**AWAKEN**

Bible Study for September 29, 2019 - “Awaken” Series
*Prayer is First*
By Dan Saville

Genuine AWAKENING leads to prayerful action…praying leads to God-awakened results.

**Scripture - Nehemiah 1:1 to 2:4**

**Observation**

**INTRODUCTION**
The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were one book in early scriptures and later separated into separate books, covering some common periods and unshared periods of the exiles return to Jerusalem. Ezra and Nehemiah (physically) cross paths in scripture noted in Nehemiah chapter 8 when the priest Ezra reads the law to the returning exiles in Jerusalem who respond with repentance and worship after the city’s walls were rebuilt. So, the study of one book naturally leads to the other.

Using the timeline at the end of this lesson, the exile of the Jewish nation began with through three invasions by king Nebuchadnezzar’s empire, ending in the year 586 BC. This God-driven exile was to last 70 years to ultimately bring the hearts of the Jewish people back to God. So, 70 years later a group of exiles did return to Jerusalem, rebuilt the Temple, and dedicated the Temple with renewed sacrifices in the year around 515 BC. From 515 BC to 458 BC (a 67-year period) the inhabitants Jerusalem did not rebuild the other parts of the city and Jerusalem was not flourishing. Our lesson begins (another 14 years later) with Nehemiah getting a report from exiles that had traveled to Susa in 444 BC.

Part of the timeline includes the use of the Jewish calendar in these scripture verses. Nehemiah chapter 1 begins in the month of Chislev in the twentieth year. This helps place an accurate historical time reference of Chislev (a month near our late November into early December) and the twentieth year refers (in those days) to the chronicled years of the reign of the king. In this case, this refers to the twentieth year of king Artaxerxes I. Following that scriptural time reference is another in Chapter 2 when Nehemiah has a seemingly obvious God-driven encounter with the king in the month of Nisan in the twentieth year. Nisan is in the spring and appears out of calendrical sequence. However, the calendar (then) started with the beginning of the king’s reign also began in the month of the start of the reign. Therefore, the month of Chislev occurs before Nisan in the twentieth year of king Artaxerxes I.
Nehemiah served in the royal court as the king’s cupbearer in the capital (or at least the king’s winter palace) in the fortress city of Susa. Susa is in the southern portions of modern-day Iran, near the Persian Gulf. This is a long way from Jerusalem, more than 1,000 miles over some hostile terrain.

The take-aways from this lesson as you open the book of Nehemiah Chapters 1 and 2 are:

- Prayer is the first action (not the last resort), asking God for wisdom, courage, strength, and the means (logistics) …in His name and in His will.
- Humble yourselves, pray and seek His face, and turn from your/their evil ways.
- God will provide all you need to accomplish “life” for His glory.
- Be obedient when God answers.
- Praise Him for his mercy and grace and provision (before and after tangible answers to prayer occur).

NEHEMIAH 1:1-3 – REPORT OF THE POOR CONDITIONS IN JERUSALEM
Nehemiah hears from his brother Hanani (and Jewish remnants from Judah) that the remnant that survived the exile and went back in Jerusalem were in great trouble and disgrace. Jerusalem (their beloved city) was in disrepair with the walls and gates still destroyed. The returning remnant of Jews was experiencing persecution and difficulty with daily living (Ezra 4:1-5 opposing the Temple re-build and Ezra 4:6-7 opposing the rebuilding of the city).

Nehemiah’s interest in the state of Jerusalem and Judah is noteworthy. The scriptures point out he specifically asked about Jerusalem and his fellow exile remnant that had made it back to live in Judah. At this point, many were still away from Jerusalem in exile, but longed for the homeland and returning to God’s good graces. They were still in bondage to their captors for >140 years at this point.

NEHEMIAH 1:4-11 - NEHEMIAH’S PRAYER
Verse 1:4. It was personal to Nehemiah and when he heard the sad news about Jerusalem he sat down (broken) and wept. In the scriptures there is no hesitation to his next action, Nehemiah mourned for several days, fasting and praying.

Pray first to address the problem (not as a last resort).

The act of fasting is defined in the dictionary as abstaining from some or all foods or things for a specified period. For Christians, fasting takes on a whole different meaning. According to biblestudytools.com, “Fasting is a theology of priorities in which believers are given the opportunity to express themselves in undivided and intensive devotion to the Lord and the concerns of spiritual life.” Essentially, this issue of Jerusalem’s dire situation was so important to Nehemiah, he fasted and prayed to put his requests (with his full devotion, attention, and without earthly distractions) before God. And he did this for several days.
Verses 1:5-11. Nehemiah’s prayer is brilliantly Christ-like with the overarching themes being the declaration of God’s holiness and greatness, petitioning for the forgiveness of sins (for himself, his family, and his people), recounting God’s established promises yet to be fulfilled, and finally requesting “to give your servant success and compassion today.” This prayer is like the Lord’s prayer that Jesus provided us as a model.

The start of the prayer is very similar to the prophet Daniel’s prayers (Daniel 9:4, occurring more than 100 years before Nehemiah’s prayer) “…the great and awe-inspiring God who keeps His gracious covenant with those who love him and keep his commands.” Nehemiah’s acknowledgment of God for who He is, also confesses our need for God and for His wisdom and strength to work through us and use us for His glory. This is a humble statement, centered on God, not Nehemiah (himself).

“I confess the sins we (Israelites, your servants) have committed against you.” Acted corruptly toward You and have not kept the commands, statutes, and ordinances you gave your servant Moses. Nehemiah is acknowledging the Israelites lost their reverence, intimacy, and relationship with God over corrupt things God told them not to do. The result, as God warned, exile from Jerusalem and the promised land for many years for the purpose of guiding His people to repent and return to Himself.

When in doubt, pray the scripture. Nehemiah, in his prayer, petitions God to remember what God had commanded Moses, “If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples. But if you return to me and carefully observe my commands…I will gather them from there and bring them to the place where I chose to have my name dwell.” (Deuteronomy 4:27 promise to scatter, and Deuteronomy 30:1-5 promise to gather). The Israelites were very ready to return to God, especially Nehemiah. Just as Moses interceded for the sins of his people, Nehemiah intercedes for them as well. A similar situation occurred when Solomon, king of Israel, dedicated the temple and the Lord’s response to Solomon’s prayer included these words (2 Chronicles 7:14), “…and my people, who bear my name, humble themselves, pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, forgive their sin, and heal their land.” God was ready, willing, and able to act for His people. His people (this includes us) need to re-focus on God (not the things of this world or self), pray and seek my face (earnestly pray in His name and for His glory), and turn for their evil ways (not only turn away from sin, but turn toward God), then God will hear and act. Nehemiah knew the Israelites needed to act: humbly, get on their knees, repent and turn from sin… and Nehemiah was in a place to lead the way.

*If my people, who bear my name, humble themselves, pray and seek my face, and turn from their evil ways…then...*

Following the petition to gather His people as God promised He would, Nehemiah’s finishing request was for God to provide Nehemiah, God’s servant, success today, and grant him compassion in the presence of this man. This man (in the context of the scriptures and regarding Nehemiah’s royal duties) was the king Artaxerxes I, who had the power to release Nehemiah and the Israelites for bondage, support, supply the effort.
to restore Jerusalem, and more. This part of the prayer is very specific and clear in the context of glorifying God...and let’s see what amazing things occur...

NEHEMIAH 2:1-4 - ASTONISHING ANSWER TO NEHEMIAH’S PRAYER
It is important to include these 4 verses in the lesson as it contains the God-ordained interaction, for which Nehemiah prayed. This is several months after first hearing of Jerusalem’s poor condition and after a lot of prayer and fasting. Nehemiah was noticeably different before the king, and the king asks, “Why are you sad when you aren’t sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart.” Nehemiah showed reverence for the king’s position and the king responded with a God-ordained question that opened the opportunity for Nehemiah to tell the whole story of his homeland and Nehemiah’s desire to lead the Israelites back to Jerusalem. Nehemiah’s prayers were answered in a way that started with prayer (first) then God managed the way for the next steps for Nehemiah and the exiles.

God provides all you need to accomplish “life” for His glory.

Application

We have heard before, that someone we know was in trouble and felt there was no way out. Then this was said, “let us pray as a last resort.” Contrary to this statement, we are to pray as a “first resort” prior to discussions, decisions, action, etc. Why, because when we do things on our own strength, our own thoughts and actions, we are doomed to fail or fall short. With and through the strength and wisdom from God and for His glory, He will guide you toward success that glorifies His name…and prayer is an excellent and God-approved method for us to petition for His wisdom, strength, and glory-driving actions. Nehemiah reflects this method of prayer first, praying with faith in God, and in understanding His will. God responded in a shocking way.

Apply these to your Christian life:
- Pray first to address the problem (not as a last resort).
- If my people, who bear my name, humble themselves, pray and seek my face, and turn from their evil ways…then…
- God provides all you need to accomplish “life” for His glory.
- Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

Prayer

1 John 5:14-15 under a paragraph title of “Effective Prayer”, John states, “This is the confidence we have before him: If we ask anything according to His will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears whatever we ask, we know that we have what we have asked of Him.”

Under the challenge to “pray first,” Christians will best know His will by staying in the Word and in consistent and intimate contact with Him. We are to know Him, more and more. When you know His will and pray for His will to be done…” we will have what we
asked of Him." Do you have needs? As Nehemiah showed us, make your plan of action a habit of praying first. Do this in His name, in His will, with faith and strength that comes from God, and trust God for the results.