

Christ, the mediator of a better covenant, is sufficient to remove our iniquity even when we despise God's judgements. In praying together we can be comforted together that we are not alone. In praying alone with our understanding

we can be comforted that we are accompanied by many others and that we are all led in the worship of the Father by one greater than Solomon, who "ever liveth to make intercession for [us]" (Heb. 7:25).

The prayers of Ezra and Nehemiah

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WE COULD describe the prayers of Ezra and Nehemiah as prayers for God's servants and people. Both were offered for very specific purposes, on behalf of Israel. Both prayers quote extensively from other parts of Scripture and draw attention to the transgressions of Israel. In this article we will look at just a few aspects of the prayers in order to provide us with help and guidance for when we ourselves pray to God.

Preparation

Nehemiah 1:2,3 tells how Nehemiah asked after Judah and Jerusalem. The reply from the men of Judah was that the people were afflicted and that the walls of Jerusalem were broken down. Verse 4 gives us the curious reaction of Nehemiah. It seems he may not have prayed immediately after hearing this, but instead he sat down, wept, mourned certain days, fasted, and only then prayed to God. There was clearly a lot of emotion involved here; these were not everyday prayers (if there is such a thing) that were going to be offered. Perhaps Nehemiah, as later, "consulted" with himself (5:7), so that he would be properly prepared to pray for this special purpose before God. This considered approach would also provide preparation for the prayer he offered in the presence of the king (2:4).

Ezra goes through a similar period of meditation before offering his prayer. Ezra 9:2 records the message given to Ezra that Israel, and in particular the Levites, were intermarrying with, and acting like, the surrounding nations. We then read in verse 3 that Ezra rent his garment, plucked off the hair of his head and beard and sat down astonished. Ezra was awestruck until evening, and only then did he get up and proceed to fall upon his knees, spreading out his hands unto God. Neither Nehemiah nor Ezra approached God while just full of emotion, but they prepared for some time, and chose their words very

carefully. Ezra had sat down and readied himself in the eyes of all the people before he gave his public prayer.

Fasting and prayer

When speaking about having faith which could move mountains, the Lord Jesus said: "Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting" (Mt. 17:21). The link between fasting and prayer is seen in the case of both Ezra and Nehemiah. In Ezra 8 we read: "Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of Him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance . . . So we fasted and besought our God for this: and He was intreated of us" (vv. 21,23). Nehemiah, as we have seen, fasted before he prayed (1:4).

The significance of fasting is shown by the words of David in Psalm 35: "I humbled my soul with fasting" (v. 13). The word translated "humbled" is usually translated 'afflicted', and is first used of the way the Israelites would be afflicted in Egypt (Gen. 15:13). The affliction which fasting represents is the opposite of the pleasures of this life. In the days of Isaiah the people were fasting, but, although denying themselves food, they were seeking other pleasures, thus making a mockery of the fast: "Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and Thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and Thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours" (Isa. 58:3). Yet in the case of Ezra and Nehemiah their fasting was indicative of a life devoted to following the things of God and of denying themselves (Lk. 9:23).

There is no specific fasting mentioned in association with the prayer in Ezra 9. However, there is an interesting link between his posture of prayer and fasting. Ezra says: "I fell upon my knees" (v. 5). When we kneel our legs collapse. It

is as though our knees are feeble (Isa. 35:3). God “taketh not pleasure in the legs of a man” (Ps. 147:10), and when we kneel down it is a way of showing that we do not put our trust in the strength of man. In Psalm 109 David says: “My knees are weak through fasting” (v. 24). This shows the link between fasting and kneeling. When Ezra kneeled it was not just a vain show of weakness. His knees had been weakened previously because he had fasted. And, as his fasting was indicative of his denial of himself in general, not just with regard to food, his kneeling truly was a sign that he did not trust in his own strength.

Seeing

When we think of prayer we usually think of how God will hear our prayer. But when we pray we should hope that God will not only hear us but *see* us. Nehemiah prayed: “let Thine ear now be attentive, *and Thine eyes open*, that Thou mayest hear the prayer of Thy servant” (1:6). These words are similar to those prayed by Solomon at the dedication of the temple: “let . . . Thine eyes be open, and let Thine ears be attent unto the prayer that is made in this place” (2 Chron. 6:40). The visual aspect of prayer is also seen in the way in which Solomon prayed “with his hands spread up to heaven” (1 Kgs. 8:54). This was a pattern followed by Ezra: “I fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands unto the LORD [Yahweh] my God” (Ezra 9:5). What did Ezra wish to convey to God by this gesture?

Sometimes the hands can be lifted up in prayer, especially when we are praying for a blessing on the work of the Truth carried out with the hands (Ps. 141:2; 1 Tim. 2:8). In contrast, the spreading out of the hands is a common way of showing that the hands are empty. We often use this gesture when we say things like, “I don’t know”, or, “I haven’t got any”. Solomon began his prayer with the words, “there is no God like Thee” (1 Kgs. 8:23), the empty hands typifying that there was nothing which matched God. In the middle of his prayer Ezra said, “And now, O our God, what shall we say after this?” (9:10). His empty hands spread out before God typified that there was nothing which they could say at that time before God unless they repented. Next time we pray and we feel that we have nothing to give or say let us not be ashamed to spread out our empty hands before God so that He can see that we are not trying to hide our weaknesses.

Deuteronomy 7

Nehemiah opens his prayer with the following words: “I beseech Thee, O LORD [Yahweh] God of heaven, the great and terrible God, That keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love Him and observe His commandments” (Neh. 1:5). These words have their roots in the Law, particularly Deuteronomy 7, where, for example, in verse 21 God is said to be a “mighty [great] God and terrible”, and in verse 9 we read that God “keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love Him and keep His commandments”. Israel had learnt through experience what it meant for God to be “great and terrible”, for the wilderness had manifested these qualities: “And when we departed from Horeb, we went through all that *great and terrible* wilderness” (1:19). However, the children of Israel were soon to forget this chastening experience and the great deliverance with which God had brought them out of Egypt and eventually to the Promised Land.

Deuteronomy 7 speaks of God’s promise to bless and protect His people if they keep His commandments, and it speaks of the importance of remaining separate from the nations. This separation included not intermarrying with them: “neither shalt thou make marriages with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son” (v. 3). The prayer of Ezra was given for this very reason, for it was after he had been told about the intermarrying between the children of Israel and the surrounding nations that he prayed to God. In fact at one point in his prayer he alludes to Deuteronomy 7:3 when he speaks of how God had said: “Now therefore give not your daughters unto their sons, neither take their daughters unto your sons” (9:12). This was a problem that Nehemiah also would later have to face (13:23).

The relevance of Deuteronomy 7 for the circumstances of Nehemiah can also be seen in these words: “If thou shalt say in thine heart, These nations are more than I; how can I dispossess them? Thou shalt not be afraid of them: but shalt well remember what the LORD [Yahweh] thy God did unto Pharaoh, and unto all Egypt” (vv. 17,18). Would Nehemiah recall these words in his prayer (Neh. 4:9) when facing the opposition of Sanballat and Tobiah?

Deliverance from bondage

Both Ezra and Nehemiah recognised in their prayers that the return to the land was a sign of

the redemptive power and mercy of God. Ezra said:

“And now for a little space grace hath been shewed from the LORD [Yahweh] our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a nail in His holy place, that our God may lighten our eyes, and give us a little reviving in our bondage. For we were bondmen; yet our God hath not forsaken us in our bondage, but hath extended mercy unto us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us a reviving, to set up the house of our God, and to repair the desolations thereof, and to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem” (9:8,9).

Nehemiah recalls in his prayer that God had promised in the Law that, if they were scattered through disobedience, nevertheless if they repented God would have mercy on them and gather them back to the land: “but if ye turn unto Me, and keep My commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set My name there” (1:9).

The children of Israel had been “bondmen in Egypt” (Deut. 6:21), but now they had another deliverance to remember, for they had been bondmen in Babylon also. Both Ezra and Nehemiah were frustrated at the way in which the children of Israel, having been redeemed so recently from bondage, were now going back to the ways of the world. The frustration they felt is echoed in the words of the Apostle Paul to the Galatians: “But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?” (4:9). Like Ezra and Nehemiah, we should remember constantly

in our prayers our own deliverance from the land of bondage at our baptism: “But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins” (2 Pet. 1:9).

We have sinned

Neither Ezra nor Nehemiah distance themselves from the actions of the people. Ezra uses the words ‘we’, ‘our’ and ‘us’ frequently. Nehemiah states: “both I and my father’s house have sinned” (1:6). The two men show that they are types of Christ, willing to mediate for, and associate themselves with, the sins of their people, though they themselves were faithful. This shows us how we should behave when faced with problems within the Brotherhood. We may be tempted to be like the Pharisee in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, who prayed: “I thank Thee, that I am not as other men are” (Lk. 18:11). Instead we should have the humility of the publican, who “would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven” (v. 13), an approach which was seen in Ezra: “O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to Thee, my God” (9:6).

Conclusion

The above has only looked at a few aspects of the two prayers, and there is much more which could be said. For example, both prayers have close links to the prayer of Daniel 9. There is also a fundamental difference between the two prayers which should be considered, namely that, whereas Nehemiah offered his prayer in private, the prayer of Ezra was spoken aloud “before the house of God” (10:1), for all to hear. However, as has been shown, the key message which comes from a consideration of these prayers is that prayer should be based upon the Word of God.

Men of prayer are of necessity men of action, vital and alert, like Moses who led a multitude from a morass of wickedness into the glory of a new life; like Elijah the rugged prophet of the wilderness, who fearing neither commoners nor kings, people nor priests, sought to fashion anew the life of God’s own people. We are not surprised therefore, to find the secret of prayer behind the active life of Nehemiah. Nehemiah teaches that prayer is not to be used like poetry, that literary opiate which soothes the mind, wafting it into the dreamy bliss of an unreal world, but instead is to be regarded as the life’s blood of real life. Here was an impossible situation. God’s city lay waste, its walls pulled down and His Temple destroyed; all around were those who mocked and were pledged to frustrate with their trained armies any attempt to rebuild the ancient city. What could a mere cup-bearer and a few unskilled Jews be expected to do? Through the eye of faith however, Nehemiah saw the true situation; he saw the armies of the living God marshalled to do His bidding. Nothing was impossible!

Cyril Tennant, *Prayer—Studies in Principle and Practice*