

# **FAITHLESS PEOPLE, FAITHFUL GOD**

## ***SERIES: THE MESSAGE OF NEHEMIAH***

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In Nehemiah 8, we read of Jerusalem as the site of a wonderful revival. The Spirit of God came on the people of God, and their worship was exhilarating as they drew together in his presence.

The opening chapters of the book of Nehemiah have to do with the broken hearts of God's people and the broken walls of God's city, the stirring of leaders and the response of the people to face those issues. We read of God at work in people and events as the walls were slowly but surely put back in place and the city was restored. As a result of their efforts, the people grew hungry to experience the living presence of God. They called out for their leaders to read and teach them the Scriptures, and a great spiritual awakening took place.

Recall two of the verses that we considered in chapter 8 (Discovery Paper 4616). Verse 12: "Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food [to those who had nothing prepared] and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them." Verse 17: "The whole company that had returned from exile built booths and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it [the Feast of Tabernacles] like this. And their joy was very great."

These verses are describing spontaneous worship of God that included both words and actions: weeping, praise, celebration--the joy of the Lord.

### **The valley after the mountain top**

Chapter 9 takes place, as the opening verse says, "...on the twenty-fourth day of the same month." The events of chapter 8 took place at the very beginning of the month.

Now, what would we expect to happen next after that thrilling encounter with God? For many of us, what happens after a mountain-top experience of the presence of God generally is a valley.

Drinking the elixir of the Spirit of God full-strength, so to speak, is often followed by expressions of need and difficulty and the reassertion of fleshly instincts. We need to work at getting through the long course ahead of us.

Let me just say before we look at chapter 9 that most people get the language about this wrong. When they talk about mountain-top experiences of being in God's presence, loving their companions, singing, being spontaneous in worship, they continue, "But then I had to go back to the real world." But the better way to think of it is this: the real world is where we are in love with one another, in love with Christ, finding new and creative ways to express our joy in the Lord, going from one extraordinary view of God to another, and that never ends. The real world consists of the joy of the Lord as your strength, and it gets better and fuller every day. But there is a necessary interim between the glorious experience of God that might be ours for the moment and the eternal experience of God that goes on forever and ever. There remains what the apostle Paul calls a course to finish. There is this time of struggle when our sins assert themselves and we have a battle to fight.

### **The journey through the valley**

This is the concern of chapter 9. It records an extended prayer, the longest prayer in the Bible outside of the Psalms. It's about sin, struggles, God's faithfulness, our faithlessness, and the longing to know how to finish the course, to get through the thicket.

Let's read verses 1-3:

**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. They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshipping the LORD their God.**

The tone is very different from that of chapter 8, which was joyful and spontaneous. This is a formal description of mourning. In verses 4ff, the Levites gathered before the people and led them in this long prayer. The prayer is mostly a history of all that God had done and all the failure to love and appreciate him that had been true of God's people.

The key theme in this prayer is found in verse 2: They confessed not only their own sins, but the wickedness of their fathers. Verses 34-35 make the same point. It wasn't just what they had done recently that was the problem. It was the fact that they came from a long line of rebellion. The problems they had were a deep and abiding heritage.

**"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."**

If all the generations prior to you have been people who listened to God and eventually rejected him, what likelihood is there that your generation is going to be dramatically different? There is something instinctive in us that makes us fall into the same ditch over and over again, that makes us devalue what God calls valuable.

Some of what flows from that is the senseless violence that has occurred in every generation. Why are the tribes of the Balkans so quickly vicious to one another? Neighbors live side by side and get along for many years. But once the violence breaks out, they ferociously hate each other. Why does racism abide generation after generation? Why do differences that are unimportant between human beings have the power to divide people, to cause anxiety and distance and warfare over and over again? There's something about how we were raised that has a profound influence.

Leaving aside the long history, how many of us haven't, at times, vowed to do better? "This time, Lord, it will be different. I will resist temptation. I won't be the same as I've always been." And yet, if we're honest and we go back over the diary of our life, we have made exactly that same vow time and time again. If we've said that too many times, it's very hard to say it again.

For example, some people respond to hurt with depression, and they know that the joylessness of depression is a denial of God. To stay very long in that dark place is to say that God is not light. So they're determined that this time when they're hurt, they're not going to give way again to black and foul moods of depression. Yet time and time again the same reaction occurs.

People in their frustration lash out with angry words at the ones they love and take out their hurt by hurting others. They've vowed, determined, gritted their teeth, clenched their fists, and said, "This time when I'm hurt I'm not going to hurt someone I love in return." Yet they realize it's the same words they've said before, with the same clenched fists and gritted teeth. It's so easy, the grooves are worn so smooth.

Some are lonely, and in their loneliness they compound the problem by pitying themselves. They finally get disgusted with self-pity and say, "Never again will the loneliness and lack that I perceive in my life take me down

that road." But they know they've said it before.

The problems are old and deep. They go back to our fathers and our forefathers, and generation after generation, the same thing happens. One old preacher used the oxymoron, "My weaknesses are powerful." That's the human tragedy.

We have transforming moments: Moses' burning bush, Isaiah's prophetic call, Paul's conversion on the Damascus road. And the transforming moments are real and eternal. But there's still a course to walk, a pilgrimage to make that is filled with what we inherited. So I am hopeful that this prayer of Nehemiah's will help us see and hear some things that will encourage us in the journey.

### **God is not to blame for our struggle**

Let me make some observations. We can't read all of it, and it is in some ways fairly repetitive. The language is not terribly evocative. This prayer is merely a retelling of history. But we do well to observe that this *is* a prayer. It is very important to know that the leaders of Israel turned toward God in hope rather than away from him in shame. Do you try to fix yourself, or do you turn to God and say, "Lord, here I am again speaking of things that seem so hard, but I'm turning to you, not to anyone else"?

Also, it is clear that our struggle with sin and rebellion and failure is not God's fault. In reading this prayer, God is viewed at every point as powerful, intimate, kind, and patient.

Look at verses 5-6.

**"Stand up and praise the LORD your God, who is from everlasting to everlasting."**

**"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."**

The power of God is absolute. This God has no shortcomings. He doesn't grow weary or get distracted.

The end of verse 8 brings the point closer to home:

**"You have kept your promise because you are righteous."**

His righteous character, coupled with his mighty power, insist that he is reliable and trustworthy.

The next part of this history lesson, verses 9-25, is about the exodus and the conquest, and it tells another wonderful truth about God. Not only is he powerful, but he is attentive. He listens and cares. We can't fault him for being so high above the human condition that he is uninvolved. Verse 9:

**"You saw the suffering of our forefathers in Egypt; you heard their cry at the Red Sea."**

Verse 15:

**"In their hunger you gave them bread from heaven and in their thirst you brought them water from the rock...."**

Verses 19-21:

**"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."**

On a hot day, or if you take a long walk, do your feet swell up? For forty years, as the children of Israel wandered in the desert, their feet didn't swell, their clothes didn't wear out, they never missed a meal, and there was always a supply of water. Our failure is not because God is distant. He is caring, attentive, involved, alert.

The last section of this long history, verses 26-31, concerns the period of the judges and the monarchy, and the words of the prophets. The frequently-encountered description of God here is his patience. "We failed, and you brought us back. We rebelled, and you were merciful. We were cold, and you were loving." Over and over again they experienced the patience of God, the mercy that had no end to it. The point is, sin is not God's fault. It is not a failure of his power, his attention, or his patience. There is nothing in him that accounts for our problems.

## **Ingratitude and defiance**

There are two phrases in this long prayer that have been helpful to me in thinking about rebellion. What is human rebellion like? Look at verse 17a:

**"They refused to listen and failed to remember...."**

God's declaration of his goodness, his involvement, who he is and what he does and what matters to him, are not hard to understand, but we refuse to listen and fail to remember. It's a choice. Listening to God and remembering what we know of him together are simply gratitude. We choose to enumerate his blessings rather than our struggles.

Every one of us has a choice as to how we're going to look at life. Is the list of things that occupies our thinking filled with the things we didn't get, God's treating someone else differently than he treated us, his not responding when we want him to? Do we have complaints to offer that compound with other complaints so that we grow increasingly petulant with our circumstances?

It's a choice to dwell on those things. The other choice is to begin to enumerate what we're thankful for—the kindness that he's shown us, the good news about Jesus having come near to us, the presence of his Spirit, the moments he gives when we see him as he is, the countless other things we have to be thankful for.

The problem that the Israelites in their history had that this prayer recounts was that they refused to listen and they failed to remember. They were not grateful to God. It's helpful to me to be reminded that gratitude, learning to actively think of and thank God for who he is and what he's done, is one of the holiest and wisest ways to live.

The second phrase is in the middle of verse 26:

**"...They put your law behind their backs."**

Defiance. They knew what God wanted. He had made it clear what was good and right. But they deliberately put behind their backs what was beautiful and good, how they ought to have lived.

Now think of the ordinary span of a person's life. Children are born cute. They get cuter, they toddle, they're learning. Then you have the "terrible twos." They finally have enough authority in their life, being able to talk and walk and tear up your things, and to put on this glorious display of defiance. "NO!" becomes a two-year-old's favorite word. They are saying, "I put your law behind my back. I don't care what you want, Mommy and Daddy. I'm doing what I want." Then there is the fabled rebellion of teenagers, or of children who have moved away from home for the first time. They take all their parents' values and toss them behind their back. Those having a mid-life crisis behave similarly. "I know better, but so what? I'm going to have what I want and be who I want and step on whomever I need to to get what I want. I've earned this mid-life crisis, and I'm going to do it in spades." They're throwing what's good behind their back.

Obviously, not every person rebels in the same way. But it is consistent with human experience over and over again to know better and say, "I'm going to do it anyway." And inevitably, what we sow we reap; there are always consequences. But we defy even our own hearts and what we know is best for us.

### **The faith in turning to God**

This prayer is wise regarding the human struggle, about who we are and what we do. It ends on a very interesting note, beginning at verse 36:

**"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."**

This is a penetrating observation. Israel's history as a nation began with the exodus and deliverance from slavery in Egypt, and now the Levites who were leading in prayer said, "We're slaves again in our own land. We are a conquered people living under the rule of Persia."

Verse 37:

**"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."**

The prayer ends on a jarring note: "We are in great distress. We've confessed our sins and the sins of our fathers. We've acknowledged that generation after generation, the same problems seem to come back. Why should we imagine ourselves to be different? We have our own history of good intentions followed by falling apart followed by good intentions followed by falling apart. And if we're honest, we can only end up saying we are in great distress."

But there is something beautiful about the willingness to go to God with nothing more than one's distress. "Lord, this is a discussion we've had before. I wish I had something better to report, but I don't. I'll report it to you as it is-I'm hurting again." It is faith that leads us to go to God with that alone.

### **The ministry of the great High Priest**

But this is not the best news. The marvelous opportunity we have as Christians is to go beyond just the statement of our distress and the acknowledgment that we have done it to ourselves again. God joined his sinful people. He didn't stand above them, only hearing their prayers. He entered into the stream of human experience with us. He knows how it feels. He has given himself to pay the price for our rebellion; but in addition to paying the price, he has stood shoulder to shoulder with us. We are not speaking to someone who doesn't understand, calling on God from a distance. We are calling on our Brother who knows exactly what it's like to be who we are.

God doesn't just offer help from heaven. He offers help from the inside. It is possible to change. God himself invests in us in ways that we discover over a lifetime. Just because our fathers were wicked doesn't mean we have to be wicked in the same way, without hope, without power, without someplace to turn. God 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 (4:14-16). This is the God we're praying to:

**"Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."**

Instead of sinning and confessing and sinning and confessing over and over again, when we're struggling, failing, being tempted in the midst of the battle, let's draw near to him then. God isn't sitting back waiting for us to fail.

There is grace, mercy, companionship, strength-the good ministry of the great High Priest who knows what it's like to be us. So let's draw near.

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