

Text: Nehemiah 9

Title: “Life Together – Praying”

INTRODUCTION

We’re talking these days about our “Life Together” as the people of God and we’re drawing encouragement from Nehemiah 8-10 talking what great things happen when God’s people gather ... in the largest gatherings for corporate worship ... in smaller settings for Bible study and staying connected through what we call Sunday School. Now the next level is a level that is a little new for us. There is not enough time on Sunday mornings for us to accomplish all that needs to be accomplished in our “life together.” So in two weeks we are starting up something called A2C groups or Acts 2 Community Groups. What are these groups? They are mostly formed from existing relationships in Sunday School classes where people get together on a Sunday evening, or some other time during the week.

Community groups focus on a common purpose, intentionally creating an atmosphere of accountability, trust, encouragement and openness, learning how to apply the truth of God’s Word in order to become passionate followers of Christ.

Some in our church already have experience with these kinds of community groups. I wanted you to hear from them this morning.

- Mike Lee, you’re a Sunday School teacher, but you’ve also had experience in an A2C kind of group. What’s the difference between what happens in Sunday morning in a Sunday School class and what happens in the A2C group?
- Yvette Campbell, you work in our church offices and I’ve heard you on several occasions an A2C group that you are part of. How has your A2C group minister to you?
- Justin Wheatley is a high school literature teacher. As you think about the spiritual goals you have in your life, how has your involvement in an A2C group helped you to experience spiritual transformation.

Open your Bibles with me to Nehemiah 9. One of the things that will happen in our A2C groups is that we will have more time to spend in concerted prayer with and for another. One the most important parts of our life together as the people of God is prayer. We worship together. We study God’s Word together. And we pray together.

Now here in Nehemiah 9 the Israelites are about three and one-half weeks into the sacred seventh month of the Jewish year, roughly equivalent to our September-October. They’ve celebrated festivals and at the conclusion of all these celebrations, they have another great gathering, primarily for prayer, corporate prayer. Read Nehemiah 9:1-5.

What we have following here is a description of a powerful prayer that is offered corporately as the people of God. We’re not told who exactly voiced this prayer. Maybe it is Ezra or Nehemiah or one of the Levites who are mentioned in vv.3-4. But it is one of the most moving prayers recorded in the Word of God. And at the end of it the people of God renewed their commitments and their covenant with their God.

And one of the most important things that happen when we are together is prayer. It was certainly true in the NT.

Acts 2:42 (NIV) - They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

The word for prayer there is plural ... "prayers." It indicates corporate prayer.

ILLUSTRATION - But this corporate praying is not like what happens on a typical Friday night in Texas at a high school football game. In the instances where it is still allowed there's somebody up in press box somewhere praying over the PA system. The cheerleaders are doing their thing; the teams are still warming up; the lines at the concession stand are still moving. Fans are looking for their seats. Is anyone really talking to God? Is there any agreement happening? And all that reflects our view of God ... or this "mush god" who is prayed to in settings like that. Does that kind of praying get above the light poles in the stadium?

No, what you see here on the pages of Scripture are the people of God uniting their hearts together in fervent, agreeing prayer.

It's an amazing thing that in the economy of God's dealings with us that He would permit us to having any kind of influence on the course of things through prayer. It really is gracious of God to allow us that privilege. Let's look at the kind of praying moves the heart and the hands of God?

1. HUMILITY (v.1).

Nehemiah 9:1 (NIV) – “the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads.”

All these things were outward symbols of an inner brokenness and humility before God. Humility and prayer always go together.

2 Chronicles 7:14 - If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

We are told here to humble *ourselves*. Humility is not just a feeling that comes and goes, over which we have no control. It is an attitude that we cultivate and demonstrate. It's not just a personality trait that some people possess. Rather it is something that we initiate. We humble *ourselves*.

Here in Nehemiah 9 the Israelites do that by fasting, wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads. They fasted ... refrained from eating. When people are grieving over something, a big delicious meal just isn't appealing. They wore clothing that reflected their brokenness, much like a widow might come to the funeral of her husband dressed in black. And they had covered themselves with dirt, another ancient way of demonstrating brokenness and remorse.

Demonstrating humility before the Lord communicates to Him that we take Him seriously. He is God and we aren't.

Another way we communicate that is through...

2. HOLINESS (v.2).

Nehemiah 9:2a (NIV) - Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners.

The Jews were not the only ones in Jerusalem. There were other people who had populated the city while the Israelites were in captivity. And now the people of God were coming into the presence of God. And for that to happen they need to be holy and set apart.

So the people separated themselves for the purpose of holiness.

Hebrews 12:14 - Be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.

So why is this important? When we come into the presence of the Lord in prayer, we need to make sure that we are clean. The fact is that anytime we enter the presence of God we enter as sinners. In your own right, you'll never be perfect enough to come into God's presence. That's why we come through the blood of Jesus Christ. And everyday we sin and fall short of God's glory and we need cleansing.

There's something else that characterizes powerful corporate prayer:

3. REVELATION (v.3)

Before they prayed...

Nehemiah 9:3a (NIV) - They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day...

Our praying and the revelation of God's Word in our lives go together. When we pray we are to say, "God, Your will be done." And God's will is recorded in God's Word. To pray without the revelation of God's Word is *misguided*. To receive the revelation of God's Word without praying is *disobedient*.

Jesus prayed, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." So the goal of praying is not to get earth's will done in heaven, but to get heaven's will done on earth. So we will pray in a misguided way if we are not praying with God's Word in our hands and in our hearts.

EXAMPLE: Now the actual words of the prayer are recorded in Nehemiah 9:6-37. And I want you to notice what happens. Remember they have been reading and studying Scripture, specifically the Book of the Law of Moses. This is the first five books of the OT. And what is included in those books? A recounting of the activities of God in creation and in forming the nation of Israel through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. There is the bondage of Israel in Egypt and the Lord's deliverance of

them in Exodus. There is the account of the wilderness wanderings of Israel under Moses and their preparation to enter the Promised Land.

Now what is the content of the prayer? The very things that they heard as the Scripture was read.

Nehemiah 9:6 (NIV) - 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.

Where did they learn that? From the revelation of the Law of Moses (Genesis).

Nehemiah 9:7 (NIV) - You are the Lord God, who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and named him Abraham.

Where did they learn that? From the revelation of the Law of Moses (Genesis).

Nehemiah 9:9 (NIV) – You saw the suffering of our forefathers in Egypt; you heard their cry at the Red Sea.

Where did they learn that? From the revelation of the Law of Moses (Exodus).

Nehemiah 9:13 (NIV) - “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.

Where did they learn that? From the revelation of the Law of Moses (Exodus).

And so it goes right down through the prayer here in Nehemiah 9. Their praying reflected their knowledge of the Word of God.

Now why is this important? There’s nothing more in the will of God than the Word of God. How much of God’s Word does He hear from us when we are praying? We are praying based upon the promises and truths revealed by God in His Word. If our praying is just coming out of our heads, then there’s no power.

So there’s revelation. Next there’s...

4. CONFESSION (v.2).

Nehemiah 9:2b (NIV) - They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers.

Nehemiah 9:3 (NIV) – (They) spent another quarter in confession...

Inward brokenness gives way to outward confession.

Now confession means to publicly express what is true. And what you see in this great prayer is that the people are expressing what was true about their ancestors, and what was true about themselves. In other words, they acknowledged their sin. They owned up to it. There is personal confession in our personal praying. There is corporate confession in our corporate praying.

Now again we have their prayer recorded here in Nehemiah 9:6-37.

Nehemiah 9:16 (NIV) - “But they, our forefathers, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and did not obey your commands.

Nehemiah 9:17a (NIV) - They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them.

So their praying recounts the *corruption* of their fathers. But it also recounts the *consequences* of that corruption.

Nehemiah 9:26 (NIV) - “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.

Nehemiah 9:27a (NIV) - So you handed them over to their enemies, who oppressed them.

Confession says, “God we have sinned, and we’re in a mess because of it.

ILLUSTRATION – A few weeks ago we started smelling an awful smell in our kitchen. My wife is a meticulous house keeper, but she just double checked everything. Maybe one of our grandson’s dirty diapers hadn’t made it to the trash can. We looked for days. Finally, one evening it occurred to me that there is a drain pan under our refrigerator. From time to time it needs to be emptied. And I pulled it out and, yes, there was the culprit. It was filled with the most putrid liquid you could imagine. That is what was smelling up the whole house. I took that mess outside, poured it out, cleaned the tray and put it back in its place.

That’s what confession is. There is a rotting mess inside of us called sin that must be continually confessed to God.

Nehemiah 9:33 (NIV) - In all that has happened to us, you have been just; you have acted faithfully, while we did wrong.

So why is this important? So what is the point of confession? Why is it important? Confession says, “God we don’t deserve any of the blessings you have sent our way.” So we do not presume upon the grace and goodness of the Lord.

Confession is the gateway into true worship.

5. WORSHIP (v.3).

Nehemiah 9:3b (NIV) – (They) spent another quarter in confession and in worshipping the LORD their God.

EXAMPLE: Look at the prayer that is prayed. What praise to God! There are repeated references to “God you did this. You made a name for Yourself. You’re the hero.”

Here’s what worship looks like in prayer:

Nehemiah 9:5b (NIV) - “Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise.

Nehemiah 9:6 (NIV) - 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.

Nehemiah 9:8b (NIV) - You have kept your promise because you are righteous.

Nehemiah 9:17b (NIV) - You are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.

So why is this important? It is important God deserves our praise no matter what. It says, “God we love you for who you are, not just for what you do for us.”

ILLUSTRATION – I’ve told you before about my practice when our kids were young. When I would go on a trip, I would always try to bring something home to my girls. (Secretly I guess I wanted to make sure they looked forward to me coming home.) When I arrived they would rip into my luggage saying, “Dad, what did you bring us?” But for Nan it was different. She was just glad to see me.

So after all this humility and holiness and revelation and confession and worship, they finally get down to asking God for what they need.

6. PETITION OR REQUESTS (vv.32,36-37)

Nehemiah 9:32a (NIV) - “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...

Now what are these hardships?

Nehemiah 9:36 (NIV) - “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.

Nehemiah 9:37 (NIV) - 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.

So what do they need? They need God have mercy. They need God to deliver. They need God to provide. They need God to relieve their distress. And they ask for it specifically.

ILLUSTRATION – One of the most amazing stories of God’s honoring the prayers of His people is found on the pages of the book of Acts. Acts 12 tells us how Peter, the churches main leader, was arrested along with some of the other believers and thrown into prison.

Acts 12:5 (NIV) - So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

Acts goes on to tell of God’s miraculous intervention in Peter’s release from prison.

So why is this important? It is because we must not presume upon God. We ask, we make petitions and requests because we want God to know He is our source.

CONCLUSION

ILLUSTRATION – A few weeks ago someone sent me an email with the following pictures in them. The pictures, as you see, show Muslims in their familiar position of prayer. My first thought was, these are pictures from a city somewhere in the Middle East, Indonesia, Afghanistan, Africa. But no! These photos were taken ... in New York City. Every Friday afternoon in several locations throughout there are mosques with a large number of Muslims that all cannot fit inside. So they spill out onto the sidewalks and into the streets as you see here.

At first, when I saw these photos it made me angry at them. I thought, “Shame on them. This is America.” But then I began to wonder, when was the last time we saw a busy intersection in our city clogged because there was not enough room for Christians to get into the church for prayer, so they had to spill out onto the sidewalks and into the streets. And my attitude changed: “Shame on us. Shame on us.” They do that to a false god Allah. We claim to worship the true God. Where is our devotion?

Today is the last day of Ramadan, the holiest month for Muslims. For 30 days they have fasted, and tonight is the called “The Night of Power.”

We presume that God is our side because we are a Christian nation. Well, Christian is as Christian does. We say are Christians, but where is this kind of display of brokenness in prayer?

Someone will object, “Well they have to do that in order to go to heaven ... if they don’t Allah will condemn them. We’re under grace.” Well, does grace produce any less in us? If they have this devotion borne of their flesh’s desire to please their god Allah, how much more should our devotion overflow to the One True God for the grace He has given us in Jesus.