

Title: What God Wants for America
Date: July 4, 2021
Subject: The Lord wants people to come to him for salvation and renewal
Scripture: Nehemiah 1, 9

Scripture declares “Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4). The things that happened to the nation of Israel are examples and warnings (1 Corinthians 10:6, 11). Examples, warnings, teaching aids to provide endurance, encouragement that helps us firmly hold onto the hope we have in Jesus Christ.

The people of Israel often went through sin cycles. They followed the Lord for a while and then sinned. God allowed them to be mired in the consequences of their sin before they’d get to the point where they’d repent and turn back to the Lord. Then they’d start the cycle all over. God used great men to bring the people back to him - men like Moses, Joash, Josiah - and a man who was neither prophet nor king. He was a civil servant, a cupbearer to a king. He was Nehemiah. He had a heart for God and made an incredible difference.

Sometimes we might wonder if little old me or little you can make a difference. If I'm right with God, the family of God is one step closer to being what God wants us to be. If you're right with God, the family of God is one step closer. If this church is right with God, we're one step closer. We can say the same thing about bringing revival, renewal and reformation to a village, county, state, country, world.

Nehemiah’s story comes toward the end of Old Testament history. Israel began returning from Babylonian captivity 90 years prior to Nehemiah coming on the scene. They’d rebuilt the temple. However, things weren't going smoothly as we shall see.

READ Nehemiah 1:1 - 7.

Nehemiah would request and receive permission from the king to go to Jerusalem. When he arrived, he assessed the situation and found not only the city in disrepair but the people’s spiritual lives as well. They’d wandered away from God. The book details Nehemiah's incredible leadership in rallying the people to rebuild the city and its walls, tackling the social and economic problems as well as countering opposition. But the main thing we discover, and which underlies all of the political, civic and social reforms, is spiritual rebuilding.

Notice what Nehemiah didn't do first. He didn't immediately launch into a plan of how to solve the problem. He didn't rail against those people who had caused the condition. He didn't complain to God about not helping his people. He didn't pine for the good ol’ days of Moses when everybody was following the Lord. News flash - everybody wasn’t following the Lord.

Instead, he wept and mourned for days. He was crushed at the condition of his city. He worshipped God. He proclaimed him as the one true God, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love to those love him and obey his commands. He asked God to be attentive and have his eyes open to his prayer. It was one of repentance for the sins of his people, his nation. He included himself as one

of the sinners. He prays about God's promise to restore his repentant people. He understood God had instituted the nation, worked in the past and what had caused the problems. He also looked for God to act.

Our country was built on a Christian foundation. There are quotes by our Founding Fathers on the bulletin Backpage. Here are more. The Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Thomas Jefferson, "God who gave us life gave us liberty. Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed the conviction that these liberties are the gift of God? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that his justice cannot sleep forever." James Madison, "We have staked the whole future of American civilization not on the power of government, far from it. We have staked the future of all of our political institutions upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves according to the Ten Commandments of God." George Washington, at his first inauguration, "The propitious smiles of Heaven cannot be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right that Heaven itself has ordained."

We can't rest on our heritage. Perhaps that attitude has resulted in some of the problems that have arisen in our country. People have treated the whole thing in a rather nonchalant manner. Neither can we simply bemoan what has happened and how terrible it is that we find ourselves in a "godless" situation. We aren't to be mired in the predicament. It's about what needs to be done.

The first thing that needs to be done is turn to God. Repentance. It means to change direction of the heart, mind, attitude and purpose. Externals and forms are easy or at least easier to change but what God is interested in is the inner person.

Earlier we heard Solomon's prayer. The king acknowledged people were going to sin. "When they sin against you - for there is no one who does not sin...and if they have a change of heart...and repent and plead with you...*we have sinned, we have done wrong and acted wickedly*; and if they turn back to you with all their heart and soul...Hear their prayer and their pleas...and forgive your people" (2 Chronicles 16:36 – 39). When people turned back to their trust in the Lord, Solomon wanted God to hear the prayers, act in mercy and forgive them.

The Lord responded with the promise that he would: "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14).

The initial intent for Solomon's prayer and God's response was when the people of Israel sinned and got into trouble. Though all the particulars don't apply, the general principle does. Repent and God will hear. This is one of those times when the things written before are for our instruction, encouragement and hope.

God had Paul write in a similar vein, "I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:1 – 4).

Christ followers are to pray for the nation and its leaders to be wise in exercising government so we may live peaceful and quiet lives which reflect God, not infringed upon by the forces of evil or the country itself when they don't fulfill their God given role of maintaining an orderly and good society (Romans 13: 4). This includes that they'd be favorably inclined to Christians.

During the iron rule of Rome in the late 100's a Christian leader (Tertullian) wrote, "We Christians...do intercede for all the emperors that their lives may be prolonged, their government be secured to them, that their families may be preserved in safety, their senates faithful to them, their armies brave, their people honest, and that the whole empire may be at peace, and for whatever other things are desired by the people or the Caesar."

In chapter 9 where we find a longer prayer. Only read part of it. READ 9:1 - 3.

The people were serious. They separated themselves from those who engaged in behaviors and practices that displeased the Lord. They dressed in a manner to reflect what was going on inside of them – sackcloth and dust on their heads. People can use outward symbols for show but it wouldn't be a very fun show to wear itchy and scratchy burlap and have dust and grime running into your eyes and face.

The most important thing is they confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers. They admitted their personal involvement in disobeying God as well as the history of being a people who neglected to follow God. READ VV. 16 - 18, 26, 28.

They read the word of God for 1/4 of the day - about 3 hours. They spent the same amount of time in confessing their sins and worshipping God. A few days earlier the people stood for hours on repeated days to hear God's word read and taught by the leaders (Nehemiah 8). People don't do that unless they're serious about wanting to know what God says and how to implement it in their lives. The book of James tells us to not just be hearers of God's word but doers (James 1:22 - 25).

The reason the people believed confessing their sins wasn't simply an exercise in naming bad things, but was worthwhile, that they'd be heard and forgiven, was based upon what they believed about God. V. 5 - they believed God to be from everlasting to everlasting - eternal. V. 6 - he alone is the Lord, the Creator and life-giver, the one the angels worship. V. 8 – He's righteous meaning his perfect character and all he does is right. V. 17 – He's a forgiving God, gracious, compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Grace and mercy continually pop up in the prayer (also vv. 19, 31, 35). Therefore, they're able to entrust their lives to him.

Time after time after time they rebelled against him. God could have abandoned them. We might think he should have because we certainly would have, but he didn't. He's interested in rescuing. He brought Abraham out of the pagan nations (v. 7). The Lord brought the people out of Egypt (vv. 9 - 12). He gave them his regulations and laws that were just and right, his decrees and commands that are good (vv. 13, 14). Besides giving them spiritual food, he gave them physical food - bread of heaven (manna), and water from a rock (v. 15). He brought them into the promised land (vv. 22 - 25). He sent his Spirit to instruct (v. 20). God revealed himself as supplier, protector, one who is intimately concerned about their welfare. He was patient with them. He would warn them so that they would return to him.

Both parties were consistent (v. 33). God - righteous, gracious, faithful. The people did wrong and more and more wrong. Nehemiah again admitted the nation's wrongs, his wrongs and pleads for God to act.

There are lots of things to decry about our country -- lack of belief in absolute truth, morals determined by how a person feels or their glands, worship gods of our making, lack of value for human life, confusion over gender, hatred of a different people group, calling evil good and good evil. The list goes on and on. Some of the trouble is outlined in the three page bulletin insert. It's an excerpt from Acts & Facts magazine from Institute for Creation Research. The article is "Refusing to Live by Lies." Excellent reading material for later.

We should speak out against wrong, evil, sin. Nehemiah did. But we're to do so "with grace seasoned with salt" (Colossians 4:6). John Stonestreet of the Colson Center reminds us "The temptation for believers is to punch back, using the world's methods. That would be an unbiblical mistake *because we are called to play by different rules*" (Decision, March 2021, p. 13).

What are we to do? READ James 4:7 - 10.

The first command is submit. Submit to God's will as in obey. Sins identified in the book of James include quarrelling, materialism, pride, selfishness, immorality, favoritism, misuse of the tongue, mistreatment of others, prayerlessness, quickly giving into anger. Don't do them but do what is right.

Resist the devil. Fight against him whether he approaches through the shiny objects of temptation or threats. Don't be an easy pushover. Don't think we can dabble in the things of the world that are on Satan's side of the fence. When it comes to ourselves and our sins, sometimes we sugarcoat how things are: this sin isn't so bad, others do a lot worse and I certainly could do a lot worse, this little sin prevents me from getting involved in a really big sin. We dance around the edges of sin. Let it tantalize. We toy with temptation - just a little longer, just a little more, it's kind of fun, it won't hurt. We're like a cat playing with a mouse, but the mouse transforms into a roaring lion who seeks to devour us. It's not safe.

Come near to God. Run to the cover of his grace. Approach him in whom we've placed our trust and confidence. Draw near through his word and in prayer, not because we've cleansed ourselves, but he's the one who can do the job. Be concerned not just with outwards matters, our actions and how we appear to others, but with issues of the heart -- allegiance, desires, attachments. If our hearts aren't right, can anything be?

Grieve, mourn and wail. Another Scripture elaborates: "the kind of sorrow God wants us to experience leads us away from sin and results in salvation. There's no regret for that kind of sorrow. But worldly sorrow, which lacks repentance, results in spiritual death" (2 Corinthians 7:10). Worldly self-centered sorrow is sorry that got caught or over the painful consequences. Godly sorrow is that which views sin in the same way God does, that it's wickedness and evil against him. Don't laugh or shrug off the serious nature of our sin against God. Too often we want to skip the grieving, mourning and wailing and go straight to the joy and laughter.

The people of Nehemiah's day responded with weeping and lamenting when they heard how they had come short of following God. Nehemiah, Ezra and the religious leaders encouraged them to not continue to mourn or weep. Don't keep on grieving. They reminded them that the joy of the Lord is their strength. They

calmed the people and encouraged them to *celebrate with great joy because they now understood the words that have been made known to them*" (Nehemiah 8:9 - 12). We mourn for sins and then celebrate God's faithfulness.

Humble selves is described as "when men, before the Lord, and from their hearts, and in the sincerity of their souls, acknowledge their meanness and unworthiness, their vileness, sinfulness, and wretchedness, and implore the grace and mercy of God in Christ...acknowledging they can do nothing without him; owning their dependence on his grace, and ascribing all they have, and are, unto it" (Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible).

Earlier in James this command is given: "Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you" (James 1:21).

Alexander MacLaren, "I believe that a very large amount of the superficiality and easy-goingness of the Christianity of today comes just from this, that so many who call themselves Christians have never once got a glimpse of themselves as they really are. I remember once peering over the edge of the crater of Vesuvius, and looking down into the pit, all swirling with sulphurous fumes. Have you ever looked into your hearts, in that fashion, and seen the wreathing smoke and the flashing fire there? But, remember, there is no prescription about depth or amount or length of time during which this sorrow shall be felt. If, on the one hand, it is essential, on the other hand there are a great many people who ought to be walking in the light and the liberty of God's Gospel who bring darkness and clouds over themselves by the anxious scrutinizing question: 'Is my sorrow deep enough?' Deep enough! What for? What is the use of sorrow for sin? To lead a man to repentance and to faith. If you have as much sorrow as leads you to penitence and trust you have enough. It is not your sorrow that is going to wash away your sin, it is Christ's blood. So let no man trouble himself about the question, Have I sorrow enough? The one question is: 'Has my sorrow led me to cast myself on Christ?'"

Sorrow is to lead to repentance: change direction of heart, mind, attitude and purpose – away from sin and toward God. We're to be like the Prodigal Son who returned to his father to say that he sinned against heaven and his dad. God is like the Father who welcomes us home.

What God wants to do in America is what he wants to do in all nations -- bring people to him. It starts with the loving invitation to respond to Christ coming to give his life as the payment for sin. The person who places their trust and confidence in Christ's payment for their sins receives the free gift of eternal life.

The second choice is to submit to God so he can revive, refresh, renew those who belong to him. God's promise: "For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him" (2 Chronicles 16:9). "Come near to God and he will come near to you" (James 4:8).

We're to believe, act and live in ways that demonstrate we are right with God and right with each other. We need to focus on having God as the center of our lives. Walter Kaiser is a distinguished Christian thinker and teacher. He writes in his book *Revive Us Again*: "Now is the time and now is the right moment to call out to God, regardless of how wretched our situation may be. For those who will respond, the stirring that God wants to effect will lead to a whole new work of the grace of God in their lives. May that work of God come in our lives, and may the life of the nation be renewed once again" (*Revive Us Again*, pp. 157, 158).