

# The Prayer of Nehemiah and Modern Responsibility For Historical Racism

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## Introduction

Racism, racial inequality and historical racial injustices are daily topics of contemporary news and commentary. In light of this a variety of sources<sup>1</sup> have called the church to repentance. These voices contend the modern church has a responsibility to ask for forgiveness of both our Lord and racial minorities for past and present sin.

Yet is this a legitimate request? Are modern Christians accountable for the behavior of the church over the past several hundred years? Many twenty-first century Christians have no connection whatsoever to the institution of slavery in the United States or post civil war racial bigotry. What duty do they have in this matter?

When we look to the word of God for answers there is at least one example that seems to address the question of responsibility. Nehemiah, a man of integrity and responsibility, understood the importance of his people's history in his relationship with Yahweh. He recognized the need to acknowledge the past and present sins of himself and his people when seeking the favor of God. The prayer of Nehemiah of 1:5-11 confirms the responsibility of modern Christians regarding past and present sin and provides insight concerning our behavior in resolving this matter.

## Covenantal and Sociohistorical Context

In order to properly understand the prayer of Nehemiah we must have a familiarity with the covenant relationship of Yahweh with his chosen people. Nehemiah, although a layman, was an educated and devout Jew<sup>2</sup> and embraced the covenant standards wholeheartedly. Nehemiah's prayer is predicated upon an understanding and the acceptance of the covenant established by God with His people after their Exodus from Egypt.

In the book of Deuteronomy we read concerning the outcome of disobedience on the part of God's people: "The LORD will bring you and the king whom you set over you to a nation which neither you nor your fathers have known, and there you shall serve other gods -

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<sup>1</sup> Emma Green, "Southern Baptists and the Sin of Racism," *The Atlantic*, April 07, 2015, accessed October 08, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/04/southern-baptists-wrestle-with-the-sin-of-racism/389808/>. See also: Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra et al., "Presbyterian Church in America Apologizes for Old and New Racism," *News & Reporting*, accessed October 08, 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2016/june/pca-apologizes-for-new-and-old-racism.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey William. Bromiley et al., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia: Fully Revised, Illustrated, in Four Volumes* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 3:2131

wood and stone" (Deuteronomy 28:36, New King James Version).<sup>3</sup> This promised curse is further elaborated with a description of how it would appear to those outside the covenant people. In Deuteronomy 29:24-28 we read,

"All nations would say, 'Why has the LORD done so to this land? What does the heat of this great anger mean?' Then *people* would say: 'Because they have forsaken the covenant of the LORD God of their fathers, which He made with them when He brought them out of the land of Egypt; for they went and served other gods and worshiped them, gods that they did not know and that He had not given to them. Then the anger of the LORD was aroused against this land, to bring on it every curse that is written in this book. And the LORD uprooted them from their land in anger, in wrath, and in great indignation, and cast them into another land, as *it is this day*'" (Deuteronomy 29:24-28)

These are words Nehemiah believed wholeheartedly. Thus, the hardship that had befallen he and his people was not the product of chance. Instead, Nehemiah understood the Jews had violated the covenant and so had been exiled to a foreign land.

Furthermore, Nehemiah understood the blessing of return to the Promised Land granted by the emperor Cyrus was contingent upon continued faithfulness to the covenant. The occupation of Judea and Jerusalem by the Jews was not up to the emperor but was in fact the prerogative of Yahweh Himself.<sup>4</sup> Again, as promised, if God's people responded to punishment, turn to Him and hear His voice, ". . .the LORD your God will bring you back from captivity, and have compassion on you, and gather you again from all the nations where the LORD your God has scattered you" (Deuteronomy 30:3), a promise substantially restated by God to Solomon upon the completion of the temple (2 Chronicles 7:14). These truths weighed heavily upon the mind of Nehemiah. He understood God had punished His people, had heard their cry for forgiveness and had blessed them with a return to the land. He also recognized blessings would continue to flow only if the people of God remained in right fellowship with Yahweh.

We are told in 1:11 that Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the king. Much has been made of the fact that Nehemiah served the king in this manner. Indeed "studies have shown the importance of this position. In the ancient near Eastern court the cupbearer, with his direct access to the king, was regarded as important and influential"<sup>5</sup> and the office was considered "a very particular distinction."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Nehemiah is later appointed governor of Judea (Nehemiah 5:14), confirming the suspicion his activity as cupbearer displayed character qualities exceeding mere deportment adequate to royal attendance.<sup>7</sup> He therefore shares characteristics common to Daniel, Mordecai and other Jews elevated to positions of

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *New King James Version*

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Kelly, *If God Already Knows, Why Pray?* (Fearn, Ross-shire, U.K.: Christian Focus, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> F. Charles Fensham, *The New International Commentary On the Old Testament: The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 157.

<sup>6</sup> Herodotus and David Grene, *The History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 225.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Watson and Joel R. Beeke, *Heaven Taken by Storm: Showing the holy violence a Christian is to put forth in the pursuit after glory* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2003), 58.

responsibility in the Babylonian and later Medo Persian Empire (Daniel 2:49, 3:30, 6:1-2, Esther 8:2, 10:2). As such, Nehemiah would have generally been held in high esteem by his countrymen. Moreover, he would have been aware of his place as a leader in the community of God's people.

Hence, when Nehemiah received word from his brother Hanani (Nehemiah 1:2, 7:2) concerning the unfortunate conditions in Jerusalem<sup>8</sup> he reacted as any pious Jew might but also as a Jew in a position of sociopolitical responsibility. This is not to suggest someone from among the proletariat would neglect prayer; it simply recognizes that Nehemiah would approach a time of prayer with the understanding of his office and responsibility.

Thus the context for the prayer Nehemiah as recorded in 1:5-11 is that of a pious Jew, fully embracing the covenant of God, in understanding of the Mosaic blessing and cursing. He is a man of some quality and occupying a position of great responsibility in the court of the king. The king who is described in the text as Artaxerxes is generally understood to be Artaxerxes Longimanus<sup>9</sup> who reigned from 465 to 424 BC. Nehemiah locates the events recorded in the first chapter as taking place "in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year" (Nehemiah 1:1). Although there are a number of ways to understand the text it seems clear Nehemiah is referring to the twentieth year of Artaxerxes which would have been in 445 BC.<sup>10</sup> This was a difficult time for the Persian king with ongoing instability in the trans-Euphrates region, especially Egypt.<sup>11</sup> Peace and stability in Judea would be beneficial to Artaxerxes. Nehemiah as a trusted official of the king would have had a like interest in maintaining a Judean buffer zone. Certainly his overriding concerns would have been about the welfare of his people and the realization of God's covenant blessings; nevertheless, we cannot discount the political interests of the cupbearer to the king of the Medo Persian Empire.

### **Nehemiah's Prayer**

The prayer of Nehemiah in 1:5-11 provides us an example of proper communication with Yahweh. Couched in covenant language and structure,<sup>12</sup> Nehemiah's prayer offers insight concerning the state of mind of a pious Jew living under Persian rule some 440 years before the time of Christ. In this prayer, Nehemiah recognizes God as sovereign, embraces his own position as a member and representative of God's people, acknowledges that God's covenant must be obeyed and "reminds" God of both the blessing and cursing promised in the covenant relationship. Nehemiah also draws attention to the fact that God's covenant includes the gracious assurance of a future hope.

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<sup>8</sup> Josephus provides an elaboration of the meeting: Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 11:5:6

<sup>9</sup> There is credible research that suggests Artaxerxes is another name for the Darius of Daniel's experience. James Jordan, *Darius, Artaxerxes And Ahasuerus In The Bible*, (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey William. Bromiley et al., *The International standard Bible encyclopedia: fully revised, illustrated, in four volumes* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 406.

<sup>11</sup> A. T. Olmsted, *History of the Persian Empire*, (1948 Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 303.

<sup>12</sup> Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1997).

## God Is Sovereign

The prayer of Nehemiah is first an expression of humility on the part of the supplicant. He begins with an acknowledgment of God's covenant name, Yahweh. It is interesting to note he also calls Yahweh "the God of heaven." This is a designation that would have been common to the Persian culture of Nehemiah's day yet there is no reason to doubt that it had likewise become part of the "religious language of the Jews"<sup>13</sup> in exile. In any case, Nehemiah begins this prayer with an appreciation of God's greatness, His sovereignty, His Lordship over all of creation. He also confesses that God keeps His covenant. Yet even in his appreciation of God's covenant faithfulness Nehemiah recognizes it takes two parties for a covenant to properly function. Yes, God is faithful to His covenant but the form of that faithfulness (as we shall see) is dependent upon the other party. In other words, the mercy of God never waives; the expression of that mercy includes correction along with tangible blessings.

## He Is a God of Order

There is no suggestion in the text that Nehemiah is the only person qualified to come before God in prayer. Thus, Nehemiah again provides an example of humility in expressing a complete dependence upon God. The cup-bearer to the king knows his political connections make no difference to Yahweh.

At the same time, Nehemiah is asking God to hear his prayer. He is asking God to hear this prayer of this specific man. He is a man who is a member of the corporate body known as Israel. He is a Jew and thus participates in the history of the Jewish people. It is a history that extends thousands of years. Nonetheless, Nehemiah is more than just part of the corporate Jewish identity. He also claims a position of leadership.

We accept the fact that all of Scripture is given by inspiration of God and that each word should be given appropriate attention. When Nehemiah concludes his prayer with the seemingly offhand fact that he is cup-bearer to the king, he is providing information that establishes his position of responsibility and authority. Granted, this does not necessarily mean he exercised authority in the Jewish community; that comes later in the story. Nevertheless, the context of the entire account allows us to recognize that Nehemiah came before God as more than a private individual. It seems the words and behaviors of Nehemiah establish him as a representative of the Jewish people. He confesses his own sins along with the sins of the "children of Israel" saying, "both my father's house and I have sinned" (1:6).

There is no indication Nehemiah was of the priestly caste, the story of Nehemiah's participation in the sacrifice and altar service in Jerusalem notwithstanding.<sup>14</sup> It is, however, likely he was of the tribe of Judah since his father's tombs were located in Jerusalem (2:3). But this does not mean Nehemiah was of the Davidic line. His attitude in prayer as well as his political activity recorded later gives us reason to view Nehemiah as acting as a representative of the Jewish people in his petition to Yahweh for relief.

Therefore, Nehemiah fulfills a representative responsibility based upon a "secular" position of authority. We are not provided with information that convinces us of either priestly or Davidic authority yet we see the man Nehemiah taking responsibility for his sin and the sin

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<sup>13</sup> Fensham, 154.

<sup>14</sup> 2 Maccabees 1:18-22

of his people. Moreover, Nehemiah indicates his willingness to accept responsibility for the sins of the past (1:7-9).

### God Must Be Obeyed

Nehemiah continues as a spokesman for his people, confessing “we have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses” (1:7), a comprehensive description of God’s law.<sup>15</sup>

This law must be obeyed. It was given by God with that expectation. The Jewish people understood that Yahweh’s word was immutable. Consequently, Nehemiah acknowledges personal and corporate guilt.<sup>16</sup>

### God Punishes Disobedience and Blesses Obedience

This brings us to the crux of the matter. Covenant blessing depends upon covenant obedience. Yahweh the sovereign has a code of ethics He imposes upon His people. The Jews were well aware of this. The fact they were living under the rule of the Medo Persian emperor was proof enough.

In this section of his prayer Nehemiah “sketches the result” of breaking God’s commands.<sup>17</sup> The veracity of God’s threatened punishment could not be more evident to Nehemiah and his countrymen. Just as God had promised, the children of Israel were punished with exile because of their covenant unfaithfulness. Indeed, Nehemiah asks God to remember the fact He had promised to scatter his people among the nations for covenant unfaithfulness. This is important because it sets up the next request. Nehemiah also asks God to remember He had promised to return His people to their land if they repent. At no point does Nehemiah attempt to minimize his own responsibility or that of the people. As a submitted and loving follower of Yahweh, Nehemiah desires all of God’s covenant truth to be praised.

In addition, Nehemiah takes responsibility for present and past sin of his people. This is evident when Nehemiah recounts the covenant stipulations thereby acknowledging the fact those ethical demands had been violated generations before. Additionally, the fact the walls of Jerusalem were thrown down and the gates burned with fire indicated present sin requiring attention. Accordingly, Nehemiah embraces the past and the present in this prayer for mercy.

### God Assures Continued Grace

As Nehemiah brings his prayer to a close he reminds Yahweh that he and his countrymen are servants of the most high God, redeemed by His great power and strong hand (1:10). The implication is that there is a future and a hope for the Jewish people. After all, what is redemption except the promise of a future? Thereby, Nehemiah calls upon God to hear his prayer and the prayers of the people.

<sup>15</sup> Fensham, 155.

<sup>16</sup> Derek Kidner, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Ezra and Nehemiah, an Introduction and Commentary*, (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press 1979), 79.

<sup>17</sup> Fensham, 155.

It is interesting that Nehemiah has not made a specific request of God at this point. He is aware that God sees all things but it seems the reason Nehemiah has failed to make an explicit request is because his prayer is presented in a formal covenant structure. This does not mean a prayer that follows the covenant outline cannot be unambiguous. Instead, the suggestion here is that Nehemiah (acting in an official capacity) seeks to place the covenant before Yahweh that He might gaze upon His own agreement and act accordingly. Certainly, the time will come when Nehemiah will be specific. But at this point Nehemiah honors Yahweh with a simple recitation of the covenant sequence.

The most specific request of Nehemiah comes at the end of his prayer when he asks Yahweh for favor before emperor Artaxerxes. Then, by way of explanation, Nehemiah tells his reader that he is cupbearer to the king. Once again Nehemiah reminds the reader of his particular position of authority.

### **Learning from Nehemiah's Example**

Nehemiah acknowledged his membership in the corporate entity of Israel and accepted responsibility for his own sins and the sins of his father's house. However, we must ask ourselves if his example is sufficient evidence to conclude that twenty-first century Christians have a like responsibility to acknowledge the sins of the church. Specifically, does the example of Nehemiah compel present Christian leaders to affirm a measure of responsibility for the sin of enslaving black Africans on North American soil?

As we will see, it is not the personal example of Nehemiah alone that compels us to take responsibility for past sins of the Body; it is also the very structure of his prayer.

#### **God Is Sovereign**

In imitation of Nehemiah, followers of Jesus Christ are enjoined to begin prayer with the acknowledgment of God's majesty. Indeed, "Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name" (Luke 11:2) parallels the prayer of Nehemiah.<sup>18</sup> Nehemiah began his prayer by calling upon the covenant God, the great God of heaven. We begin by recognizing the close covenant relationship we have with God in Christ; He is our Father. He is also the magnificent "other," the One residing in heaven.

#### **He Is a God of Order**

Furthermore, Christians are called to entreat the Father concerning the evident reign of Jesus. Thus we pray "Your kingdom come" (Luke 11:2). Regardless of one's eschatology, it is true that the reign of Christ is currently exemplified on this earth in His Church. Therefore, the Body of Christ displays the orderly nature of Christ's rule (Romans 12:3-8, Ephesians 4:11-13). Not only that, the Church of all ages has as its foundation the Apostles and Prophets with Jesus Christ its cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20). Truly, we share in the life of the Church from its inception to this very day just as Nehemiah shared in the life of Israel from the time of Abraham to his own day. We affirm this truth each time we participate in the Lord's Supper.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Kinder, 79.

<sup>19</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982), 405.

And, as Nehemiah shared in the failures of Israel's past, we too must shoulder responsibility for the sins of the Church, especially here on our native soil.

### God Must Be Obeyed

Every Christian is called to work out their own salvation (Philippians 2:12). This is an act of faith, confirming the gift of salvation freely given in Jesus Christ. Hence, when Christians fail to do so, they are guilty of ignoring the ethical claims of the covenant of grace. Jesus told us to pray God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven (Luke 11:2). Jesus said to His Apostles "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15), a claim that rests upon our shoulders as well: "Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments (1 John 2:3). From the beginning of the Church to the present day, God has required obedience of His people. Once again, we see our prayer as analogous to the prayer of Nehemiah.

### God Blesses His People

The greatest blessing Christians have is forgiveness in Christ. This blessing is confessed in the outline of prayer provided by Jesus: "And forgive us our sins, For we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us" (Luke 11:4).

Truly, every Believer regardless of his or her position in the scheme of things has the privileged of praying for fellow Christians (1 Thessalonians 5:25 and many more). Indeed, Christians (laymen and leaders) have a duty to pray for one another, including prayers to God to forgive the sins of our brothers and sisters in Christ (James 5:14-16).

Moreover, it seems there is no biblical reason not to acknowledge the sins of our forefathers. Certainly we must not request forgiveness for the dead; we can ask God to forgive a corporate entity that has sin in its past. This is what Nehemiah did. The corporate entity Israel had sinned and Nehemiah was part of that community. As a member of that group he suffered for past sins. Nehemiah was not personally responsible for the iniquities that resulted in exile; he did suffer the consequences. This is why he recounted the covenant promises of blessing and cursing in his prayer to Yahweh and shouldered responsibility for the past sins of his people. We are called to do the same.

### God Assures Continued Grace

Nehemiah concluded his prayer with a request for Yahweh's favor: " 'O Lord, I pray, please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name; and let Your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.' For I was the king's cup-bearer" (Nehemiah 1:11). The Lord's prayer also ends with a request for continued grace: "And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one" (Luke 11:4). The implication in both cases is that God's intention is to bless His people. Nevertheless, "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. (John 13:17). Not, "you will lose your salvation if you don't do what God commands" but "you will not realize the full benefits of salvation if you fail to do what God commands" (Matthew 7:24-25, James 1:22-25).

## **Conclusion**

The example of Nehemiah and the arrangement of his prayer lead us to believe that twenty-first century Christians should ask forgiveness for past and present sins of the North American church. Nehemiah shows us that Christians with civil or church authority have a duty to lead in this regard. The structure of his prayer as a mirror of the outline provided by Jesus reminds us that we too are people of the covenant. We are reminded the covenant relationship we enjoy is both individual and corporate. We are members of the Body of Christ, participants in His church, a relationship that spans the ages.

It is suggested that local congregations establish a specific day for public confession and prayer about the failure of the church in repudiating the enslavement of black Africans in North America. There should also be prayer and confession of sin as it pertains to institutionalized racism in our nation's history and the part played by the church in maintaining that tradition. Like action at the denominational level regardless of the historical behavior in that particular community is recommended. There is one Body of Christ; none of us can wash our hands of the sin of any part of the church.



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