

Nehemiah 9:1-38 (ESV)

¹ 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. 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.

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. 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.

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 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. 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, enjoying 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.

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."

Nehemiah 10:1-27 (ESV)

¹ On the seals are the names of Nehemiah the governor, the son of Hacaliah, Zedekiah, ² Seraiah, Azariah, Jeremiah, ³ Pashhur, Amariah, Malchijah, ⁴ Hattush, Shebaniah, Malluch, ⁵ Harim, Meremoth, Obadiah, ⁶ Daniel, Ginnethon, Baruch, ⁷ Meshullam, Abijah, Mijamin, ⁸ Maaziah, Bilgai, Shemaiah; these are the priests.

⁹ And the Levites: Jeshua the son of Azaniah, Binnui of the sons of Henadad, Kadmiel; ¹⁰ and their brothers, Shebaniah, Hodiah, Kelita, Pelaiah, Hanan, ¹¹ Mica, Rehob, Hashabiah, ¹² Zaccur, Sherebiah, Shebaniah, ¹³ Hodiah, Bani, Beninu.

¹⁴ The chiefs of the people: Parosh, Pahath-moab, Elam, Zattu, Bani, ¹⁵ Bunni, Azgad, Bebai, ¹⁶ Adonijah, Bigvai, Adin, ¹⁷ Ater, Hezekiah, Azzur, ¹⁸ Hodiah, Hashum, Bezai, ¹⁹ Hariph, Anathoth, Nebai, ²⁰ Magpiash, Meshullam, Hezir, ²¹ Meshezabel, Zadok, Jaddua, ²² Pelatiah, Hanan, Anaiah, ²³ Hoshea, Hananiah, Hasshub, ²⁴ Hallohesh, Pilha, Shobek, ²⁵ Rehum, Hashabnah, Maaseiah, ²⁶ Ahiah, Hanan, Anan, ²⁷ Malluch, Harim, Baanah.

Nehemiah is a book with insights for us into restoration, renewal, leadership, and God's faithfulness.

Read Nehemiah 9:1-37
(Questions for later personal reflection)

24. What is the setting of this chapter, and who were its participants.
25. What aspects of the character of God are focused on in the confession?
26. What has God given? How have His gifts been misused? What are the worshipers' requests?
27. A key verse: Nehemiah 9:17b How is this verse relevant to Nehemiah's Jerusalem? To us?

The events of Chapter Nine take place two days after the time of feasting ended, and is a time of fasting – sackcloth and ashes. A service takes place lasting six hours – the first half devoted to reading from the Book of the Law of their God, and second half was spent in confession and worshipping the Lord.

The stairs may have been the stairs of the temple, or possibly the platform mentioned in chapter 8. Two groups of eight levites are mentioned, with five names common to both lists. Apparently they were leading in the liturgy with loud voices. If Ezra or Nehemiah were involved in this service, it is not in the text. Notable is their separation from all foreigners.

There is a lengthy confession – one of the Bible's longest prayers - running from Vs 5-37. It is as much a confession of God's glory and grace, as it is one of confessing man's ingratitude for what God has given and done. Its context is a call to praise. A hymnic form stands out, though it lies somewhere between narrative and poetry in actual form.

This confession is a look back at God's history with his chosen people, (Compare Psalms 105 and 106; 135 and 136.) There are many rich allusions to events in the Pentateuch: Creation, the Covenant with Abraham, the Exodus, the Wilderness Wanderings, and the possessing of the Land. It is commented that even critics accept the author must have known the Pentateuch in substantially its present form.

There is also a cycle here, similar to that in Judges. In response to their sin, God gives His people over to foreign powers, they cry for help, and He responds with deliverance.

The stress is on God's faithfulness to His covenant, His mercy and grace, despite their sin. (Neh 9:7, 17b, 19ff, 27, 30-33) Its not about what the people have done, it is about what God has done again and again! In verses 6-15, God is subject of every sentence; in 16-31, there is a contrast between “you . . .” and “ but they . . .”

It ends with finally with a request - a cry to the Lord - “we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our forefathers . . . its' abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us.”

Read Nehemiah 9:38 - 10:39
(Questions for later personal reflection)

28. Who bound themselves to this renewed covenant?
29. What specific practices are they committing themselves to? To what extent are these personal or communal responsibilities? How do these relate to current issues within the community?

The List of those who sealed the Covenant or binding agreement are broken into three groups: and many of the names represent families: first the Priests, then the Levites, finally the leaders of the people. The rest of the people are lumped together in verses 28.

The commitment they make here addresses the specific problems of their community: mixed marriages, sabbath observance, specific offerings and tithes that neglected have lead to neglect of the temple.

Similar issues were also addressed by the Prophet Malachi. In these the whole community has an involvement, but the individual involvement of its members is also stressed. The balance between personal and community responsibility is difficult to maintain, but such a balance is clearly suggested.

And in responding to the Word of God, declarations of intent are not enough, they need to touch both our lifestyles and our practice.