



A Prodigal Church Returning to Its God

Read Nehemiah 9

What blessings he had had in the Father's house! Yet his heart had desired the ways of the world, and he had followed his heart. He had squandered his Father's blessings, until he was left empty and desolate in a land far away.

This sounds a lot like the prodigal son from Christ's parable, but I'm really referring to the nation of Israel as it is pictured in Nehemiah 9 (see vv. 36-37). Their hearts had gone after the idols of the nations around them. Now they were in bondage and trouble among these very nations.

Sadly, the church of our time is not that different. In most parts of the Western world, today's church has largely sold out to the "pig-farmers" of our culture. At one time, we were in the Father's house of biblical and evangelical truth. Now, however, we feed on the husks of entertainment and a "this-world" gospel — and are more empty than ever.

What is a church in the sty of 21st-century hedonistic paganism to do? What is a church to do when tethered to its culture's dictates and void of any true satisfaction? The answer is found in Nehemiah 9, where we see a prodigal church returning to its God.

The church in Nehemiah's day had lost all the good gifts she had received from the Lord. These gifts were consumed by others. The people acknowledged this when they declared: "*Behold, we are servants this day, and for the land that thou gavest unto our fathers to eat the fruit thereof and the good thereof, behold, we are servants in it*" (Neh. 9:36). Just as the prodigal son began to be in want, Israel found herself "*in great distress*" (Neh. 9:37), serving at the pleasure of others. She had joined herself to strangers, and now was at the mercy of foreign lords.

The church of Nehemiah's day was also similar to the prodigal as he returned to his father's house in rags, confessing his sins. In sackcloth, they "*separated themselves from all strangers*" and retraced their steps, back to the Father's house. They were drawn by the Father's love, which they had begun to miss. As we survey the steps of Israel's return to the Lord, let's ask ourselves: What does the prodigal church today need to do?

1. We need to remember the Father's house

The great thing about the prayer of Nehemiah 9 is the fact that the people began to speak about God's being, majesty, greatness, and faithfulness. Until now, the Jews had thought about themselves, the people around them, and their gods. They had given no thought to the Lord who had nurtured them and given them every provision that they had ever known. But in their own self-inflicted bondage, their minds began to go to the greatness and goodness of the God who brought them into being.

They prayed: "*Thou, even thou, art LORD alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein, and thou preservest them all; and the host of heaven worshippeth thee*" (Neh. 9:6). The Jews pictured God's greatness and goodness, and how holy and happy God's servants, the angels of heaven, are.

To wean ourselves from the emptiness and filth of this world, we need to see the splendor, sanctity, and suitability of the Father's house. The principal lack in the church of our day is that

we do not have a functioning doctrine of God — at least, not a biblical one. When we begin to reckon with who God really is, all our religious games come to a quick end, and we begin to realize who it is with whom we have to do. Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones once said, *“There is no doubt but that 99.9 percent of our troubles as Christians is that we are ignorant of God.”* We need to remember the Father’s house.

2. We need to recall the Father’s heart

Why does Nehemiah 9 go on at length about the past? A survey of the past will show the Lord’s undeserved kindness and faithfulness. It was He who had remembered His promise and covenant. He had performed the mercy promised to their forefathers. Time after time, He demonstrated love and faithfulness when there was nothing in His people to deserve such dealings. The prayer openly confesses this to the glory of God: *“Thou didst divide the sea ... thou leddest them ... thou camest down ... and spakest ... and gavest ... and madest known ... and commandedst ... and gave them bread from heaven for their hunger ... and broughtest forth water ... and promisedst them”* (Neh. 9:11-15). In their current bondage, the people recalled the Father’s heart.

We should do the same. Why hasn’t the Lord simply eliminated the church from the scene of human history and wiped it from the face of the earth? Why did He give His church the Reformation and Great Awakening, the revivals and blessings she has enjoyed? Let us confess with the Jews: *“Nevertheless for thy great mercies’ sake thou didst not utterly consume them, nor forsake them; for thou art a gracious and merciful God”* (Neh. 9:31). If we had such a humbling view of the Father’s heart, there would be hope for us.

3. We need to vindicate the Father’s right

In Christ’s parable, the prodigal son freely admitted that he had forfeited the status of a son: *“I am no more worthy to be called thy son”* (Luke 15:21). Because of his sin, he justly deserved never to be accepted again, and he acknowledged this honestly and forthrightly before his father. In other words, he vindicated the father’s right. In Nehemiah 9, the Jews also vindicated the justice of God. *“Thou hast done right,”* they confessed (Neh. 9:33). By our departure from God’s truth and ordinances, we too have sinned away all right of being accepted again as the chosen generation and the holy nation that God has appointed us to be. We need to acknowledge this honestly and readily. In God’s quarrel with us, we need to stand up at His bar and say, *“Thou art just in all that is brought upon us; for thou hast done right”* (Neh. 9:33). The malaise that Western Protestantism finds itself in is solely brought on by the church itself. True, God has given us up to our own devices; yet, He has done so justly, because we have done wickedly. In returning to God, we need to confess our wrong and vindicate the Father’s right.

4. We need to plead the Father’s grace

Lastly, we need the beggar’s plea. You’ll remember the prodigal’s cry to his father. He acknowledged his sin, but he also uttered a plea for acceptance in the father’s house. For the prodigal, this was mixed with a measure of the spirit of bondage and servile fear, *“Make me one of thy hired servants.”* His mind showed the confusion many a returning sinner knows. Yet his speech betrayed him, when he called out: *“Father”* (Luke 15:21). This was a plea for acceptance again.

It is no different with the pleas of the prodigal church: *“Now therefore, our God ... who keepest covenant and mercy...let not all the trouble seem little before thee”* (Neh. 9:32). Notice how they say: *“Our God.”* They have some sense that, for the sake of another (surely not themselves), He can be *“their God.”*

The troubled church today should be earnestly beseeching the covenant-keeping God to remember mercy for His name’s sake. Returning to Him, let us plead for grace: *“Our God ... let not all the trouble seem little before thee.”*

Questions:

1. What are the similarities and differences between the repentance of a returning sinner and the repentance of a returning church?
2. How is today's church in bondage, and how has that happened? Doesn't the world promise freedom?
3. What does it mean practically to vindicate God? Why is this important? What must we say if a person cannot bring himself to confess the justice of the Lord?
4. Find the petition in this prayer. Why is it so short compared to such a long prayer? Is this evidence of an imbalance, or is there something more than meets the eye?
5. What does it look like today practically when a prodigal church returns? Can you think of a New Testament example of a church returning (compare 2 Cor. 7, James 4, or Rev. 2-3)?
6. Discuss the implications of Dr. Lloyd-Jones's statement quoted above.

Gerald M Bilkes

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