to God. Prayer in itself has no power. Prayer to any other god is futile. Elijah laughed at the men praying to Baal – as if Baal had the power to send down fire from heaven. Their gods were just lumps of wood or stone. They had ears but could not hear. Nehemiah knew the Lord God of heaven could hear, and would hear and act.

Jesus told us to pray *Our Father in heaven*—notice the parallel with Nehemiah’s prayer – our Father in heaven, hallowed/holy be your name. God is holy. His name is above every name. He is the Most High God, the Almighty God, the creator of all things and judge of all human beings. He is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. When we come before our Father in heaven we acknowledge him for who he is and for what he has done. We believe that he hears our prayers and is powerful to save.

The second thing Nehemiah acknowledges about the Lord God of heaven is the covenant he made with his chosen people – the Mosaic covenant. In making a covenant he gave them commandments, promising to bless them when they obeyed, and to curse them if they disobeyed. In particular he promised to scatter them from one end of the earth to the other, there to serve other gods, if they failed to observe his commandments (Deuteronomy 28:64). Nehemiah, like Daniel, knew this was the reason they were exiled in Babylon (1:8). He knew that God keeps his word. God is faithful to his covenant.

There is a pattern of prayer that goes by the mnemonic ACTS. The A is for adoration. We could have used this word instead of ‘acknowledge’. The way to begin prayer is with adoration, with acknowledging God for who he is and what he has done. We acknowledge him for his creation and our redemption in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Confession

The C in the ACTS pattern is ‘confession’ and this is exactly what we find in Nehemiah’s prayer – and Daniel’s. It is what Jesus taught us in the Lord’s Prayer – *forgive us our sins*. It is found in the prayer of the tax collector but not the Pharisee in Luke 18. Is confession of sin found in your prayers?

Nehemiah knew God was faithful to his covenant. He knew that it was because of the people’s unfaithfulness that they were in exile. He also knew from Scripture that God in his mercy had promised to hear his people and bring them back from captivity when they confessed their sin and returned to the Lord (Deuteronomy 30:2-3). On the basis of this promise Nehemiah prays, confessing the sin of the people and his own sin (1:6).

The leaders of Judah, especially Manasseh, were primarily responsible for the apostasy of the nation. But the priests and the people went along with them. Their sins are detailed in the books of Kings and Chronicles. That is in the past but still remembered. Nehemiah is not praying for the dead but for the people living in Jerusalem in distress and shame. They had been intermarrying with pagans, breaking the Sabbath, and failing to give their tithes. Nehemiah was following Ezra in confessing the sins of his people and seeking reform in the holy nation. *We have not kept the commandments, the statutes, nor the ordinances which you commanded through your servant Moses* (1:7).

The decline of the western church in the last century has come about largely through corruption and compromise in high places. The authority of the word of God was undermined by so-called scholarship. Human reason and science were given authority over the Word of God. The inspiration and infallibility of the Scriptures was questioned. Biblical truths were cast aside if they were unreasonable to the modern mind. With these truths cast aside people no longer have a foundation for holy living, even in the church.

The commandments God gave through Moses were based on God's character and his covenant. They had a context if you like. In the New Testament the apostle Paul gave instructions to the church on how Christians should live; this teaching was based upon the truth about God, his character and his covenant in Jesus Christ.

Nehemiah's prayer is noteworthy for his confession. Our prayers should be the same. We cannot hide our sin from God. If we try to do so he will not hear our prayer (Psalm 66:18). Confess your sin and the Lord will forgive you. His ears are open to the prayer of those who confess and repent of their sin.

Supplication

The T in ACTS is for thanksgiving. In Nehemiah's prayer there is no specific mention of thanksgiving, yet in a sense the whole of his prayer is one of thanking God for his mercy and covenant faithfulness. The fact that they were not consumed by God in his righteous anger and that a remnant had returned to Jerusalem was cause for thanksgiving.

Following his confession Nehemiah makes his plea to God (1:11). On the basis of God's character and his covenant Nehemiah makes his request. Note the number of times he uses the word 'your' referring to God. Like Moses he pleads *these are your people whom you have redeemed by your great power* (1:10).

In his wrath God was ready to destroy his people when they made the golden calf to worship. But Moses pleaded with the Lord saying *these are your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with your great power* (Exodus 32:11). Daniel made his plea saying *for your city and your people are called by your name* (Daniel 9:19). Listen to your prayer sometime. Do you hear 'me' and 'my' or 'you' and 'your'?

Nehemiah prayed according to the declared will of God. He was praying according to the covenant God had made with his people – I will be your God and you will be my people. Nehemiah did not ask for any personal gift or benefit from the Lord. He did not pray for God to advance the life of Nehemiah in this world. He prayed for Jerusalem to be rebuilt to the honour and glory of God. To this end his specific request was for a favourable audience with King Artaxerxes.

As we weep like Nehemiah for the apostasy in our day let us also pray like Nehemiah, acknowledging God who is great and awesome. Let us humble ourselves before God, confess our sin and seek mercy in the name of Jesus. Let our request be *your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven, for yours is the kingdom the power and the glory forever and ever amen?*

Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon