

Let us Bow before our Maker

by Ray C. Stedman

The ninth chapter of the book of Nehemiah records the longest prayer in all the Bible. Perhaps you do not like long-winded prayers and are nervous about this one.

There is a great story about D. L. Moody who once asked a certain brother to pray at a service in the Chicago Church. The man began to pray and was still droning on after ten minutes had gone by. Finally, Mr. Moody stood up and said, "While our dear brother is finishing his prayer, let's turn to number 342 and sing it together!" This prayer in the book of Nehemiah is not that long, but it is a great model prayer which will teach us much for our own praying.

The first two verses record **the occasion** when this prayer was uttered. It follows the celebration of the Feast of Booths, or Tabernacles, which was observed in Israel for the first time for many years, following the recovery of the city of Jerusalem, the rebuilding of the walls, the resetting of the gates, and the restoring of order and some degree of prosperity to the city. That was a time of celebration but this occasion sounds a different note, as we see in the opening verses of Chapter 9:

On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads. Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers. {Neh 9:1-2 NIV}

This is clearly a time of sober self-judgment. It is a time when the people expressed their feelings of shame and grief by refraining from eating, by wearing burlap (sackcloth) and placing ashes on their heads to symbolize their inner sense of desolation. They confessed their sins and their father's sins as well. They were aware that the evil of one generation is often passed along to the next. Many today have forgotten that this principle still applies. The cause of this sudden change in the behavior of the Israelites is not given until the end of this prayer. Let us look ahead to Verses 36-37 which tell us what it was that caused them to mourn and fast, and to confess their sins. Addressing themselves to God they say:

But see, we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our forefathers so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces. Because of our sins, its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress. {Neh 9:36-37 NIV}

Here is a people that recognize clearly the connection between the evil in their own hearts and lives and the terrible conditions of slavery and bondage in which they exist.

As we have been noting throughout these studies, this is very similar to our own times. Today's

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secular prophets are deeply disturbed by what is going on in present-day American life. They seem to be saying the same things that these people are saying.

For instance, listen to these words from Brux Austin, Editor-in-chief of the *Texas Business* magazine:

We are truly the lost generation, huffing and puffing down the fast track to nowhere, always looking to the dollar sign for direction. That's the only standard we recognize. We have no built-in beliefs, no ethical boundaries. Cheat on your taxes, just don't get caught. Cheat on your wife, just don't get AIDS. Simply use a condom.

Then he goes on to look back at the previous generation, as these people in Nehemiah do.

“Where did I go wrong?” is the traditional wail of parents of kids-gone-wrong. The eighties version says, “We gave him everything – clothes, a computer, a car, a college education.” Everything but a conscience. We are products of a high-tech society; amoral automatons outfitted with calculating brains and sleek casings, just like the computers with which we are so compatible. But they forgot to give us souls.

He concludes by saying,

What good is lolling in your Jacuzzi in the beautiful backyard of your breathtaking home if you feel an aching emptiness in your innards – a chronic pain that all the wine cooler in the world can't numb?

Those searching words are descriptive also of what we see taking place in this chapter of Nehemiah. It is of great relevance to us. Despite our high-tech industries, our vaunted freedom from moral restrictions, our Rolex watches, Mercedes-Benzes and BMWs, we are really slaves today in America. Slaves in the land of the free and the home of the brave! What irony!

In this prayer of the Levites in Nehemiah 9 we learn how to recover from that kind of a situation. What can we, the people of God (as they were the people of God) do to help change this condition? As we read in these opening verses, they gathered before God to pray:

- They fasted.
- They wept.
- They asked for mercy.
- They kept it all strictly within the family of Israel.
- They did not go outside it to involve foreigners.
- They did not blame others for their plight.

They looked to themselves and “confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers.”

And they did **one other thing**, recorded in Verse 3:

They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day, and spent another fourth in confession and in worshiping the LORD their God. {Neh 9:3 NIV}

Three hours of confession and then three hours of praise! Thus they presented their case to God. As we read on we will see that the Levites divided themselves into two groups. Some were standing on the stairs leading up to the Water Gate and others were on a platform on the opposite side of the square. These groups were calling back and forth to the people, one group confessing the sins of the people, the other praising God in language that fit the situation at the time.

Standing on the stairs were the Levites – Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani and Kenani – who called with loud voices to the Lord their God [these were the confessors]. And the Levites – Jesuha, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah and Pethahiah – said: “Stand up and praise the LORD your God, who is from everlasting to everlasting” [these were the praise leaders]. {Neh 9:4-5a NIV}

We have, then, a kind of antiphonal chorus: one group confessing sin, another group answering them, extolling the glory, compassion and mercy of God.

The rest of this chapter, from Verse 5 through Verse 37, gives us the actual words they employ. I want to read it through with you. We will **let the text itself teach us** how to confess sin before God and how to praise him for his mercy and grace. It

begins with a great section of praise. Verses 5-15 are all praise to God.

First, God is praised as *the Creator and Maker* of everything.

“Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.” {Neh 9:5b-6 NIV}

That is a great place to start when you are praising God. Begin with the life he gave you. It seems strange to me that men who are dependent every moment on life given to them by God, allow themselves so easily to forget that fact.

- We did not create ourselves.
- We did not fashion this intricate machinery that sustains our bodies. Did you ever think of all the processes that are happening in your body right now that are keeping you alive, over which you have no control?
 - That pacemaker in your mind that keeps your heart beating, for instance. You do not control that. It would be awful if you had to, wouldn't it?
 - The diaphragm that keeps you breathing in and out. Wouldn't it be terrible if you had to lie awake all night and say, “Now *dia*, now *phragm*, now *dia*, now *phragm*, now *dia*, now *phragm*!”

God sustains us moment by moment. We ought to be grateful for that. Let us never forget that our very breath comes from him.

Then the next section praises God as *the Caller and Chooser of men*. He is the One who gives undeserved blessings to those he chooses.

“You are the LORD God, who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and named him Abraham. You found his heart faithful to you, and you made a covenant with him to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Jebusites and Girgashites [These were the Canaanite

tribes that inhabited the land of Palestine]. **You have kept your promise because you are righteous.” {Neh 9:7-8 NIV}**

God is the keeper of promises. He is the One who initiates the call of man to himself. The New Testament tells us that not one of us would ever seek God if he had not first sought us. It is he who awakens in us feelings and desires to draw near to him and to find out the truth of where we came from. These eternal questions that throb in the minds of men and women all over the world are planted there by the Spirit of God. It is he who calls, chooses and draws us to himself. Not one of us would be here today if it were not for that merciful, sovereign call of God. Jesus said, “No man can come unto me except my Father draw him.” We are here today because the Spirit of God in wondrous grace has drawn us irresistibly to himself.

Then they praised God as *the Deliverer from sin* and its enslavement.

“You saw the suffering of our forefathers in Egypt; you heard their cry at the Red Sea. You sent miraculous signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his officials and all the people of his land, for you knew how arrogantly the Egyptians treated them. You made a name for yourself, which remains to this day. You divided the sea before them, so that they passed through it on dry ground, but you hurled their pursuers into the depths, like a stone into mighty waters. By day you led them with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire to give them light on the way they were to take.” {Neh 9:9-12 NIV}

This is a retelling of the history of this nation, beginning with the call of Abraham and their deliverance from Egypt. Some of us are inclined to be indifferent to history. We should remember the wise words of George Santayana, the Spanish philosopher: “He who forgets the past is condemned to repeat it.” Many have done that. We have forgotten the lessons God taught us and gone right back to do the same things over again, plunging ourselves once more into rebellion and slavery. Let us never forget that we have been wonderfully, even miraculously, delivered by the great hand of God.

Last Monday night I reminded my class about a young man who was subjected to the mockery of his friends when he became a Christian. “Do you believe in all those miracles of the New Testament?” they asked him. “Yes, I do,” he replied. “Do you believe that one about Jesus changing water into wine?” they demanded. “Yes, I believe that,” he said. “How could he do that?” they asked. The young man responded, “I don’t know how, but I believe it, because at our house he changed beer into furniture!” When God changes the heart, all kinds of wonderful deliverances take place.

So the Israelites praise God for his deliverance of their nation.

Then they praise him as *the great Provider* of wisdom and the necessities of life.

“You came down on Mount Sinai; you spoke to them from heaven. You gave them regulations and laws that are just and right, and decrees and commands that are good. You made known to them your holy Sabbath and gave them commands, decrees and laws through your servant Moses. In their hunger you gave them bread from heaven and in their thirst you brought them water from the rock; you told them to go in and take possession of the land you had sworn with uplifted hand to give them.” {Neh 9:13-15 NIV}

Here is God’s providential care of his own. He taught this people how to live in the midst of great wickedness. He knew he was sending them into a land inhabited by tribes who were morally degraded to a degree that is appalling to us today. They openly indulged in lewd practices. They offered their children to the god Molech by throwing them alive into a furnace of fire. It was among this people that these Israelites had to live. Yet God taught them how to avoid defilement and contamination from those things. He taught them how to be friends with these people, but not be destroyed by their immorality.

It is exactly the situation we are called to live in today. God has given us this wonderful book that teaches us the rules of life, health, salvation, deliverance and the inner strength that can resist the temptations that abound all around us. To neglect it is folly.

God also supplied their needs. He gave them bread to eat when there was none. He gave them

water from the rock in the middle of the desert. That is not only an account of meeting physical needs, but it describes the meeting of spiritual needs as well. The New Testament tells us these are pictures of Christ: He is the bread of life; he is the water of life. As the Israelites learned the meaning of these symbols they began to understand that there was coming One who would fully meet the need of the human heart. Thus they looked forward and saw the coming of the Messiah.

Now, the confessing group takes up the theme and, in the rest of the passage, we have an alternation between **confession** and **praise**. One group cries out, confessing sin, and then the other answers with praise to God.

But they, our forefathers, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and did not obey your commands. They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. {Neh 9:16-17a NIV}

This is the direction rebellion always takes. When you rebel against God you invariably want to go back to the evil that you once were involved in. That is what Israel did. They actually wanted to go back to Egypt, back to beatings and oppression by the heavy hand of Pharaoh, back to slaving all day, making bricks without straw. They forgot all the bondage because they longed for the sensual pleasures of Egypt. That is how rebellion deceives.

But now there follows a wonderful word of praise. It covers the history of Israel in three divisions:

First, the scenes around *the Mount of Sinai*:

But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them, even when they cast for themselves an image of a calf and said, “This is your god, who brought you up out of Egypt,” or when they committed awful blasphemies. {Neh 9:17b-18 NIV}

Where did the impression ever arise of God as a cruel, stern God, thundering judgments upon people, demanding that they toe the mark or else be punished severely and without mercy? God is al-

ways described in the Old Testament as a God of loving care. He is compassionate and patient. He waits while people go through their trials, hoping they will learn lessons along the way, that they might return to him so that he can bless them. Even as these people blasphemed God by creating this golden calf they called their god, he did not wipe them out but spared them, as this account says.

Verse 19 moves on to *the desert and the years of wandering*:

Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them in the desert. By day the pillar of cloud did not cease to guide them on their path, nor the pillar of fire by night to shine on the way they were to take. You gave your good Spirit to instruct them. You did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and you gave them water for their thirst. For forty years you sustained them in the desert; they lacked nothing, their clothes did not wear out nor did their feet become swollen. {Neh 9:19-21 NIV}

Have you recently looked back on your life and counted up the providential care of God in your experience? We tend to take God's blessings for granted and concentrate our attention on what we do not have. The media teaches us that we deserve far more than we are getting. They flash shiny cars before us and say, "You deserve this. You are the kind of person that ought to have this. You deserve to be the president of your company. You deserve to take annual cruises on the Caribbean. You deserve to have a BMW or a Jaguar – maybe two of them. You deserve to live in a beautiful, well landscaped home."

But when you turn to the Scriptures you see the other side of it. There we are brought face-to-face with what has actually gone on in our lives and in our hearts. Hidden behind locked doors of silence are acts of cruelty, violence, anger, thoughtlessness, immorality, child abuse, sexual abuse, and other ugly, miserable, vicious practices. God has seen all that. When we face the full picture as it really is, we learn that we do not deserve anything but death. But that is not what we get! We do not get death. That is the point. God is patient and longsuffering with us. He withholds judgment. He lets us experience some judgment in order to get our attention, but he does not wipe us out. He is a

compassionate, merciful, caring, loving God. That is what these people are reminding themselves of.

Then there follows another period of confession, gathered around *their life in Canaan*, their conquests and achievements by God's hand.

You gave them kingdoms and nations, allotting to them even the remotest frontiers. They took over the country of Sihon king of Heshbon and the country of Og king of Bashan. You made their sons as numerous as the stars in the sky, and you brought them into the land that you told their fathers to enter and possess. Their sons went in and took possession of the land. You subdued before them the Canaanites, who lived in the land; you handed the Canaanites over to them along with their kings and the peoples of the land, to deal with them as they pleased. They captured fortified cities and fertile land; they took possession of houses filled with all kinds of good things, wells already dug, vineyards, olive groves and fruit trees in abundance. They ate to the full and were well-nourished; they reveled in your great goodness. {Neh 9:22-25 NIV}

It is an amazing story! These people had just come out of 400 years of slavery in Egypt. They had no military training. They were not an aggressive people, and yet they confronted armies of well-trained pagans who were used to fighting, and swept them away. They took over great cities and won the land. This is describing the book of Joshua. When they were finished, they recognized that God had done this and they praised him for his marvelous goodness to them.

Have you ever thanked God for the victories you have achieved in your life; your promotions that you did not expect to get; your achievements at work or in your home? Have you stopped to revel in the goodness of God? That is the right thing to do. Recognize that God is with you. God's hand is in what you do. Give him glory for that.

But the other group now comes in to give us the other side of the picture.

But they were disobedient and rebelled against you; they put your law behind their backs. They killed your prophets, who had admonished them in order to turn them back to you; they committed awful blasphemies. {Neh 9:26 NIV}

How does God deal with people who treat him like that? After he has blessed them abundantly and given them so much, what happens when they forget to give him glory and turn their backs on him?

The other group tells us:

So you handed them over to their enemies, who oppressed them. But when they were oppressed they cried out to you. From heaven you heard them, and in your great compassion you gave them deliverers, who rescued them from the hand of their enemies. {Neh 9:27 NIV}

That is the book of Judges – the story of Israel at last brought under the rule of strangers for 20, 30, 40 years at a time. Then, as the people would cry out to God, he would deliver them every time by sending a judge. But it is also clear from Judges and this account that their rebellion led to ugly things, among them murder and sexual perversion.

Then the confessors come in again, in Verse 28:

But as soon as they were at rest, they again did what was evil in your sight. Then you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies so that they ruled over them. And when they cried out to you again, you heard from heaven, and in your compassion you delivered them time after time. {Neh 9:28 NIV}

What a marvelous picture of the patience of God! This is the way God works. He lets us taste the results of our evil. He gets our attention sometimes by letting sickness come or disaster strike. But it is only in order that we might hear what he is saying and be delivered. He warns us in order to keep us free.

One Sunday evening in the '70s we invited the president of the Gay People's Union of Stanford University to come here and speak to our young people on the subject: *What the Bible says about Homosexuality*. We extended to him the opportunity to defend the position that the Bible endorses homosexuality as an alternate lifestyle. We told him he could say whatever he liked and bring all the literature he wanted. If you were here that night you will remember that, although this man

was the president of the Debating Club at Stanford, he struggled as he tried to present his case. He would read a passage and then say, "It really doesn't say that, does it?" and then he would turn to another passage. He went all through the Bible trying to prove his cause, but he floundered and could not get anything together.

We had made an agreement with him that when he finished one of our young pastors would speak to the same subject. I remember well how graciously Steve Zeisler opened the Scriptures and pointed out that when God forbids something it is not because he wants to limit us or narrow our lives. It is because he is protecting us from something that we cannot handle, something so devastating it will eat away at the vitals of our life and ruin us. We heard from the Word over and over again how homosexuality destroys human beings and turns them into something God never intended them to be. Eventually they would be locked into pain, hurt, misery, loneliness and death.

Out of that episode there came opportunity for us to reach out in compassion to those who were struggling with homosexual tendencies. We have seen a great number delivered and set free by the mercy and grace of God. That is what this passage describes – the tough love of God who will not let ruin overtake us without adequate warning.

In Verse 29 we have the last dual presentation of confession and praise,

You warned them to return to your law, but they became arrogant and disobeyed your commands. They sinned against your ordinances, by which a man will live if he obeys them. Stubbornly they turned their backs on you, became stiff-necked and refused to listen. {Neh 9:29 NIV}

Again they are confessing the mistakes of a previous generation. They see clearly how much of their own agony and hurt has come from the mistakes their fathers made before them. But then the praise group comes in:

For many years you were patient with them. By your Spirit you admonished them through your prophets. Yet they paid no attention, so you handed them over to the neighboring peoples. But in your great

mercy you did not put an end to them, or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God. {Neh 9:30-31 NIV}

There covers the rest of the Old Testament: the story of Israel's subjugations, first by the Syrians, later by the Assyrians, and finally the Babylonians. God allowed these enemies to come in to make his people see what was happening; to wake them up to the damage being done.

The closing paragraph here, beginning with Verse 32, brings *their history down to their own time*. Here we find a change of pronouns. They have been talking about "they" and "them." Now we read about "we" and "our" as they begin to look at their own generation.

Now therefore, O our God, the great, mighty and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes – the hardship that has come upon us, upon our kings and leaders, upon our priests and prophets, upon our fathers and all your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until today. In all that has happened to us, you have been just; you have acted faithfully, while we did wrong. Our kings, our leaders, our priests and our fathers did not follow your law; they did not pay attention to your commands or the warnings you gave them. Even while they were in their kingdom, enjoying your great goodness to them in the spacious and fertile land you gave them, they did not serve you or turn from their evil ways. {Neh 9:32-35 NIV}

As we saw at the beginning, they acknowledge that they are slaves in their own land and because of their own sins.

This is where we find ourselves in America today. Our cities are torn with violence, strife, and drug wars of such intensity that people hardly dare go outside their homes. We are slaves in our own land. The only recovery is to do as these people did – confess our wrongdoing to God and praise him for his compassionate mercy.

These Levites teach us how to confess. Notice how specific they are. "We did wrong. You have acted faithfully but we did wrong. We did not pay attention to your laws. We did not hear your words, etc." Some Christians think they are confessing when they say,

Lord, if I have injured any soul today,
If I have caused some foot to go astray,
If I have walked in my own willful way,
Dear Lord, forgive.

But that is not confession. There is no "if" in true confession. You do not say, "If I did this..." You say, "Lord, I did it. I failed. I turned aside. I forgot your Word. I walked in my own willful way." Then God hears, forgives and restores. That is his gracious nature. That is what he wants to do.

This word needs little application. We are in the same place today. We see the same two themes at work – the rebellion and indifference of men, and the gracious, loving patience of God until he is at last forced to take action. He is waiting to pardon us when the wrong of our lives is faced.

I am not going to diminish the impact of this on individual hearts. I am going to give an opportunity now for each of us to sit in quietness before the Lord and confess directly to him the sins of our own life and to pray for forgiveness.

Then we shall stand and sing together the words of *The Lord's Prayer*.