

# The Prayers of Ezra and Nehemiah



Little known to Lutherans, the two books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which originally were a single volume, give a glimpse of Jewish history in the period following the Jewish exile from Israel and captivity in Babylon in 587 BC by the infamous King Nebuchadnezzar. Ezra and Nehemiah begin where another unfamiliar book to Lutherans, 2 Chronicles, left off. About 50 years later, in 539 BC, Persia succeeded in conquering Babylonia. The Persian emperor, Cyrus, permitted the Jews to return to their homeland, Israel. Cyrus even returned the furnishings that had been taken from their temple when the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem.

However, not all the Jews returned to Judea, nor did those who went back go at the same time. When Cyrus gave his permission, about 50,000 people returned (Ezra 2:64-65) under the leadership of Sheshbazzar, who was probably a descendant of David. Their return fulfilled a prophecy (Jer. 29:10) that God would bring the Jews back after 70 years of captivity. The returning exiles began to rebuild the temple at Jerusalem. Soon the people who lived nearby, the Samaritans, asked if they could help. They were harshly refused; the Jews did not consider them true Israelites either by race or religious practice. The sincerity of these Samaritans is open to question when we see how they began at once to oppose the work of the Jews with force. They were able to persuade a new emperor to stop the building. However, under prodding from the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the exiles eventually completed the temple.

It was after this that Ezra and Nehemiah came upon the scene. Scholars disagree as to who came first; probably both were present at the same time, at least for a while. Ezra was a priest whose function was to rebuild the spiritual life of the Jews (Ezra 7:14-18). He gathered together the books that form the Old Testament and taught the people, stressing obedience to the Law. Ezra also instigated the dissolution of marriage ties between Jews and non-Jews in Judah. Thus, he sought to foster the concept of one people, one religion, one God (Ezra 7-8; Neh. 8-9). Nehemiah's job was more political. He is remembered especially for rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. His humble attitude and sincere identification of himself with the sins of his nation, along with a consistent prayer life (see Neh. 2:4), may account for the fact that Nehemiah made some headway in his attempt to bring his people back to obedience to God. He, however, credits his success to the fact that "the gracious hand of my God was upon me" (Neh. 2:8). This statement runs like a refrain throughout the two books.

# Invocation

*P: In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.*

**C: Amen**

## Within Our Darkest Night

The musical score is written in G major and 4/4 time. It consists of four systems of music, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment line. The lyrics are: "With - in our dark - est night, you kin - dle the fire that nev - er dies a - way, nev - er dies a - way. With - in our dark - est night, you kin - dle the fire that nev - er dies a - way, nev - er dies a - way." The chords are indicated above the vocal line: B, em, D, G, C, G, D, G, em, C, B, em, B, em, f#dim, B.

With - in our dark - est night, you kin - dle the  
fire that nev - er dies a - way, nev - er dies a -  
way. With - in our dark - est night, you kin - dle the  
fire that nev - er dies a - way, nev - er dies a - way.





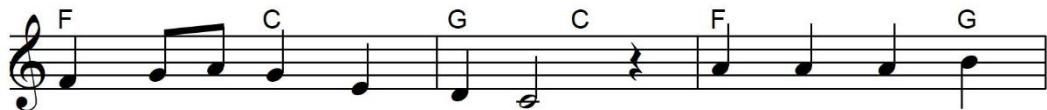
those un - known, we call on Your name so ho - ly. For  
fixed Your eyes, You fin - ished the work God gave You. And



en - vy and pride, for clos - ing our eyes, for scon - ing our ver - y  
there on the tree, a King a - mong thieves, You bled for a world's be -



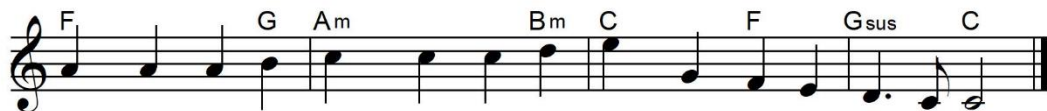
neigh - bor. In thought word and deed we've failed You our King; how  
tray - al. You loved to the end, our mer - ci - ful friend: how



deep - ly we need a Sav - ior. *f* Lord have mer - cy,  
pure and for - ev - er faith - ful.



Christ have mer - cy, Lord have mer - cy on us.



Lord have mer - cy, Christ have mer - cy, Lord have mer - cy on us.

## Prayer of the Day

*P:* The Lord be with you.

**C:** And also with you.

*P:* Let us pray.

**C:** Spirit of God, stir our minds, open our hearts, and free our voices so we can come to you with our authentic selves, bearing our soul, our joy, our anxiety, our pain, our longing, and our hope. As you heard and responded in grace and love to the prayers of your faithful servants, Hannah, Jonah, Nehemiah,

**Peter, Cornelius and your Son, our Savior, Jesus, so we too, long for you to hear and respond to our prayers this night. Come, Lord, let us sit together now with you and find peace and contentment in our conversation. Amen.**

## *Scripture Reading*

## *Nehemiah 1*

**Narrator      Nehemiah      All      King**

Narr: The words of Nehemiah son of Hachaliah.

Neh: In the month of Chislew, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem.

**ALL: The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire.**

Neh: When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven. I said, "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; let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned. We have offended you deeply, failing to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples; but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place at which I have chosen to establish my name.' They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great power and your strong hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give success to your servant today and grant him mercy in the sight of this man!"

At the time, I was cupbearer to the king. In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was served him, I carried the wine and gave it to the king. Now, I had never been sad in his presence before.

King: Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This can only be sadness of the heart.

Neh: Then I was very much afraid. "May the king live forever! Why should my face not be

sad, when the city, the place of my ancestors' graves, lies waste, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?

King: What do you request?

Neh: So I prayed to the God of heaven.

King: If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor with you, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my ancestors' graves, so that I may rebuild it.

King: How long will you be gone, and when will you return?

Neh: So, it pleased the king to send me, and I set him a date. If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may grant me passage until I arrive in Judah; and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, directing him to give me timber to make beams for the gates of the temple fortress, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy. And the king granted me what I asked, for the gracious hand of my God was upon me. Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent officers of the army and cavalry with me. When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel. So, I came to Jerusalem and was there for three days. Then I got up during the night, I and a few men with me; I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. The only animal I took was the animal I rode. I went out by night by the Valley Gate past the Dragon's Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that had been broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool; but there was no place for the animal I was riding to continue. So, I went up by way of the valley by night and inspected the wall. Then I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing; I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest that were to do the work. You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace. I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me.

**All: Let us start building!**

Neh: So they committed themselves to the common good.

## Silence

Refrain Sung 3x by Congregation

Musical notation for the refrain "Ky-ri-e e-le-i-son". The music is written in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The melody is on a treble clef staff, and the bass line is on a bass clef staff. The chords are: G, C, am, D, bm, em, am, D, G. The lyrics are: Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son, Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son.

## Cantor Verses

1. Lord Jesus Christ, you were sent to heal the contrite, have mercy on us.
2. Lord Jesus Christ, you came to call all sinners, have mercy on us.
3. Lord Jesus Christ, you intercede for us, have mercy on us.

## Reading

## Nehemiah 9

Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads. Then those of Israelite descent separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their ancestors. They stood up in their place and read from the book of the law of the Lord their God for a fourth part of the day, and for another fourth they made confession and worshiped the Lord their God. Then Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, and Chenani stood on the stairs of the Levites and cried out with a loud voice to the Lord their God.

Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah, said, "Stand up and bless the Lord your God from everlasting to everlasting. Blessed be your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise."

And Ezra said . . . "You are the Lord, you alone; you have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. To all of them you give life, and the host of heaven worships you. You are the Lord, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham; and you found his heart faithful before you, and made with him a covenant to give to his descendants the land . . . and you have fulfilled your promise, for you are righteous. And you saw the distress of our ancestors in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea. You performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants and all the people of his land, for you knew that they acted insolently against our ancestors. You made a name for yourself, which remains to this day. And you divided the sea before them, so that they passed through the sea on dry land, but you threw their pursuers into the depths, like a stone into mighty waters. Moreover, you led them by day with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire, to give them light on the way in which they should go. You came down also upon Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven, and gave them right

ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments, and you made known your holy sabbath to them and gave them commandments and statutes and a law through your servant Moses. For their hunger you gave them bread from heaven, and for their thirst you brought water for them out of the rock, and you told them to go in to possess the land that you swore to give them. But they and our ancestors acted presumptuously and stiffened their necks 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 necks and determined to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you did not forsake them. Even when they had cast an image of a calf for themselves and said, 'This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt,' and had committed great blasphemies, you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness; the pillar of cloud that led them in the way did not leave them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night that gave them light on the way by which they should go. You gave your good spirit to instruct them, and did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and gave them water for their thirst. Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness so that they lacked nothing; their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell. . . You multiplied their descendants like the stars of heaven and brought them into the land that you had told their ancestors to enter and possess. So, the descendants went in and possessed the land, . . . so they ate, and were filled and became fat, and delighted themselves in your great goodness. Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their backs and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies. Therefore, you gave them into the hands of their enemies, who made them suffer. Then 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 hands of their enemies. But after they had rest, they again did evil before you, and you abandoned them to the hands of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them; yet when they turned and cried to you, you heard from heaven, and many times you rescued them according to your mercies. 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 ordinances, by the observance of which a person shall live. They turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey. Many years you were patient with them and warned them by your spirit through your prophets; yet they would not listen. Therefore, you handed them over to the peoples of the lands. Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God. . .”

*Silence*

*Prayer Hymn*



## *Meditation on Nehemiah*

Nehemiah's goal came to pass, in part, because he allowed God to infuse in him a sense of purpose -- "what God put in my heart to do." This strong sense of purpose is evident by what he did:

- ❖ his weeping over the homeland
- ❖ his inspection of the walls by night
- ❖ his emphasis on the "gracious hand of my God" (2:8, 18)
- ❖ his powerful persuasion of the officials

How do the first two items differ from useless brooding?

Nehemiah's passion was exhibited by how he wept, prayed and followed through. Think about the things you're passionate about. Check any of the items below that you need to do more of concerning the causes God has put in your heart.

- ❖ experiencing others' brokenness and getting involved emotionally, weeping over it
- ❖ praying for God's wisdom and insight,
- ❖ confessing your lack of finesse
- ❖ doing something, even if it's insignificant, to work in the situation

# O Lord Hear My Prayer

Ostinato Chorale

em gm am D

O Lord, hear my prayer, O Lord, hear my prayer:

The first system of music features a treble and bass staff in G major and common time. The treble staff has a melodic line starting with a quarter note G, followed by a repeat sign and a series of chords: em (E-G), gm (G-B), am (A-C), and D (D-F#). The bass staff provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords: em (E-G), gm (G-B), am (A-C), and D (D-F#). The lyrics are: "O Lord, hear my prayer, O Lord, hear my prayer:"

gm C f#dim B em gm

when I call an - swer me. O Lord, hear my prayer, O

The second system continues the melody and accompaniment. The treble staff has chords: gm (G-B), C (C-E), f#dim (F#-A), B (B-D), em (E-G), and gm (G-B). The bass staff has chords: gm (G-B), C (C-E), f#dim (F#-A), B (B-D), em (E-G), and gm (G-B). The lyrics are: "when I call an - swer me. O Lord, hear my prayer, O"

am D em am7 B em

Lord, hear my prayer. Come and lis - ten to me. O

The third system concludes the piece. The treble staff has chords: am (A-C), D (D-F#), em (E-G), am7 (A-C-Eb), B (B-D), and em (E-G). The bass staff has chords: am (A-C), D (D-F#), em (E-G), am7 (A-C-Eb), B (B-D), and em (E-G). The lyrics are: "Lord, hear my prayer. Come and lis - ten to me. O"

## *Prayers from the Taizé Community . . .*

*P : Jesus our hope, in you we find the consolation with which God comes to flood our lives, and we understand that, in prayer, we can bring everything to you, entrust everything to you.*

*P : Jesus our peace, by your Gospel, you call us to be very simple, very humble. You cause to grow within us an infinite gratitude for your constant presence in our lives.*

*P : God of consolation, even when we feel nothing of your presence, still, you are there. Your presence is invisible, but your Holy Spirit is always within us.*

*P : Holy Spirit, you have a call for every one of us. So come, prepare our hearts to discover what it is that you expect of each of us.*

*P : God of compassion, disconcerted by the incomprehensible suffering of the innocent, we pray for those who are experiencing times of trial. Inspire the hearts of those who seek the peace that is so indispensable for the whole human family.*

*P : God of consolation, you burden yourself with our burdens, so that we can move forward at every moment, from anxiety toward trust, from shadows toward light.*

**C: Gracious Lord, we give you thanks for the day, especially for the good we were permitted to give and to receive; the day is now past, and we commit it to you. We entrust to you the night; we rest in surety, for you are our help, and you neither slumber nor sleep.**

**C: O Lord, support us all the day long of this troubled life, until the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes and the busy world is hushed, the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then, Lord, in your mercy, grant us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last; through Jesus Christ our Lord.**

**C: Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory now and forever. Amen.**

Capo 1: (D) (A) (Bm) (D) (G) (A7) (D)  
 Eb Bb Cm Eb Ab Bb7 Eb

1 A - bide with me! Fast falls the e - ven - tide. The dark-ness  
 2 Swift to its close ebbs out life's lit - tle day. Earth's joys grow  
 3 I need thy pres - ence ev - 'ry pass - ing hour. What but thy  
 4 I fear no foe, with thee at hand to bless. Ills have no  
 5 Hold then thy cross be - fore my clos - ing eyes. Shine through the

(G) (D) (Em) (E7) (A) (D) (A) (Bm) (D)  
 Ab Eb Fm F7 Bb Eb Bb Cm Eb

deep - ens; God, with me a - bide. When oth - er help - ers  
 dim, its glo - ries pass a - way. Change and de - cay in  
 grace can foil the tempt - er's pow'r? Who like thy - self my  
 weight, and tears no bit - ter - ness. Where is death's sting? Where,  
 gloom, and point me to the skies. Heav'n's morn - ing breaks, and

(G) (B7) (Em) (A7) (D) (Bm)(Em)(D/A)(A7) (D)  
 Ab C7 Fm Bb7 Eb Cm Fm Eb/Bb Bb7 Eb

fail, and com - forts flee, help of the help - less, O a - bide with me.  
 all a - round I see. O thou who chang - est not, a - bide with me.  
 guide and stay can be? Through cloud and sun - shine, O a - bide with me.  
 grave, thy vic - to - ry? I tri - umph still, if thou a - bide with me.  
 earth's vain shad - ows flee. In life and death, O God, a - bide with me.