

DEEP WATERS MEN'S DISCIPLESHIP-LEADERSHIP TRAINING
Lesson Eight: Prayer Becomes the Focus
Nehemiah 9:1-37

It has been quite a month for the people of Judah. Work had been completed on the walls. Even the gates had been finished. Yet life had not returned to the normalcy of the previous 91 years. As we saw last week, six days after the completion of the project, the people approached Nehemiah and Ezra expressing a need to get into the Word. This month of Tishri had been an exciting one.

A day of celebration on the first - Rosh Hashana - had been spent hearing the Word of God proclaimed for six hours. Eagerly the people returned the next day for even further teaching and instruction. There was almost an insatiable spiritual hunger. They soon discovered that they had failed to observe the Feast of Tabernacles that God had commanded. So, after two weeks of diligent preparation, on the fifteenth day of the month, the people gladly entered into the booths they had created. And for the next seven days they hungered for more of the Word. This celebration lasted until the 22nd of the month.

It is now two days as we open our text: Nehemiah 9. One day has elapsed since the end of the Feast of Tabernacles. The people go from feasting to fasting. They cover themselves with sackcloth and ashes. Both these acts were representative of humility, contriteness of heart, and concern over sin. As they had been studying the Scriptures the previous days, the people had become aware of their own sinfulness. And they began to mourn.

Verse 2 - A separation from foreigners among them.

Leviticus 20:26 - You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own.

There was a need to be different than those who lived around them. There was to be an uniqueness about these people.

Men, this is still God's desire for us today: We are to be different from those around us. We are to make decisions based upon a different set of ethical standards. We are to discipline our children with a different attitude of caring. We are to love our wives with a different type of love. We are to work for our employers with a different attitude than others on the workplace floor.

Remember these words of Jesus: In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Not only did they separate from foreigners, they also had confession of sins - their present sins as well as those of the past.

Verse 3 - Three hours of reading from the Scriptures, followed by three hours of worship

Note the order: the Word, then worship.

Question: What might be the advantages of doing this? The disadvantages?

Verses 4–5 – The purpose of the Levites in verse 4 – to echo the cries of confession before God

The purpose of the Levites in verse 5 – to lead in corporate worship

A Powerful Prayer – Nehemiah 9:5b–37

Verse 5b – “who is from everlasting to everlasting” – Israel’s present state is seen in the eyes of eternity

“above all blessing and praise” – God’s greatness which cannot be fathomed.

Similar to Psalm 41:13 – Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting.

Amen and Amen.

Psalm 106:48 – Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Let all the people say, “Amen!” Praise the LORD.

Verses 6–15 – Focus on God as Creator and Savior

1. Confession of God’s glory and grace
2. Confession of man’s ingratitude

Question: Why does man seem to be so reticent to give thanks to God? How can this be corrected?

Verses 6–8 – Ezra goes back to the very beginning – the stories in Genesis

- a. Creation – Genesis 1
- b. Call of Abraham – Genesis 12–17
- c. God’s covenant with Abraham – Genesis 15

Question: This seems to be an unlikely place to begin one’s prayer. Why does Ezra begin here rather than with Israel’s present condition?

Could it be that Ezra knew that he had to take the people back to the very foundations of their faith story. The present is anchored in the past. The present is a product of the past. I think Ezra wanted the people to understand how far they had fallen.

Verses 9–15 – Recounting the Exodus story

28 times in these 10 verse we see the words “you” or “your” – the subject being addressed is God – this is another opportunity for Ezra and Nehemiah to remind the people, through prayer, of what God has done

Question: Have you ever considered the use of prayer as a teaching tool?

Verses 16–25 – Focus on God as Generous and Patient

Verse 16 – “but they” – the rebellion with the golden calf (Sinai) and the rebellion to return to Egypt (Kadesh)

Question: In the light of the previous descriptions of God’s faithfulness to His promises, how could a people so effortlessly turn against God? Do you think it could happen today? Why?

Verse 17b – “but God” – God was forgiving, gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love (All I can say is a big “Wow!”)

Verse 19 – God did not abandon them

Verses 20–25 – describe the Conquest of the land

God gave – the people were ungrateful and forgot!

Verses 26–31 – Focus on God’s warnings and His discipline

These verses describe the period of the Judges:
Cycle of: sin, slavery, supplication, salvation

What was the cause? – Judges 21:25 – In those days Israel had no king: everyone did as he saw fit.

The people chose to base their decisions on their own judgments rather than seeking the will of God through the Word of God.

In spite of this we see God’s mercy – verse 31 – How great and awesome is His mercy!

“A mother once approached Napoleon seeking a pardon for her son. The emperor replied that it was a second offense and that justice demanded death. ‘But I don’t ask for justice,’ explained his mother, ‘I plead for mercy.’ ‘But,’ declared the emperor, ‘he does not deserve mercy.’ ‘Sir,’ cried the mother, ‘it would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask for.’ ‘Well then,’ said Napoleon, ‘I will have mercy.’ And her son was spared.” (Campbell, p. 86)

Verses 32–37 – The low ebb of God’s people

Verse 32 – God is great = God does not share our small vision
God is mighty – God is a conqueror

Ezra’s appeal to God is based on:

- a. God’s majesty
- b. God’s faithfulness – “who keeps his covenant”
- c. God’s compassion – “his covenant of love”

“Awesome” – refers to the “fear of the Lord” – helps us to understand our relationship with God

End of Verse 32 – Assyrians were the first, then came the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, then the Turkish hordes

Verses 33–35 – A Word of Confession

Verses 36–37 – A final challenge

As they close their prayer, Ezra and Nehemiah recount that the condition of the people now is not what God had planned for them – “we are in great distress.”

but they were there because of the choices they had made in the past.

Homework Assignment: How can you achieve a more intimate time with God in prayer? What specific steps will this take? How will this time in prayer relate to your time in the Word of God?