

## Stand Up and Bless the Lord

### Nehemiah 9

What can we possibly learn from such a long, historical prayer? Last week's passage was easy enough to understand. We saw how the people were celebrating their version of Thanksgiving. They had spent a whole week rejoicing in how God had provided for them, and how God had protected them. Moreover, as they camped out around the Temple in Jerusalem, they were also celebrating God's presence with them.

Well, I think we American Christians understand all that – we know how to give thanks. We know we are blessed in so many ways, and we certainly enjoy gathering with family and friends to celebrate those blessings. But turning the page to this chapter, which takes place only one day after the thanksgiving feast of chapter 8 was over, is enough to give anyone a case of emotional whiplash. For instead of feasting, now the people were fasting. Instead of celebrating in their best clothes, now they had put on sackcloth, a rough and scratchy material intended to produce discomfort. They had even put dust on their heads, a sign of the deepest grief and mourning. The thanksgiving party was most certainly over.

And however little we might like it, that's not so hard for us to understand. Yes, we love great parties and great food, but we know all too well that the good times don't roll on forever. And when the tough times come, we know how to get serious in prayer for one another, regularly lifting up one another's needs before God's throne of grace. None of us are strangers to the hospital room or the funeral home or the graveside, where we hold one another close in our darkest hours.

Yes, we know how to offer prayers of thanks, and we know how to pray when we and our loved ones are in trouble. For let's not forget – no matter how thankful they were, the people in today's passage had big problems too. After all, in verse 36, the people mention that they were servants, conquered subjects of the Persian king, really no better than slaves. And in verse 37 we learn why that was such a serious problem – they didn't get to enjoy the produce of the land, but had to pay high taxes to their foreign overlords. Yes, they certainly had good reason to ask God for help.

But did you notice that we had to get all the way to verse 36 before any of these difficulties were even mentioned? That's not how we tend to pray, is it? No, when things are going well, our prayers tend to be lists of all the things for which we are thankful. And when things aren't going the way we think they should for ourselves or our loved ones, our requests for healing, for prosperity, for some kind of relief come right out, right up front. But while we find it all too easy to tell God exactly what we think He should do – open up this job opportunity, heal that particular disease, restore that relationship – the people in today's passage don't make any request to God at all. They simply point out their problems to God and leave the solutions up to Him – and they leave all of that until the very end of the prayer. Weird.

Oh, and there's one other very strange thing – this reads a whole lot more like a history lesson than like a prayer, doesn't it? And it's quite a comprehensive history lesson at that. It rehearses how God created everything, and then how He brought Abraham into the Promised Land, and then how He brought the people out of slavery in Egypt. It tells about how the people sinned against God in the days of the Judges and the Kings, and how God eventually sent them into exile in Babylon. All of this forms

the background for the main business of the prayer which is not thanksgiving or intercession but confession of sin.

Now, I hope we all understand the need to confess our sins, even if we might tend to give this part of our prayers short shrift. But we tend to do our confessing in private, and in a very individual way. Like our thanksgiving and our intercession, our prayers of confession also tend to be lists – all the things we did that we know God didn't want us to do, and perhaps some of the things we left undone that we know God did want us to do. In this way, even our confession of sin tends to be rather focused on this world, on ourselves.

But the people who were offering this prayer weren't focused on themselves and their sins. No, all the events of verses 5 through 30 were ancient history even for them. The people's unfaithfulness in the time of the Judges – that had happened well over 600 years earlier. And the great sins that had led to Nebuchadnezzar's conquest and destruction of Jerusalem? The city had been destroyed in 586 BC, 140 years before they offered this prayer. None of the people who were weeping and fasting and wearing sackcloth had had anything to do with any of those sins.

So, how does that make sense? It would be like us, instead of confessing the sins of our own generation, telling God how sorry we are that our Roman Catholic ancestors were so mean to the Protestant Reformers some 500 years ago. It would be like us fasting because our ancestors gave all the Indians smallpox and then kicked the Choctaws out of Mississippi. It would be like us putting on sackcloth because some of our ancestors owned slaves. We weren't personally involved in any of those things, so why should we confess any of them?

So, what gives? Why did these people pray in this strange way? Simply put, and probably because of the great revival that was taking place among them, these people have taken to heart the lesson that Jesus was trying to teach us New Testament Christians in our responsive reading: prayer isn't primarily about us – it's about God. In other words, instead of presenting lists of things for which we are thankful and lists of things we need, and lists of things of which we are ashamed, our prayers should be focused first on God, on Who He is, and what He has done. Yes, we and our loved ones, our needs and our sins have a place in our prayers, but if we're not careful, focusing on these things can make our prayers quite self-centered. And if we're going to focus on ourselves, why pray to God at all?

So instead of wondering why these people prayed the way they did, perhaps we need to ask a different question: what does this prayer tell us about God? And how could such a view of God transform our own prayer life?

Well, the first reason that the people stood up and blessed the name of the Lord, as the Levites urged them to do in verse 5, was perhaps the most obvious one: God is our Creator. As verse 6 says, God is the One Who created the heavens and the earth. God is the One Who created everything that lives – including all of us. And so if the host of heaven, all the stars and all the angels can bow down before Him, giving Him all the worship and praise He deserves, then so should we. In short, our prayers should reflect what we know to be true: life, the universe, and everything is not about us – about the things for which we are thankful, or our needs, or our sins. No, it's all about God, so as Jesus taught us, our prayers should focus on His glory. Our greatest desire should be that His name be considered holy, and that more and more people all over the world might acknowledge that He is the King and thus obey His sovereign will.

And the more we know about God, the easier this should be to understand. It was certainly obvious to the people in today's passage, regardless of their weakness and their poverty. In fact, at the beginning of this prayer, they seemed to have forgotten themselves and their problems completely, so amazed, so dazzled were they at the God Who had revealed Himself throughout history.

And what did they find so amazing about God? That this almighty creator of heaven and earth would be willing to choose one man, Abraham, and would agree to make a covenant with Him, a promise to give him a multitude of descendants and give them a place to live. But what was even more amazing was that God had kept that promise. In other words, they marveled that God is as faithful as He is powerful, that He is a God not only to be feared but to be trusted.

But that's not all. Starting in verse 9, the people meditated on the big mess their ancestors were in when they were slaves in Egypt, a situation they themselves could certainly understand. But instead of wallowing in their own problems, they marveled at God's mercy, how He had seen the affliction of their ancestors and heard their cries and brought them out of Egypt, pouring out mighty plagues on His enemies, and leading His people on dry ground through the midst of the Red Sea. When God's people were lost in the desert, He guided them with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. And when the people were lost morally as well as geographically, when they needed to know what was right and wrong, verses 13 and 14 rejoice that God in His mercy gave them His perfect law, teaching them how to love God and how to love one another, giving them specific and concrete ways to respond to His faithfulness and love with obedience.

So, before we even get into the confession part of this prayer, shouldn't a similar focus on God's power, His faithfulness and His mercy change how we pray? If we do what Jesus said, and start our prayers with an acknowledgement that God is our Heavenly Father, and that our greatest desire is that His name be considered holy, that His royal authority and law be obeyed – what would that do to our fears? Wouldn't that transform our thanksgiving, as our attention shifts from the gifts to the Giver? As we raise our focus from the creation to the Creator, wouldn't each of our blessings become simply another opportunity to praise God? And as we remember how powerful and faithful and merciful God is, wouldn't that build our confidence that He will give us what we need? A truly God-centered prayer would look a whole lot more like this chapter than our lists of blessings and needs, wouldn't it?

And when we finally get down to asking God to forgive our sins, wouldn't a continuing focus on Him give us so much more confidence? For as the people rehearsed the sins of their ancestors, they were able to see how patient God had been throughout the years. Verse 17 says that even though over and over again the people were so stubborn and rebellious, God continues to be ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness. Even after the people made and worshipped a golden calf, God continued to give them manna and to guide them through the wilderness. Even after the people turned away from God's gracious law and even killed some of the prophets He sent to warn them, He delivered them over and over again when they cried out in the distress that came upon them as a result of their sins. So, knowing how gracious, how patient our Heavenly Father is, surely we shouldn't be afraid to confess our sins to Him, right?

Now, it's true that verse 33 reminds us of yet another truth about God – that He is just, He is perfect in judgment, holy and righteous in all His ways. And perhaps that knowledge might make us hesitant to confess our sins. Perhaps we might doubt that God, even in all His mercy and grace, even in

all His patience and love could forgive us, not for what our distant ancestors have done, but for how we ourselves have failed so many times to do what God has asked for us.

But even here we New Testament Christians can find comfort, for we know how God has worked out His plan to reconcile His holiness and His mercy, His plan to make His righteousness and His grace fit together. And He has done it all through His faithfulness, by keeping His promise to Abraham. For in Jesus Christ, God has provided one of Abraham's descendants, the One in Whom God promised all the nations of the earth would be blessed, One who would perfectly keep the Law of God and who would die on behalf of all who share the faith of Abraham. And because Jesus died for the sins of all His people, we can trust that God, in His perfect, righteous judgment, has no choice but to forgive and welcome those who trust in Christ – because Jesus has done what is impossible for us to do, both perfectly keeping the law and dying to pay the penalty for all our sins.

So, there's nothing wrong with the lists that tend to dominate our prayers – lists of blessings, lists of needs, lists of sins. But let's keep all those things in their proper place. Let's lift our eyes from our blessings to praise our powerful and faithful God. Let's lift our eyes from our needs to trust our gracious God to demonstrate His mercy. And as we confess our sins, let's remember how patient our God has been with us, and how, in Christ, He has satisfied His perfect justice and righteousness.

So let's do what the Levites called all the people to do in today's passage – let's stand up and bless the Lord.