

FIRST RESPONSE

How do you respond to distressing news? About something far away in time or space, but near and dear to your heart? That's what happened in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah, after the time of Ezra and Esther, which we've just explored. And it's full of great practical principles for our own lives today.

1- BAD NEWS CALLS for a rapid response. Recall that Jerusalem had been destroyed in 586 BC and the people exiled. Some 70 years later, God sent Ezra and others back to rebuild the temple and restore proper worship. Now, some 111 years after the exile, in chapter 1 of his book, Nehemiah is in Babylon, distressed at the situation back home a thousand miles away.

Nehemiah is in the winter capital of Persia, and some men from Judah report bad news: the remnant of people in Jerusalem are in great trouble and shame. The city wall is broken down and the gates are destroyed. Nehemiah drops in depression at the disastrous report, and verse 4 records: "*I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.*" Have you ever responded like this to distressing news? When you cared enough to do something about it?

2- PRAYER IS A PERFECT first response to distress. Prayer should be our first response to any news or situation. ASAP means always start after prayer. Philippians 4:6 says, "*the Lord is at hand, do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.*" 1Peter 5:7 echoes, "*casting all your anxieties on Him, because He cares for you.*" Both passages picture the almighty hands of God around His people, bearing them up and protecting them. Prayer is not telling God anything He doesn't already know, prayer is to get your thoughts in line with God's thoughts.

Prayer is a prelude to action. In verse 5, Nehemiah prays, "*O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love Him and keep His commandments, hear the prayer for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel. We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the statutes and the rules that You commanded. Remember Your word, 'if you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, from the uttermost parts I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make My name dwell there' - Your people, whom You have redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand.*"

3- GOD'S PROVIDENCE includes your prayers. Prof.M.Breneman notes how "Nehemiah emphasizes great awareness of the awesomeness of the God of heaven, our creator and sustainer, and His steadfast covenant love. Because of who He is, we praise Him and bring our prayer requests to Him." Prof.D.Kidner observes, "with personal and corporate guilt, Nehemiah comes to God emptyhanded, but not uninvited." Nehemiah takes ownership of his and his people's guilt, knowing that God will hear his prayer.

Nehemiah echoes many prayers of Scripture, which shows his profound grasp of the Bible. Deuteronomy 30:1-10 records where through blessings and curses, God both prophesied and promised that when His scattered people would return to Him in repentance and faith, then He would have compassion and restore their fortunes and return them to the land of promise. This is exactly what Nehemiah prays.

4- REPENTANCE MEANS TURNING to God, away from disobeying Him. Prof.Westerman notes that Nehemiah's prayer of repentance involves four parts. First, an invocation to God, then confession of sins, then making requests of God on behalf of His people, and finally a request for success. Praise, then petition, asking God to take action - even through obedient "me"! Nehemiah closes with verse 11:

"*O LORD, let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and to the prayer of Your servants who delight to fear Your name, and give success to Your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.*" Nehemiah wasn't just praying pious empty words, he was backing them up with action. He trusts God and His word, and therefore he acts accordingly. First, Nehemiah speaks to the King of Earth and Heaven, and then he will speak to the king of Persia. He takes personal responsibility for his prayer.

5- GOD RAISES UP PEOPLE perfect for His jobs. Not perfect people, but people perfect for the job at hand. Just as we see in Ezra and Esther, scholars say the theme of Nehemiah is how God sovereignly works through responsible human agents to accomplish His redemptive purposes. God raises up ordinary people through ordinary means to work out His extraordinary ends

The name Nehemiah means "*the Lord comforts.*" Nehemiah is presented as a man of faith, with deep understanding of who God is, and thorough knowledge of God's Word. We see Nehemiah as a man of prayer eleven times. And his prayers are instructive for how we should pray, to prepare ourselves for God's work. Nehemiah first focuses on God as the trustworthy One in whom we believe. As someone well said, "*Faith is not hoping God can, but knowing He will*" on the basis of His trustworthy Word. Let us likewise come to God in faith as we pray, trusting that He is able to do anything we can ask! □