

ZEAL FOR THE LORD: NEHEMIAH 9:1-38

I. Overview of Covenant Renewal (Nehemiah 8)

- A. After the walls are built and the former exiles are remembered, thousands gather “as one man into the square” to hear Ezra and the Levites solemnly read and explain the Law of God for five hours straight (8:1-8):

“They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.” (v. 8)

- B. The people are stirred up to remember the love of God for them, the presence of God, and the delight of God:

“And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, ‘This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.’ For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. ¹⁰ Then he said to them, ‘Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.’” (vv. 9-10)

“Sorrow for sins is necessary if it be not unremitting. I beg you to turn your steps back sometimes from troubled and anxious remembering of your ways, and to go forth to the tableland of serene remembrance of God's benefits”
- John Calvin quoting Bernard of Clairvaux, *Institutes*, 3.3.15

- C. The people return to keep the family-oriented festival called the “Feast of Booths/Tabernacles”:

“And they found it written in the Law that the LORD had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month...” (v. 14)

II. The Satisfying Pain of Confession: Nehemiah 9:1-38

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. ² And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. ³ And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day; for another quarter of it they made confession and worshiped the LORD their God. ⁴ On the stairs of the Levites stood Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, and Chenani; and they cried with a loud voice to the LORD their God. ⁵ 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.

(1) Praise to God the Creator (vv. 1-6) ⁶ *“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; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you. ⁷ You are the LORD, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham. ⁸ You found his heart faithful before you, and made with him the covenant to give to his offspring the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite. And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous.*

(2) Record of God’s grace, mainly in wilderness (vv. 7-17a) ⁹ *“And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea, ¹⁰ and performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants and all the people of his land, for you knew that they acted arrogantly against our fathers. And you made a name for yourself, as it is to this day. ¹¹ And you divided the sea before them, so that they went through the midst of the sea on dry land, and you cast their pursuers into the depths, as a stone into mighty waters. ¹² By a pillar of cloud you led them in the day, and by a pillar of fire in the night to light for them the way in which they should go. ¹³ You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments, ¹⁴ and you made known to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses your servant. ¹⁵ You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger and brought water for them out of the rock for their thirst, and you told them to go in to possess the land that you had sworn to give them. ¹⁶ But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments. ¹⁷ 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.*

(3) Testimony of God’s forgiveness and compassion (vv. 17b-25) *“But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them. ¹⁸ Even when they had made for themselves a golden calf and said, ‘This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt,’ and had committed great blasphemies, ¹⁹ you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness. The pillar of cloud to lead them in the way did not depart from them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night to light for them the way by which they should go. ²⁰ You gave your good Spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst. ²¹ Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness, and they lacked nothing. Their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell.*

²² “And you gave them kingdoms and peoples and allotted to them every corner. So they took possession of the land of Sihon king of Heshbon and the land of Og king of Bashan. ²³ You multiplied their children as the stars of heaven, and you brought them into the land that you had told their fathers to enter and possess. ²⁴ So the descendants went in and possessed the land, and you subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gave them into their hand, with their kings and the peoples of the land, that they might do with them as they would. ²⁵ And they captured fortified cities and a rich land, and took possession of houses full of all good things, cisterns already hewn, vineyards, olive orchards and fruit trees in abundance. So they ate and were filled and became fat and delighted themselves in your great goodness.

(4) Confession of sin during judges/monarchy until the prophets (vv. 26-31) *²⁶ “Nevertheless, 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. ²⁷ Therefore you gave them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer. 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. ²⁸ But after they had rest they did evil again before you, and you abandoned them to the hand 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 delivered them according to your mercies. 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, which if a person does them, he shall live by them, and they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey. ³⁰ Many years you bore with them and warned them by your Spirit through your prophets. Yet they would not give ear. Therefore you gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. 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.*

(5) Complaint that they are slaves under Persia (vv. 32-37) *³² “Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love, let not all the hardship seem little to you that has come upon us, upon our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and all your people, since the time of the kings of Assyria until this day. ³³ Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly. ³⁴ Our kings, our princes, our priests, and our fathers have not kept your law or paid attention to your commandments and your warnings that you gave them. ³⁵ Even in their own kingdom, and amid your great goodness that you gave them, and in the large and rich land that you set before them, they did not serve you or turn from their wicked works. ³⁶ Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves. ³⁷ And its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress.*

(6) Climactic oath of covenant recommitment (v. 38) *³⁸ “Because of all this we make a firm covenant in writing; on the sealed document are the names of our princes, our Levites, and our priests. (Neh 9:1-38)*

1. Why does this prayer begin by recognizing God as Creator? What does God’s creatorship have to do with confession?

2. Notice that their prayer of confession was an act of worship (v. 3). How so?

“Religion on earth finds its highest expression in the act of prayer... On his knees before God everyone that has been saved will recognize the sole efficiency of the Holy Spirit in every good work performed and will acknowledge that, without the atoning grace of Him who is rich in mercies, he would not exist for a moment but would sink away in guilt and sin. In a word, whoever truly prays ascribes nothing to his own will or power except the sin that condemns him before God and knows of nothing that could endure the judgment of God except it be wrought in him by divine love.” – Abraham Kuyper

*“The prayer of a Christian is not an attempt to force God’s hand, but a humble acknowledgement of helplessness and dependence. When we are on our knees, we know that it is not we who control the world; it is not in our power, therefore, to supply our needs by our independent efforts; every good thing that we desire for ourselves and for others must be sought from God, and will come, if it comes at all, as a gift from His hands.” – J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, 11.*

3. One gets the sense that these people, paradoxically, grew as a result of their failures and sin. How is this possible? How is knowing the contours of our sin evidence of God’s grace? How does it magnify God’s grace to us? Could this be true of you this Christmas?

4. Upon what did David appeal for forgiveness from God (Ps 51:1)? How is David’s appeal different from what may be our self-oriented inclination when looking for God’s mercy?

5. How do we think about justice when we are hiding sin from God? Do you think the notion of justice was on the mind of Bernie Madoff? Tim Donaghy (NBA ref caught gambling)? Tiger Woods?

6. Explain how Rom 3:24–26 (esp. v. 26) proves how the cross of Christ is the only gateway to genuine forgiveness?

When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long...my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD”—and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found...You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance. (Ps 32:3-7)