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Series: The Prayers of a Cupbearer

Part 2: Prayer in The Presence of My Enemies

Text: Nehemiah 4:4-5

Have you ever been mistreated so badly that you wanted *God* to get revenge on the person who mistreated you? This prayer, which seems rather spontaneous in nature, is a “Get ‘em, God” prayer. The term for such a prayer is, *imprecatory*. On Thursday nights some of us are studying the Psalms together. Last week we studied Psalm 109, which has an imprecatory section in it. Listen to a few verses of that Psalm, beginning at verse 8. Let his days be few,

*And* let another take his office.

**9.** Let his children be fatherless,

And his wife a widow.

**10.** Let his children continually be vagabonds, and beg;

Let them seek *their bread* also from their desolate places.

**11.** Let the creditor seize all that he has,

And let strangers plunder his labor.

**12.** Let there be none to extend mercy to him,

Nor let there be any to favor his fatherless children.

**13.** Let his posterity be cut off,

*And* in the generation following let their name be blotted out.

Nehemiah and his colleagues are engaged in a rebuilding project.

There are those who make sport of Nehemiah and his co-workers. Sanballat, a government official of Samaria, on more than one occasion, laughs at and mocks Nehemiah (2:19; 4:1). If you and I live long enough, we will run into Sanballat. He is not dead. He lives in many of the people you and I will encounter. There will always be those who have no confidence in us or in our work. Sanballat called Nehemiah and his colleagues, “feeble Jews” (v.2). The Hebrew word for feeble (ame-lal) means *frail, wretched, lacking in force or effectiveness.* What an insult! Sanballat and company question Nehemiah’s ability to produce substantive work (v.3). Sanballat and company even questioned the materials with which Nehemiah is working: *Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish- stones that are burned?* (end of v.2)

Nehemiah has a few options. One option is to take Sanballat on, physically. He could also fight him rhetorically, engaging in a heated war of words. Nehemiah does neither. He prays!!

Nehemiah tells God,

1. We are despised. This is not Nehemiah’s self-assessment. This is what his *enemies* think of him. They despise him. They do not respect him or his work, or his vision, or his commitment. Nehemiah feels the need, in prayer, to tell God what he is hearing.
2. In prayer, Nehemiah asks God to balance the scales. In very specific language, Nehemiah asks God to “turn their reproach on their own heads”. That’s as far as Nehemiah goes. He doesn’t act on his feelings. Nehemiah does remember that vengeance belongs to God (Deuteronomy 32:35).
3. Nehemiah is in fellowship with God, but he doesn’t want his enemies to experience the same. Nehemiah wants his haters to *not* have their sins forgiven (v. 5). We would not want to imitate this kind of praying. I admire Nehemiah’s “take it to the Lord in prayer” approach to life. However, I ought to want to see every person living in fellowship with God. In 2 Peter 3:9, Peter gives us an insight into God’s character.

*The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is long suffering toward us,* ***not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.***

The best revenge on our enemies is qualitative life and work. These haters despised and mocked Nehemiah and his colleagues. Rather than engaging in a brawl and/or a shouting match, Nehemiah and company simply pray and do good work (v.6).

Sanballat is watching all this. Right there, in the presence of his enemies, Nehemiah builds. God delights to do some of His work right in the presence of our enemies. Psalm 23:5- Thou preparest a table before me **in the presence of my enemies.** Don’t allow anyone to pour cold water on your dreams, on your mission, on your ministry. Do your best wall-building, Christ-serving, people-loving, right in the presence of your enemies.

**Illus.**

In Act 2, scene 3 of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Shakespeare puts words about ridicule into the mouth of Benedict:

*Shall quips and sentences and these* ***paper bullets of the brain*** *awe a man from the career of his humor?*

Nehemiah doesn’t allow these **paper bullets of the brain** to deter him.

Nehemiah reminds me of Jesus, who had enemies and who did not exact revenge on them. Peter says of Christ,

...*when he was reviled, (he) did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously* (1 Peter 2:23).

Jesus, our model, kept His mind on HIs work, His calling, His mission. In John 9, Jesus’ disciples tried to engage Him in a theological argument about pre-natal sin. Jesus refuses to take the bait. Jesus said, in that conversation,

*I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work.* (John 9:4)

That’s Nehemiah, in the presence of his enemies. Hear him:

“I have a wall to build. I don’t have time to entertain your mockery. I must work the works of the God who called me back to Jerusalem”.

True, Nehemiah and, perhaps, the people, had a mind aimed toward vengeance. BUT they also had a mind to work (v.6).

The mind to work, in our best life, must always the supersede the mind to exact revenge. We are the people of peace, the people of The One who is the Prince of Peace. We are the ones who have been forgiven and we ought to want to see every person we know, forgiven as well. Hear the opening of Psalm 110, which we will study this Thursday night:

*The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand, till I make* ***Your enemies Your footstool****.” The Lord shall send the rod of Your strength out of Zion.* ***Rule in the midst of Your enemies!***

This prayer of Nehemiah is printed here to show us how human Nehemiah is and how he is feeling. It is *not* a prayer to be imitated by the people of God. We are to preach, model and long for the reconciliation of persons to persons and persons to God.

God has given Nehemiah thick skin, causing him not to cave when mocked. Nehemiah doesn’t break because some people tease him. Likewise, we pray that right there in the midst of our enemies, we might show fortitude and courage and, yes, even love for our enemies. Is this really possible???

If left to ourselves, no.

**Closing**

A fable from Aesop:

A certain Father had a family of sons, who were forever quarreling among themselves. No words he could say did the least good, so he cast about in his mind for some very striking example that should make them see that discord would lead them to misfortune.

One day when the quarreling had been much more violent than usual and each of the sons was moping in a surly manner, he asked one of them to bring him a bundle of sticks. Then handing the bundle to each of his sons in turn he told them to try to break it. But although each one tried his best; none was able to do so.

The Father then untied the bundle and gave the sticks to his sons to break one by one. This they did very easily.

“My sons,” said the Father, “do you not see how certain it is that if you agree with each other and help each other, it will be impossible for your enemies to injure you? But if you are divided among yourselves, you will be no stronger than a single stick in that bundle.”

Moral

In unity is strength.

Nehemiah and his colleagues are united in their sense of mission and purpose. They will not dignify their enemies by buying into their ridicule and mockery. They bind themselves to each other like a bundle of sticks and Nehemiah and his co-workers are...unbroken.

Amen