

PP Nehemiah: 4D Praying**Nehemiah 9:16-31**

Part 31-April/6-7, 2013

Illus On May 18, 1980, Mt. Saint Helens exploded. And though I've shared this before, it is so amazing, it bears repeating. It was an explosion so severe, that it atomized 1300 feet of rock in a flash, obliterated everything up to 8 miles away, flattened trees even 19 miles away, melted soil down to bare rock and left a thick layer of ash everywhere. A park employee, after the area stabilized, stumbled across a lush patch of wildflowers, ferns and grasses in the otherwise barren area, eventually noticing an eerie fact: the patch was in the shape of an elk. Plants had sprouted from the organic material that lay where the elk had been killed and buried. It was from these small patches of life in the midst of devastation that allowed naturalists to begin calculating the loss of wildlife from that explosion.

Let's take this contrast, of new life in the midst of devastation, and add a few illustrations
 Some say that wherever irritating poison ivy grows, its antidote, jewel weed grows as well
 Go underground into a cave with a helmet light, and imagine a vein of gold ribboning its way through the dark rock wall

Or look out the window of a plane down at a barren landscape below, and see that river snaking its way down toward a distant lake or ocean

The point I am driving at with all four of these is this: Going deep with God in prayer, will open your eyes to an incredible contrast between our unfaithfulness and His faithfulness

No matter how dark and difficult a person's life has been, or how many mistakes and sins we have committed, God leaves evidence of His presence, mercy and goodness like memorials along the path

And a healthy prayer life has a rearview mirror that points our eyes back to see this evidence

Before we took a break for Palm Sunday and Easter, we had been looking at 4 direction praying

PP The first had been to '**Look Up**', made clear by 57 uses of the word '**You**', referring to God
 How often our prayers have us occupying center position, yet God alone is to be in that center!
 So the Levites led the people of God to look up, lifting up God's attributes, blessing His name
 But in verse 16, the prayer transitioned from looking up, to the second direction, looking back

PP Direction #2-Look Back (9:16-31)

But immediately, someone may ask, are we supposed to look back?

PP After all, Paul said we are to be "*forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,*" **Philippians 3:23**

PP Jesus said "*No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.*" **Luke 9:62**

PP (Genesis 19:26) Lot's wife shows us the danger of looking back

In each of these, the lesson is clear: *Do not look back on the life God has called you out of, with a longing to return to it!*

The rearview mirror of prayer is a look back, not to return to a previous life, but to see how God has remained faithful even when we were not

Let's look at three principles to remember when we look back in prayer:

PP First principle: *The rearview mirror of prayer can weaken our pride and bring humility*

“But they and our fathers” (9:16) is a way of saying that all throughout our people’s history there had a been a pattern, and the prayer is turned from looking up to looking back ***“they...acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments. They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them, but they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt.” Nehemiah 9:16-17***

Verse 26 shows us another glimpse: ***“they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies.”***

Again in **verse 28**, ***“But after they had rest they did evil again before you”***

Again in **verse 29**, ***“And you warned them in order to turn them back to your law. Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your rules”***

Even again in **verse 30**, ***“Many years you bore with them and warned them by your Spirit through your prophets. Yet they would not give ear.” 9:30***

It’s like spiritual wreckage littered along the desert of the Israel’s wanderings from Egypt, and the Levites are aiming that rearview mirror to look back and see it

Like Israel, all of us can relate to times of unfaithfulness and sin

Have you ever acted presumptuously, meaning to boil up with pride and arrogance?

Have you ever stiffened your neck refusing to yield to God’s authority?

Have you refused to obey God going your way instead of His?

Have you forgotten the wonders that God has performed in your life?

Have you ever rebelled against God, believing that returning to Egypt would make you happier than He could?

The reason the Levites look back is not to make them feel guilty for their forefathers’ sins

It is true that God will allow the consequences of sin to extend into generations, and if each generation continues to hate and reject God, they will each be guilty

PP ***“The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.” Ezekiel 18:20***

Do you remember the old adage, *those who forget history are doomed to repeat it!*

Looking back to the unfaithfulness of the generations before us reminds us of our constant need of God’s intervention to help us stay faithful

It produces humility, puts to death our pride with the realization that we are capable of great unfaithfulness without God’s power and grace in our lives

PP **Second Principle**-*The rearview mirror of prayer reveals God’s activity that we didn’t see*

Illus Sherlocke Holmes and Dr. Watson went on a camping trip. After the meal and some time around the fire they climbed in their tent and went to sleep. In the middle of the night, Holmes awoke and nudged his friend awake and asked him, ‘Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see?’ ‘I see millions and millions of stars’ ‘*What does that tell you?*’ “*Astronomically, it*

tells me that there are millions of galaxies and billions of stars *Astrologically*, I observe that Saturn is in the Leo position *Horologic ally*, I determine that the time is approximately a quarter past three *Theologically*, that God is all-powerful and we are all insignificant in comparison *Meteorologically*, I suspect we will have a clear and sunny day tomorrow. What does it tell you?" asked Watson. Holmes was quiet for a moment and then said, '*Watson, you idiot, someone has stolen our tent!*'

Sometimes, the fingerprints of God are all over an event in our lives, but somehow we miss it. We see these fingerprints when we encounter the word '**But**' in verse 17, "***But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them.***"

Think of a spatula which flips the food over in the pan or on the grill
Think of hinges, which allow a door to open or close

It is a contrast word, transitioning from one thing to another

Repeatedly through the Bible as well as in our own lives, we are unfaithful, **but** God is faithful. We choose sin **but** He gives mercy, we are helpless, **but** He is powerful.

'**But**' is the hinge of the gospel and we see this clearly in **Ephesians 2:1-5**, "***And you were dead in the trespasses and sins....but God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us...made us alive together with Christ***"

Friends, the gospel is the good news of the saving mercy of God through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It is two sides of one story...we were all dead in our sins, **but** God made us alive with Christ!

You might be thinking right now, wow, he is really overstressing this 3 letter word.

To me, it's one of the most hope-inspiring words in the entire Bible.

It's as if the sun comes out from behind the storm clouds, or rain on drought blighted land.

When a church tries to mute sin, tries to downplay it, it is sliding into liberalism and distorting the gospel rendering it ineffective.

When a church overemphasizes sin that drowns out the mercy of God, it is sliding into suffocating legalism, distorting the gospel and rendering it repulsive.

The bad news is despairing without the good news, and the good news is empty without the bad news.

'**But**' holds the two together and produces the glorious truth that God takes unfaithful people like all of us and graciously brings about His transformation!

Do you remember all the verses detailing their forefathers' unfaithfulness?

Now see God's fingerprints amid the wreckage: "***You in Your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness***" 19

Again in verse 27, "***And in the time of their suffering they cried out to You and You heard them from heaven, and according to Your great mercies You gave them saviors who saved them from the hand of their enemies.***"

Again in verse 28, "***But after they had rest they did evil again before You...Yet when they turned and cried to You, You heard from heaven, and many times You delivered them according to Your mercies.***"

Once more in verse 31, "***Nevertheless, in Your great mercies You did not make an end of them or forsake them, for You are a gracious and merciful God.***"

Friends, has your life been littered with the wreckage of sin, rejection, suffering or loss?
 Have you compiled a list of grievances against God, how He's dropped the ball and failed you?
 Maybe, unwittingly, a list so deeply ingrained that you aren't even aware of it anymore
 Did you pray desperately in a terrible situation, and still that dreaded outcome happened, causing
 you to seriously struggle with trusting God?
 As difficult as it may be to believe, God never left you, and while you may not understand the
 answer to the 'Why' questions on this earth, He can persuade your heart of His good and
 perfect hand bringing about His mercy and grace
 Get on your knees before God, and let Him show you His fingerprints
 Ask Him to show you, and keep asking, until you begin to see the jewel weed, the veins of gold,
 the ribbon of water, and the outline of His life He was producing in you

PP **Third Principle**-The rearview mirror of prayer can build our hope and confidence in God

PP If you have not memorized **Philippians 1:6**, let me ask you to do so: ***"He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."***

The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all at work within each of us to bring about change in us
"You gave your good Spirit to instruct them..." 9:20

'You gave...'

PP The **'You'** is God the Father and James tells us: ***"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights"*** **James 1:17**

The Levites acknowledge this and notice what the Father gave to Israel... **'Your good Spirit'**
 The Father gave the Spirit, to do what... **'to instruct them' (20)**

PP ***"When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth, for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak, and He will declare to you the things that are to come."*** **John 16:13**

The Father sends us the Spirit to teach us how to live in a way that pleases Him
 And He ***"did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst."***
Manna and water are two of the most common symbols of Jesus Christ in the Bible

PP ***"I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is My flesh."*** **John 6:48-51**

Jesus is the bread of life, of salvation, and it is through His death that He brings life

PP ***"If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'"*** **John 7:37-38**

The Father gave the good Spirit to open our eyes and guide us into truth, and He gave us the
 living bread and living water of Christ to save us and restore us

Our encouragement in this is that the Tri-une God-Father, Son and Spirit-are all at work in our
 lives to change the course of our history

When is the last time you looked in the rear view mirror with the confidence to look for God's
 fingerprints in your life?

Maybe you should get in the habit of praying through each day, looking at the times you may have not been faithful to God, yet lifting up His faithfulness as you confess them and He takes them from you

Perhaps, it is time to drop your grievances against God for the difficult things that have happened in your life

Look in that rearview mirror, let Him show you His fingerprints of activity, His grace and mercy in the midst of those dark times

You may begin to see the Father, Son and Spirit all working together to fashion you into the child of the Father's dream, the brother or sister of Christ's desire, the man or woman of the Spirit's craftsmanship!

Pray