

Nehemiah 9
December 5, 2021

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: What would church attendance look like if churches across America had six-hour worship services? The first three hours would be the reading of Scripture, and the last three hours would be confession and prayer and praise. What would be your guess and why? [Let people engage]

Transition: I grew up in Southern Baptist churches, where it was not uncommon to see 2-week revivals scheduled a couple of times a year. But as the years have gone by, these revivals became “special meetings” that were shortened to one week, then to a weekend. Now they are almost non-existent. Worship services as we know it are very time-bound. Ministers who lead during the service watch the clock so that the service ends on time. If churches did have six-hour services, they would probably see a significant drop in attendance or members would be making requests for resignations of the pastor! We live in a culture of a fast-food mentality that has invaded our churches.

The Israelites didn’t have fast food restaurants in their day! To the Jewish community, a six-hour service—three hours of preaching and three hours of confession and prayer represented the beginning of a new life for them and their city. Just two days after the glad Feast of Tabernacles, the people came together in a solemn assembly. This was a solemn public confession of their sin, and it was to be directed by certain of the Levites. When they came together, the book of the Law was again read aloud. Then they confessed their sins.

The Levites led in this public confession. This included a lengthy recounting of the history of Israel from the time of Abraham to the present. The main theme which runs throughout the confession is the faithfulness of God and the faithlessness of his people. Let’s begin.

BOOK:

The Israelites Confess Their Sins

9 On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads. ² Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers. ³ They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshiping the LORD their God. ⁴ Standing on the stairs were the Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani and Kenani—who called with loud voices to the LORD their God. ⁵ And the Levites—Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah and Pethahiah—said: “Stand up and praise the LORD your God, who is from everlasting to everlasting.”

“Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. ⁶ You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.

⁷“You are the LORD God, who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and named him Abraham. ⁸ You found his heart faithful to you, and you made a covenant with him to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Jebusites and Girgashites. You have kept your promise because you are righteous.

⁹“You saw the suffering of our forefathers in Egypt; you heard their cry at the Red Sea. ¹⁰ You sent miraculous signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his officials and all the people of his land, for you knew how arrogantly the Egyptians treated them. You made a name for yourself, which remains to this day. ¹¹ You divided the sea before them, so that they passed through it on dry ground, but you hurled their pursuers into the depths, like a stone into mighty waters. ¹² By day you led them with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire to give them light on the way they were to take.

¹³“You came down on Mount Sinai; you spoke to them from heaven. You gave them regulations and laws that are just and right, and decrees and commands that are good. ¹⁴ You made known to them your holy Sabbath and gave them commands, decrees and laws through your servant Moses. ¹⁵ In their hunger you gave them bread from heaven and in their thirst you brought them water from the rock; you told them to go in and take possession of the land you had sworn with uplifted hand to give them.

¹⁶“But they, our forefathers, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and did not obey your commands. ¹⁷ They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked, and in their rebellion, appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore, you did not desert them, ¹⁸ even when they cast for themselves an image of a calf and said, ‘This is your god, who brought you up out of Egypt,’ or when they committed awful blasphemies.

¹⁹“Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them in the desert. By day the pillar of cloud did not cease to guide them on their path, nor the pillar of fire by night to shine on the way they were to take. ²⁰ You gave your good Spirit to instruct them. You did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and you gave them water for their thirst. ²¹ For forty years you sustained them in the desert; they lacked nothing; their clothes did not wear out nor did their feet become swollen.

²²“You gave them kingdoms and nations, allotting to them even the remotest frontiers. They took over the country of Sihon king of Heshbon and the country of Og king of Bashan. ²³ You made their sons as numerous as the stars in the sky, and you brought them into the land that you told their fathers to enter and possess. ²⁴ Their sons went in and took possession of the land. You subdued before them the Canaanites, who lived in the land; you handed the Canaanites over to them, along with their kings and the peoples of the land, to deal with them as they pleased. ²⁵ They captured fortified cities and fertile land; they took possession of houses filled with all kinds of good things, wells already dug, vineyards, olive groves and fruit trees in abundance. They ate to the full and were well-nourished; they reveled in your great goodness.

²⁶“But they were disobedient and rebelled against you; they put your law behind their backs. They killed your prophets, who had admonished them in order to turn them back to you; they committed awful blasphemies. ²⁷ So you handed them over to their enemies, who oppressed them. But when they were oppressed, they cried out to you. From heaven you heard them, and in your great compassion you gave them deliverers, who rescued them from the hand of their enemies.

²⁸“But as soon as they were at rest, they again did what was evil in your sight. Then you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies so that they ruled over them. And when they cried out to you again, you heard from heaven, and in your compassion, you delivered them time after time.

²⁹“You warned them to return to your law, but they became arrogant and disobeyed your commands. They sinned against your ordinances, by which a man will live if he obeys them. Stubbornly they turned their backs on you, became stiff-necked and refused to listen. ³⁰For many years you were patient with them. By your Spirit you admonished them through your prophets. Yet they paid no attention, so you handed them over to the neighboring peoples. ³¹But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.

³²“Now therefore, O our God, the great, mighty and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes—the hardship that has come upon us, upon our kings and leaders, upon our priests and prophets, upon our fathers and all your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until today. ³³In all that has happened to us, you have been just; you have acted faithfully, while we did wrong. ³⁴Our kings, our leaders, our priests and our fathers did not follow your law; they did not pay attention to your commands or the warnings you gave them. ³⁵Even while they were in their kingdom, enjoying your great goodness to them in the spacious and fertile land you gave them, they did not serve you or turn from their evil ways.

³⁶“But see, we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our forefathers so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces. ³⁷Because of our sins, its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress.

The Agreement of the People

³⁸“In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it.”

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn't understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

Our God is a glorious God (Neh. 9:5). He is powerful (v. 6), faithful (v. 8), and concerned about the needs of His people (v. 9). He is a pardoning God (vv. 17–19, 31), who is long-suffering when we sin (vv. 21, 30) but who chastens if we rebel (vv. 26ff). He is a generous God (vv. 24–25, 35), who gives us far more than we deserve. He is a God who keeps His promises even if we are unfaithful.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *Be Determined* (pp. 105-118). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Jehovah God is the main subject of this chapter—who He is, what He does for His people, and what His people must do for Him. This prayer reviews the history of Israel and reveals both the majesty of God and the depravity of man. Israel responded to God's "great kindness" (Neh. 9:17), "great mercy" (v. 31), and "great goodness" (vv. 25, 35) with "great provocations" (vv. 18, 26) that resulted in "great distress" (v. 37).

It is interesting that three of Israel's great "national prayers" are recorded in Ezra 9, Nehemiah 9, and Daniel 9. Behind these prayers is the promise of 2 Chronicles 7:14 as well as the example of Moses when he interceded for the people (Ex. 32–33).

Dr. Arthur T. Pierson said, "History is His story"; and this chapter bears that out. "That men do not learn very much from the lessons of history is the most important of all the lessons that history has to teach," wrote Aldous Huxley; and philosopher George Santayana wrote, "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it." The church today can learn much from the experiences of Israel, if we are willing to humble ourselves and receive the truth.

As you read this prayer, notice that it reveals the greatness of God (Neh. 9:1–6), the goodness of God (vv. 7–30), and the grace of God (vv. 31–38).

1. The greatness of God (Neh. 9:1–6)

The Feast of Tabernacles had ended, but the people lingered to hear more of the Word of God. Feasting had turned to fasting as the Word brought conviction and people started confessing their sins. In most churches today, a six-hour service—three hours of preaching and three hours of praying—would probably result in some requests for resignations; but to the Jewish people in that day, it was the beginning of a new life for them and their city.

When I was a young believer, churches often had two-week evangelistic campaigns; and it was not unusual for citywide meetings to go for a month or six weeks in the summer. Gradually a change took place as “special meetings” were shortened to one week, then to a weekend; and now they are almost obsolete. In my itinerant ministry, more than once I have been reminded to watch the clock so the service could end on time. We live in the age of the digest and fast-food, and this mentality has invaded our churches. We piously sing, “Take Time to Be Holy,” but we aren’t willing to pay the price to do it.

God’s greatness is seen in the fact that *He receives our worship* (vv. 1–5). True worship involves many elements: hearing the Scriptures, praising God, praying, confessing sin, and separating ourselves from that which displeases God. Each of these elements is recorded in this paragraph.

Worship involves the Word of God, for the Word of God reveals the God of the Word. “The essence of idolatry,” wrote A.W. Tozer in *The Knowledge of the Holy*, “is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him” (p. 11). The better we know the Scriptures and respond to them, the better we will know God and become like Him. Israel was chosen by God to receive His Law (v. 13) and to know His will. Any worship service that ignores the Scriptures will not receive the blessing of God.

In the Scriptures, God speaks to us; and in prayer and praise, we speak to Him. “Stand up and bless the Lord your God!” (v. 5) is a command every true believer wants to obey. God’s name is exalted above every name (Phil. 2:9–11), and we should honor it as we praise Him. It should be “exalted above all blessing and praise” (Neh. 9:5).

The people also took time to confess their sins (vv. 2–3) and seek the Lord’s forgiveness. The annual Day of Atonement was past, but the worshipers knew that they needed constant cleansing and renewal from the Lord. We must not major on self-examination to the extent that we start ignoring the Lord, but we must be honest in our dealings with Him (1 John 1:5–10). Whenever you see sin or failure in your life, immediately look by faith to Christ and seek His forgiveness; *and keep on looking to Him*. The more you look at yourself, the more discouraged you will become. Focus on His perfections, not your own imperfections.

Finally, the people separated themselves from the world as they drew near to the Lord (Neh. 9:2; Ezra 6:21). Separation without devotion to the Lord becomes isolation, but devotion without separation is hypocrisy (see 2 Cor. 6:14–7:1). The nation of Israel was chosen by God to be a special people, separated from the pagan nations around them. “You are to be holy to Me because I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be My own” (Lev. 20:26, NIV). The Apostle Peter applied those words to Christian believers in the church today (1 Peter 1:15; 2:9–10).

God’s greatness is also seen in the fact that *He is God alone* (Neh. 9:6a). The nation of Israel was surrounded by idolatry and the degrading lifestyle that was associated with pagan worship. In his reading and explaining of the Law, Ezra had certainly emphasized the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1–17; Deut. 5:6–21), including the first two commandments that declare the uniqueness of God and the wickedness of idolatry. Even today, faithful Jews still recite “The Shema” (6:4–6) as their declaration of faith in the one and only true God.

One of Israel's ministries to the world was to bear witness to Jehovah, the true and living God. Their Gentile neighbors were surprised that the Jews had no idols (Ps. 115). When Israel turned to idols, as they often did, God disciplined them. In His eyes, their idolatry was like adultery (Jer. 3:1–5); for He had been “wedded” to them at Mt. Sinai when He gave them His covenant.

A third evidence of God's greatness is the fact that *He created the universe (Neh. 9:6b)*. “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth” (Gen. 1:1) is a statement that can be applied only to Jehovah, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Whenever God wanted to encourage His people, He would point to creation around them and remind them that He had made it all (Isa. 40). He used the same approach to remind them of the foolishness of worshiping idols (Isa. 41). To know that our Father in heaven is the Creator of all things is a great source of strength and peace. Idolatry means worshiping and serving the creature and the creation rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:25). “Thus does the world forget You, its Creator,” wrote Augustine, “and falls in love with what You have created instead of with You.”

God's greatness is seen in the fact of *His providential care for His creation (Neh. 9:6c)*. He did not simply make everything and then abandon it to its own course. He is involved in the affairs of His creation: He sees when a sparrow falls (Matt. 10:29), and He hears when a raven cries out for food (Ps. 147:9). He has the stars all counted and named (v. 4), and He has even numbered the hairs on your head (Luke 12:7). “You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing” (Ps. 145:16, NKJV).

Finally, God's greatness is seen in the fact that *the hosts of heaven worship Him (Neh. 9:6d)*. You and I can't duplicate the mighty works of the angels, but we can imitate their devotion to the Lord as they worship before His throne. *And we have more cause to praise Him than they do!* We have been saved by the grace of God and shall one day be like the Lord Jesus Christ. We are not just servants; we are *children* of God (1 John 3:1–3) and will dwell with Him forever!

In our worship, it's wise to begin with the greatness of God. If we focus too much on what He gives or what we want Him to do, we may find our hearts becoming selfish. Sincere worship honors God in spite of circumstances or feelings or desires.

2. The goodness of God (Neh. 9:7–30)

This prayer rehearses the history of Israel, revealing God's goodness to His people and their repeated failure to appreciate His gifts and obey His will. The word “give” is used in one way or another at least sixteen times in this chapter (KJV), for our God is indeed the “giving God,” who delights in meeting the needs of His people (1 Tim. 6:17). God gave Israel a land (Neh. 9:8, 15, 35), a law (v. 13), the ministry of the Spirit (v. 20), food and water (vv. 15, 20), deliverers (v. 27), and victory over their enemies (vv. 22, 24). What more could they want?

Centuries before, Moses had warned the people not to forget God, either His gracious hand of blessing or His loving hand of chastening (Deut. 8). Alas, the nation didn't thank God in times of blessing, but they were quick to turn to God for help in times of suffering (see Pss. 105–106). Let's not be too quick to judge them, because some of God's people today treat God the same way.

In my years of pastoral ministry, I have met people who had little interest in God or the church until a loved one was in the hospital or there was a death in the family. Then the pastor and all the church family had to drop everything and give them help! But just as soon as the crisis was over, these people were back to their old life again, ignoring the things of the Lord and living for the things of the world.

You can trace this tragic pattern in every stage of Israel's history.

Forming the nation (Neh. 9:7–18). It was an act of pure grace when God chose Abram and revealed Himself to him, for Abram was an idolater in a pagan city (Josh. 24:2–3). Eventually, God changed his name from Abram (“exalted father”) to Abraham (“father of a multitude”), because He had promised to make him a great nation (Gen. 12:1–3; 17:1–8). Though Abraham had occasional lapses of faith, for a century he trusted the Lord and walked in obedience to His will. His obedient faith was made especially evident when he gave his son Isaac on the altar (Gen. 22; Heb. 11:17–19).

God's covenant (Gen. 12:1–3) was the basis for all that God did with and for Abraham and his descendants. It was God's purpose that *all the world* be blessed through Israel, and He did this in the sending of His Son, Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:8). God gave the land to Abraham and his descendants, even though during his lifetime Abraham owned nothing in the land but a cave for burying his dead (Gen. 23).

In the land of Egypt, the nation multiplied greatly, saw God's power over the pagan gods, and experienced deliverance from bondage by the mighty hand of God (Ex. 1–15). God opened the sea to let Israel through and then closed it again to destroy the Egyptian army. It was complete deliverance; Israel was to have no further relationship with Egypt.

God led His people by day and by night, giving them food to eat and water to drink. He also gave them His holy Law, so that in their civil, personal, and religious life, they knew the will of God. The Sabbath was given as a special sign between God and His people (Ex. 31:13–17), but there is no evidence in Scripture that the Sabbath law was given to any of the Gentile nations.

In Nehemiah 9:16–18, Nehemiah tells us how the nation responded to all that God had done for them: They refused to bow to His authority (“hardened their necks”), listen to His Word (“hearkened not”), or obey His will. At Kadesh-Barnea, they tried to take matters in their own hands and appoint a new leader to take them back to Egypt (v. 17; Num. 14:1–5). When Moses was on the mountain with God, the people made and worshiped an idol (Neh. 9:18; Ex. 32). Moses interceded for the people, and God pardoned them.

How could these people turn their backs on God after all He had done for them? *They did not truly love Him.* Their obedience was only an outward form; it didn't come from their hearts. In their hearts, they were still living in Egypt and wanting to return there. They did not have a living faith in God but were willing to receive His help and enjoy His gifts. Read Psalm 78 for an “x-ray” of Israel's spiritual history.

Leading the nation (Neh. 9:19–22). During the forty years of Israel's discipline in the wilderness, the old generation died and a new generation was born; but God never forsook His people. He led them by the cloud and fire, taught them the Word, provided them with the necessities of life, and gave them victory over their enemies. God keeps His promises and fulfills His purposes. If we obey Him, we share in the blessing; if we disobey Him, we miss the blessing; but God's purposes will be fulfilled and His name glorified.

Like too many of God's people today, the Jews were shortsighted: They forgot the glorious purposes that God had in mind for the nation. Had they meditated on God's promises and purposes (Gen. 12:1–3; Ex. 19:1–8), they would not have wanted to go back to Egypt or mingle with the godless nations around them. Israel was a people who lived beneath their privileges and failed to accept fully God's will for their lives.

Chastening the nation (Neh. 9:23–30). God promised to multiply His people, and He kept His promise (Gen. 22:17). He also promised to give them a good land, and He kept that promise (13:14–18; 17:7–8). Under the leadership of Joshua, the army of Israel invaded Canaan,

conquered the land, and claimed all its wealth. It was God who gave them victory and enabled them to possess cities, houses, lands, and wealth in the land of Canaan.

It was a “fat land” (“fertile,” NIV), and Israel became a “fat people” (nourished, satisfied); and this led to their downfall. “But Jeshurun [Israel] grew fat and kicked; you grew fat, you grew thick, you are covered with fat; then he forsook God who made him” (Deut. 32:15, NKJV). Moses’ warnings went unheeded (Deut. 8). Israel delighted themselves in God’s great goodness *but they did not delight themselves in the Lord*. Like the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–24), they wanted the Father’s wealth but not the Father’s will.

“For every one hundred men who can stand adversity, there is only one who can stand prosperity,” said Thomas Carlyle. Novelist John Steinbeck wrote, “If you want to destroy a nation, give it too much—make it greedy, miserable and sick.” It’s possible for a local church to get proud of its “riches” and become poor in God’s eyes (Rev. 3:14–22). The church that we may think is poor is probably rich in God’s eyes (2:8–9).

“Give me neither poverty nor riches,” prayed Agur the wise man. “Feed me with the food You prescribe for me; lest I be full and deny You, and say ‘Who is the LORD?’ Or lest I be poor and steal, and profane the name of my God” (Prov. 30:8–9, NKJV). Through the power of Christ, Paul had learned by experience “how to be abased” and “how to abound” (Phil. 4:12); and that is the lesson all of God’s people need to learn.

Once in the land, Israel enjoyed rest during the days of Joshua and the elders who had served with him; but when those godly leaders were gone, the new generation turned away from the Lord (Jud. 2:6–15). God disciplined them, so they cried out for help; and God raised up deliverers to rescue them. Then they would walk in God’s ways for a time, lapse back into sin; and the cycle would be repeated. The Book of Judges records the sad story of how God disciplined His people *in their own land* by allowing their pagan neighbors to rule over them.

Against the dark background of Israel’s unfaithfulness shines the bright light of the faithfulness of God. When Israel obeyed Him, He was faithful to bless; when they disobeyed Him, He was faithful to chasten; when they asked for mercy, He was faithful to forgive. God is willing to give His people many privileges, but He will not give them the privilege of sinning and having their own way. God’s purposes are more important than our pleasures, and He will accomplish His purposes even if He has to chasten us to do it.

Israel’s sins finally became so disgusting to God that He decided to discipline them *away from their own land*. He used the Assyrians to destroy the Northern Kingdom, and then He brought the Babylonians to take the Southern Kingdom (Judah) captive and to destroy Jerusalem and the temple. It was as though God said to His people, “You enjoy living *like* the heathen so much, I’ll let you live *with* the heathen.” The nation’s seventy years of captivity in Babylon taught them to appreciate the blessings they had taken for granted, and they never again returned to pagan idolatry.

God’s chastening is as much an evidence of His love as is His bountiful supply of our needs (Heb. 12:1–11). We should be grateful that God loves us too much to allow us to become “spoiled children.” *The Father is never as close to us as when He is chastening us*. “Blessed is the man You discipline, O Lord, the man You teach from Your law; You grant him relief from days of trouble, till a pit is dug for the wicked” (Ps. 94:12–13, NIV). “Before I was afflicted, I went astray; but now have I kept Thy Word” (119:67).

3. The grace of God (Neh. 9:31–38)

God was good to His people when His people were not good to Him. He sent them prophets to teach them and to warn them, but the nation refused to listen (2 Chron. 36:14–21). He was merciful to forgive them when they cried out for help, and He was long-suffering with them as they repeatedly rebelled against His Word. He could have destroyed the nation and started over again (see Ex. 32:10 and Num. 14:11–12), but He graciously spared them. In His mercy, God didn't give them what they deserved; and in His grace, He gave them what they didn't deserve.

As the Levites prayed, they acknowledged the sins of the nation and God's justice in sending punishment. "In all that has happened to us, you have been just; you have acted faithfully, while we did wrong" (Neh. 9:33, NIV). Note that the Levites used the pronoun "we" and not "they." As they prayed, they identified with the nation and acknowledged their own guilt. Nehemiah had prayed the same way at the beginning of the book (1:6–7). It is easy to be convicted about other people's sins, but God forgives only when we repent and confess our own sins.

In the past, although the nation had enjoyed abundant blessings, they still sinned against the God who had blessed them. Now those blessings had been taken away from them. They were back in the land, but they could not enjoy the land; for everything they worked for was given to somebody else! The Persian king was in control of everything, including their own bodies.

When God had been their king, the Jews had enjoyed great blessing; but when they rebelled against His will, they found themselves enslaved to kings who had no compassion on them. Samuel had warned them (1 Sam. 8), and Moses had prophesied that the nation would forfeit its wealth to its conquerors (Deut. 28:15ff). *Whatever we fail to give God, we cannot keep for ourselves. He will take it one way or another.* Christians who refuse to honor God joyfully by faithful giving often end up having to spend that money reluctantly on obligations that are painful and unexpected, like doctor bills or home repairs (see Mal. 3:7–12).

The Levites had acknowledged God's greatness and goodness; and now, on the basis of His grace, they asked Him for a new beginning for the nation. They couldn't change the servitude they were in, but they could surrender themselves to a greater Master and seek His help. No matter who exercises dominion over us, if we are yielded to the Lord, we are free in Him (1 Cor. 7:22; Eph. 6:5–9). If God had been merciful to Israel in the past, forgiving their sins when they cried out to Him, would He not be merciful to them now?

But they did more than ask God for mercy; they also made a solemn covenant with God to obey His law and do His will. The nation had made a covenant with God at Mt. Sinai and then broken it (Ex. 24:3–8). They had renewed the covenant when they entered Canaan (Josh. 8:30–35) and after they had conquered the land (24:14–28), but then they rebelled against the Lord (Jud. 2:6–15).

Samuel had led the people in renewing their covenant vows (1 Sam. 11:14–12:25), but King Saul led the people back into sin and defeat. As soon as his throne was secure, David sought to bring the people back to the Lord (2 Sam. 6); and Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple was also a step in that direction. Sad to say, however, Solomon sinned against the Lord and almost destroyed his own kingdom.

Throughout the history of Israel, there was always a remnant of faithful people who trusted God, obeyed His will, and prayed for God to fulfill His promises (1 Kings 19:18; Isa. 1:9; Luke 2:38). This believing remnant was God's "lifeline" to maintain the ministry of Israel in the world. They kept the light of faith and hope burning in the land; and because of them, God was able to fulfill His promise and bring the Savior into the world. The Jews in Jerusalem in Nehemiah's day were a part of that remnant, and God heard their prayers.

Our God is a glorious God (Neh. 9:5). He is powerful (v. 6), faithful (v. 8), and concerned about the needs of His people (v. 9). He is a pardoning God (vv. 17–19, 31), who is long-suffering when we sin (vv. 21, 30) but who chastens if we rebel (vv. 26ff). He is a generous God (vv. 24–25, 35), who gives us far more than we deserve. He is a God who keeps His promises even if we are unfaithful.

Surely this God deserves our loving obedience!
Perhaps the time has come for a new beginning.

Getz, G. A. (1985). Nahum. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, pp. 690-691) Wheaton, IL: Victor Books

2. THE ISRAELITES' CONFESSION OF SIN (9:1–37)

“The Word of God had a tremendous impact on the Restoration community. It pointed the people to their sin (8:9), led them to worship (8:12, 14), and gave them great joy (8:17)” (J. Carl Laney, *Ezra/Nehemiah*, p. 104). Now the Word led to their confession of sin.

9:1–5a. The Feast of Tabernacles concluded on the 22nd day of the month (see comments on 8:14). After one day's interval, the 23rd, the people assembled **on the 24th**. They **separated** from **foreigners** (cf. 10:28). Then they confessed their sins, evidenced by **fasting** (cf. comments on 1:4), **wearing sackcloth** (cf. Gen. 37:23; Es. 4:1–4; Pss. 30:11; 35:13; 69:11; Isa. 22:12; 32:11; 37:1–2; Lam. 2:10; Dan. 9:3), a dark coarse cloth made from goats' hair, **and having dust on their heads** (cf. Josh. 7:6; 1 Sam. 4:12; 2 Sam. 1:2; 15:32; Job 2:12; Lam 2:10; Ezek. 27:30). These were signs of mourning and grief.

For about three hours the people again **stood** (cf. Neh. 8:7) while **the Law** was **read**. Then for another three hours they **confessed their sins** and worshiped **the LORD**. Several **Levites**, some of whom were mentioned in 8:7, were involved in leading the people in their **praise** of the eternal **God**. Five of the eight Levites in 9:4 are listed in the group of eight in verse 5 (**Pethahiah** is also mentioned in 11:24). These five may have been the same or different men. One group was involved in petition (v. 4) and the other in praise (v. 5). **The stairs** (lit., “ascent”) may have led to some part of the temple complex or they may refer to the platform mentioned in 8:4.

9:5b–31. The material in 9:5b–10:39 follows the normal covenant form used in the ancient Near East: preamble (9:5b–6), historical prologue (9:7–37), acceptance of the covenant (9:38–10:29), and the stipulations (10:30–39). The prayer in 9:5b–31 was voiced by the Levites on the people's behalf. It rehearses major events in Israel's history, first stating God's glory (v. 5b), uniqueness (v. 6a), and Creation of the universe (v. 6b). The Levites then spoke of God's work with **Abram**—calling him from **Ur** (Gen. 12:1) and making **a covenant with him** (Gen. 15:4–21). Then they recounted God's deliverance of Israel from **Egypt** (Neh. 9:9–12; cf. Ex. 1–15), and the giving of the Law (Neh. 9:13–14) and of manna (**bread from heaven**) and **water** (v. 15; cf. Ex. 16–17). On God's swearing an oath by His **uplifted hand**, see comments on Exodus 6:8.

But the Israelites' ancestors became disobedient and rebellious against God even to the point of worshiping a **calf-idol** (Neh. 9:16–18; cf. Ex. 32). However, God was still **gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love** (cf. Ex. 34:6; Num. 14:18; Pss. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). God continued to **guide them ... instruct them**, and provide for them (Neh. 9:19–21). He helped them conquer their enemies **Sihon** and **Og** (v. 22; cf. Num. 21:21–35), and brought them into **the Promised Land** under Joshua (Neh. 9:23–25). In all this they enjoyed God's **great goodness** (cf. v. 35).

Again the people **rebelled** (v. 26; cf. v. 17) so God gave them over to oppressors. But because of His **great compassion** He raised up **deliverers**, the Judges, who freed them (vv. 27–28). Through the centuries of Israel’s sin (v. 29) God continued to be **patient** and to admonish them **by the Holy Spirit ... through the prophets** (v. 30). But as a result of their ongoing sinning they were taken into exile (vv. 30–31).

9:32–37. In this concluding part of the Levites’ prayer, they asked for relief, again acknowledging God’s power, majesty (cf. 1:5; 4:14), and loyalty. Throughout Israel’s history she experienced **hardship** because of her disobedience. **Assyria** was the first great power after Egypt that menaced Israel and Judah, beginning in the ninth century, over 400 years before Nehemiah’s time. Even while the Israelites were **enjoying** God’s blessings (from His **great goodness**; cf. 9:25) in the **land**, they were still sinful.

Now they were **slaves** in their own land! (v. 36) Being slaves meant that they had to pay taxes to Persia, and Judah’s governmental leaders had to give the Persian **kings** tribute from the produce of the land. Nehemiah’s prayer ended with a plaintive admission of their **great distress**.

Simmons, B. E. (1972). Nehemiah. In H. F. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs (Eds.), The Teacher’s Bible commentary (p. 261). Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers.

A Public Confession (Neh. 9:1–38)

The passage—Just two days after the glad Feast of Tabernacles the people came together in a solemn assembly. This was a solemn public confession of their sin, and it was to be directed by certain of the Levites. When they came together, the book of the Law was again read aloud. Then they confessed their sins.

The Levites led in this public confession. This included a lengthy recounting of the history of Israel from the time of Abraham to the present. The main theme which runs throughout the confession is the faithfulness of God and the faithlessness of his people.

The confession concludes with a lament that they are in servitude to foreign kings in the land which God had given to their forefathers. Then a solemn covenant was written. This was a renewal on the nation’s part to keep the covenant made at Sinai.

Special points—In verse 2 it is said that “the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers.” That is to say there would be no intermarriage with the heathen that surrounded them.

One-fourth part of a day in verse 3 represents three hours. The Jews divided the twenty-four-hour day into two twelve-hour segments. These were from 6 P.M. to 6 A.M. and from 6 A.M. to 6 P.M.

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). (Ne 9:1-38). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.