

## A Journey Through Ezra and Nehemiah

### Nehemiah 9-10: In Response to God's Word

Take a moment now to ask for God's blessing and help as we study Nehemiah 9-10 together.

#### ***The Big Picture:***

In chapter 8, the leaders told the people not to weep but to rejoice. But there is a time for weeping – and that time has now come. The confession and repentance in chapters 9-10 build directly upon the reading and teaching of the law in the previous chapters. Convicted by their reading and studying of the law, the people confess their sin in light of the history revealed in that law (chapter 9) and they renew their covenant promises to obey that law (chapter 10).

The first half of Nehemiah showed the rebuilding of the walls; as the second half develops, we are watching the rebuilding of a people – from the inside out.

#### ***Read Nehemiah 9 – 10***

#### ***A Prayer of Confession and of God's Goodness***

The ninth chapters of Ezra, Nehemiah and Daniel are all devoted to confessions of national sin and prayers for grace. Here in Nehemiah 9, Ezra leads the people in standing before the Lord to bless and exalt His name, and to confess their sins and the iniquities of their ancestors.

Ezra's prayer is striking in its beauty and it might remind us of some of the Psalms. This prayer talks about the mighty works of our powerful and loving God. It reviews His grace and power in:

1. creation (v.6);
2. the covenant of Abraham (v.7-8);
3. Egypt and at the Red Sea (v. 9-11);
4. the wilderness and at Sinai (v. 12-21);
5. the conquest of Canaan (v. 22-25);
6. the work of the judges (v. 26-28);
7. the words of the prophets (v. 29-31);
8. and in the present situation (v. 32-37).

#### ***God's Mercies***

The mercies of God run like a stream through this prayer. They answer the disobedience of the people repeatedly with something much better than they could ever have deserved. The first mention of mercy (v. 17) echoes Exodus 34:5-6 in which God proclaimed His name before Moses and then rewrote the two tablets of the law (after Moses had broken the first ones in anger over the people's sin). Verses 18-19 of Nehemiah 9 recall the making of a golden calf and God's 'great mercies' in not forsaking this blasphemous and disobedient people. The language of 'saviours' and of 'deliverers' (v. 27-28) points us ahead to the Saviour who came to deliver His people finally from sin.

The prayer's sweep of history climaxes in a statement bookended by mercy: *"Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God (v. 31)."*

### ***Stiffened Necks***

Scripture uses many metaphors to demonstrate disobedience and undeserved grace. One vivid picture or metaphor used throughout the Old Testament is that of stiffening one's neck – refusing, like a stubborn mule, to take direction (9:17 & 29). The people rebel against God by constructing a golden calf and then in effect become like what they worship: God immediately nicknames them 'stiff-necked' (Exodus 32:9). They are stubborn, disobedient and running wild (Nehemiah 9:16, 17, 26, 29). After the prayer's exaltation of the God who alone is Lord and the rehearsing of His mercies to His people, this picture makes rebellion against Him appear even more wilful, wild and foolish. It also confirms the fact that salvation comes to us disobedient people with absolutely no help or deserving on our parts. Salvation for stiff-necked people like ourselves is accomplished only and wholly by the Lord, due only and wholly to His mercy (Ephesians 2:1-9).

### **Read Nehemiah 10**

At the end of Nehemiah chapter 9, the people had come to a place of decision, and now, collectively, the nation was going to do something about it. Chapter 10 begins with a list, bearing the official seals and containing a roll of 84 names. These 84 mentioned and the rest of the people – that is, everyone who had knowledge and understanding – made a covenant with God. In making the covenant, they agreed to accept a curse from God if they did not obey His law. They accepted the curse as a form of His correction, to bring them back to obedience.

The nation of Israel is making a series of promises and decisions. They are saying 'we will be faithful.' We could categorise the series of promises and decisions into three:

1. we will be faithful to God when it comes to our romantic relationships
  - they promise not to give their daughters as wives to the people of the Land;
2. we will be faithful to God when it comes to doing business
  - they promise not to buy or sell on the Sabbath day;
3. we will be faithful to God when it comes to supporting God's work
  - they agree to give as God has commanded (the first-born, first-fruits, and the tithe). They also agree to give as the special need required (the one-third of a shekel tax and the wood)
  - they promise not to neglect the house of God.

Together the people pledge their obedience, faithfulness and trust in their Father God.

### ***The Story of God's Covenants***

As the prayer in chapter 9 sweeps through salvation history and as chapter 10 tells us of the nation's renewed promises and decisions, we are reminded of the continuing story of God's covenants with His people. In connection with Abraham, the part of the covenant involving the land is emphasised, as these exiles who have been returned to their land celebrate God's keeping His promise (Nehemiah 9 & Psalm 105:8-11). The story uses covenant language

throughout. For example, God ‘multiplied their children as the stars of heaven (Nehemiah 9:23 & Genesis 15:5).’ Their appeal for mercy is to the ‘great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love (Nehemiah 9:23).’ The people are calling out to God to continue to be faithful to His promises, even though they themselves have been unfaithful. Not only did God faithfully protect this remnant through the next centuries, but from them He brought the Lord Jesus Christ in the line of David, just as He has promised (covenanted) to do.

### ***Abundant Provision***

Nehemiah 9:25 echoes the depiction of the Promised Land as one which was ‘flowing with milk and honey.’ It was a land of riches (Deut 6:10-12) and here the people experienced God’s abundance. Moses warned that the people would become full and forget the Lord – and they did and the abundance was taken away. Yet here in Nehemiah we see God’s abundant mercies flowing. That mercy culminates in the One whose giving was reflected in all those physical riches: Jesus Christ. He came so that His followers might have life, and have it abundantly (John 10:10). In Him we inherit all the riches of the new heaven and earth – trees of Eden-like abundance and God dwelling in our very midst, with the slain and risen Lamb of God as they temple and the lamp, lighting the whole scene with His glory (Rev 21:22-23 & 22:1-5).

*Take time to reflect on the implications of Nehemiah 9-10 for your own life today. Consider what you have learned that might lead you to praise God; what might lead you to repent and to reconsider; and what leads you into a place of deeper trust in His gracious promises and purposes.*

### ***Some questions for reflection:***

1. Nehemiah 9:1-5: Look at all the carefully noted elements of this prayer gathering. What strikes you in Nehemiah’s description of God’s people coming together in prayer – and what can we learn from this scene today?
2. Nehemiah 9:6-15: How does each sentence in this section begin? What various attributes of God are celebrated in these? Consider – Do we tell our history in this way? If not, should we? Why or why not?
3. Nehemiah 9:32-37: Verse 32 finally arrives at ‘now.’ In what several ways does the final section of this prayer (v. 32-37) effectively sum up what has come before? What and how are the people asking God?
4. In light of Ezra’s ending and the history revealed in the prayer of chapter 9 of Nehemiah, what questions might we have about the people’s covenant in chapter 10? Read Nehemiah 9:17 and Exodus 34:1-9. What glorious truths about God stand out?

Feel free to get in touch to share what you have learned and what you have been reflecting on during our study. You can email Mark at [revmarkmccconnell@gmail.com](mailto:revmarkmccconnell@gmail.com) and/or Emma at [revemaycarson@gmail.com](mailto:revemaycarson@gmail.com).

***The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. Numbers 6:24-26***

***Yours in faith and love, Rev Emma***