

# Nehemiah 9:1-37

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[ 0 : 00 ] Again, the scripture reading text is Nehemiah 9, 1 through 37, page 445 on the White Bibles. Now on the 24th day of this month, the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth and with earth on their heads. And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.

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. On the stairs of the Levites stood Jeshua, Benai, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunai, Sherebiah, Benai, and Kenanai. And they cried with a loud voice to the Lord, their God.

Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Benai, Hashemniah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shabaniah, 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. You are the Lord, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their hosts, 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. You are the Lord, the God, who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham. You found his heart faithful before you and made with him the covenant to give 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.

[ 1 : 49 ] And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea and perform 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. 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. 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. You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them bright rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments.

And you made known to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses, your servant. 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. But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck 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 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 and steadfast love and did not forsake them. Even when they had made for themselves a golden calf and said, this is your God who brought you out of Egypt and had committed great blasphemies, you and your great mercy 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. You gave your good spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst. Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness and they lacked nothing.

Their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell. 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. 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. So the descendants went in and possessed the land and you subdued before them the inhabitants of the

land, the Canaanites.

[ 4 : 22 ] And gave them into their hand with their kings and the peoples of the land that they might do with them as they would. 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.

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. 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. 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 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. 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. Nevertheless, in your great mercies, you did not make an end of them or forsake them for you are a gracious and merciful God. Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love. Let not all the hardships 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. Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully, and we have acted wickedly. 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. 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. Behold, we are slaves this day. In the land that you gave our fathers to enjoy its fruit and good gifts, behold, we are slaves. 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. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated.

Well, I want to encourage you this morning to keep a copy of that reading open as we consider God's design for God's design for us this morning. Nehemiah chapter 9. And I want to open by asking a series of questions.

[ 7 : 59 ] What is it that would move the human heart to make a fresh start with God? Certainly there are many here today who would long to recapture a setting out with God.

What are the seeds that would need to be sown in the soil of your own soul that when watered would bring forth flowers?

The fragrance of which would be an aroma that is pleasant to you and a glory to your Creator.

What thoughts would need to be set down in the mind of the church that might germinate in ways that bring the church to fresh promises and pledges?

Simply put, what is it that leads to a revival of soul and a strengthening of this faith family?

[ 9 : 32 ] I ask those questions today because Israel's fresh start with God at the time of Nehemiah produced unusual promises and pledges from them.

I mean, you only need to see the verse that follows the last one that was read because of all this. The outcome of the prayer was the appending and the signing of one's name in ways that took a fresh oath and obligations in joy.

If that is the case, then there is something about this prayer before us today that has within it the seeds which if nurtured in the soil of your soul, hold out hope to making a fresh start with God.

Certainly it is a prayer. It is obvious from the traditional invocation that began all the way back in verses 5b and verse 6.

[ 11 : 07 ] It was a conventional way of opening up a conversation that rises toward God.

A signature invocation that He is the Lord. That He is the Creator of the heavens and the earth. That all things ought to worship you.

This was a standard opening to a prayer. Not only that, but we see in verses 1-4 that this prayer came on the heels of a corporate worship service.

That all the people had been gathered together, it says in verse 1. And by the time one is reading in verses 3 and following, you'll realize that for three hours they were listening to the reading of the Word.

which then brought upon the people three more hours, yes, a six-hour long worship service, where they began to bring confessions of sin in light of their reading.

[12:31] In fact, it seems clear from the text that this congregational gathering, this church corporate worship service, came on the second day after their celebration of the feast of the booths.

And they had gathered, it says, in sackcloth and ashes with earth on their heads, emblematic of Job long before them, of Israel in its state of confession.

Yes, this is a prayer that is published on the backside of that gathering.

And it's obviously been penned by these priests. In other words, it's a prayer that was offered on behalf of the people and then put down in writing.

Can you envision the day all of God's people gathered, desirous of making a fresh start, already within their hearts a willingness to the work, an attentiveness to the Word, a verbal expression of having fallen short, and now having heard from God who spoke to them through text, and having heard from one another concerning their failures of that text, they now speak to God.

[14:27] There is something about this prayer that when germinated in their soul, made them want to make a promise and a pledge as the natural outcome.

This prayer, you'll notice, is a prayer of a different sort. My editors have unfortunately indicated on the front side that I should be reading an entire chapter that is bent on their confessing of sin.

But in the listening to the text, there is very little confession of their sin. It makes much in its confession of God's kindness to them in light of their sin.

Let me take a run at a lengthy chapter in ways that will make it digestible for you.

Most prayers are bent on asking God to do something for you.

[15:53] This prayer highlights what God has done for you. The outcome of which is a heart that says, What can I do for you?

See, this is a unique prayer. And it divides easily. They begin to reflect on God's earliest history with them.

Verses 7 and 8. Which will give way to a reflection on God's ministry to them in the hard times of life.

Verse 9 through 21. Which will then alter their thinking concerning the happy times as well.

And it will close by indicating that whether or not God removed privileges from them or restored and replenished and returned privileges to them, His gracious mercies are the common denominator in all of their life.

[17:21] You can see it at the very beginning, 7 and 8. They want God's people to know that the Lord, God, chose Abram, brought Abram, gave a new name to Abram, that the Lord found within his heart faith, that the Lord made a covenant with him, and, verse 8, that the Lord kept all of His promises to him.

That's the confession. The confession is, Dear family, go back to our founding father, Abram, and reflect on the lavish love of God.

He chose him. He gave him. He named him. He brought him. He led him. He kept all of His promises to him.

This is what you call historical reflection in the voice of praise. Now, let me just say this for a moment. Having been raised in prayer meetings that are rather dignified in the sense of being difficult to stay with, I have been encouraged every first Sunday of the month now for two and a half years to gather with this church family in the loft on the first Sunday of the month.

And through the prayers of you, through the prayers of this people, I am learning to pray. I remember early listening in the loft with my eyes closed as an individual in the congregation would set out to pray.

[19:19] And they would say something like, Lord, you have been with us from the very first day. Lord, like Israel, you chose us in your son.

You brought us over. You gave to us. You kept us. And the litany of their ability to reflect on God's gracious activity from their earliest moments in history began to buoy my own soul.

In other words, the lavish love of God reflected in my mind through the history of his activity with his people brought me to a point of worship.

And that's what this prayer is doing. It's a confession. And I ask you today, did not God find you when you were living in another land?

Is there not anyone here who knows what it's like to be brought forth out of the Ur of the Chaldeans and be given a new name?

[ 20 : 31 ] Are there some here today who could bring testimony and testify to the fact that you have no other understanding for how it is you came into a relationship with God other than that he initiated, that he brought, that he called, that he named, that he protected, that he brought, that he kept all of his promises.

And he did so to one who had no birthright or inheritance to the things of God. This is what he prays. And he moves from that early moment in history which I recall in my own life at the age of 17 to 18 when the mystery of the mercies of Christ were mine.

They were mine. And I saw that he loved me and he took me and he wanted me and he would fulfill all of his promises unto me.

I still remember orange shag carpeting. Face down. Tears of released joy that God, the creator of the heavens and the earth would look upon me in my state and say, you're my son.

I have a name for you. And I will keep all good things concerning you. He moves in verse 9 through 21 to say not only in your earliest moments of history with me but in the hard times of life.

[ 22 : 18 ] In the hard times of life he has been gracious and merciful. Look at the hard season he picks up on. He sets out there in verse 9 with Egypt.

He will end this unit of thought and prayer in verse 21 with the 40 years in the wilderness. In other words he's bundling up in this section the gracious abundant ever present mercies of God upon his family in the hard times of life when they were in Egypt and then released.

Notice again the activity of God just follow with your eyes verses 9 through 15 you saw the affliction of our fathers you heard their cry you performed signs and wonders you knew about our enemies you made a name for yourself you divided the sea you went through the midst of the sea you gave us a pillar of cloud by day you gave us fire by night you gave us the law at Mount Sinai you gave us bread when we had none you offered water when there was none all through the hard things of life and you and I both know that the bread in the wilderness and the water from the rock were a test from God that we would learn to live not by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from God God gave them hard things that they would trust him in all things and he was faithful he was faithful but look how the text moves this incredible literary symmetry verse 16 but they followed by verse 17 but you but they oh

God when things were hard did not always handle the test in ways that produced a passing grade they oh God occasionally acted presumptively presumptuously disobediently stiffened their neck and wanted to go in another direction but they but you don't you love how the content of verses 17 through 21 roll back through the very things that he had already abundantly!

given them Lord you gave them bread Lord you gave them water but they rebelled but you oh Lord continued to give them bread you continued to give them water he never left them in the hard times of life even though their heart was fickle and often left him this is what they're confessing oh God as I look back upon the history of your people it says it right there verse 17 you have been ready to forgive gracious and merciful slow to anger abounding in steadfast love verse 19 in your great mercies here it is the capstone of the prayers thought you did not forsake them this is what they're confessing God your kindnesses to us in the hard times of life were met with grace and mercy even when

[ 26 : 31 ] I didn't respond appropriately in fact it says all the way there at the very end you've got to love it their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell it's their way of saying who woke up this morning and still had a pair of shoes to put on did God not give you something to wear in the times of want in seasons in your life where you did not know where the next meal was coming from did the next meal yet come amen it did and oh that more of us many more of us would be wrestling with the incredible depth of his grace and his mercy to provide for you in hard times anybody here know some hard times anybody here wonder how's it going to get done anybody in the midst of a wilderness considering whether or not he can walk you out to a better end prayer prayer!

!! but you. On going provision. It moves. It moves from a prayer of their earliest moments in history to the hardships of their life to when they look back upon the family even in the happy times God was there. The whole next unit of thought between verses 22 and 31 considers the land that they were given.

It's almost as though he's saying from the time of Joshua all the way to the moment of the exile God was even there in the happy times the one who was providing. Look at the way it talks about it. They got kings and kingdoms.

You brought them into a land. They possessed the land. You subdued people in the land. You captured fortified cities from the land. Look at that verse 25 at the end so they ate and were filled and became fat and delighted themselves in your great goodness.

This is the table of the family in full bounty. In times of plenty as well as in times of want. In times of happiness and in hardship. In the good and the bad. The testimony of God's word is clear.

[ 29 : 10 ] He is abundantly providing for his own. This is what this is what the prayer meeting sounds like. You are listening to these people pray about who God is in all of life.

But just as there was that incredible literary subtlety but they but you even in this happy moment the subtlety is still there. Verse 26 nevertheless they verse 31 nevertheless you there it is the emphasis of the prayer isn't just that he provided plenty but in the midst of that plenty nevertheless we went astray.

that that unit of thought between verses 26 and verse 30 is worth your consideration this afternoon.

There are four repetitions of God's mercy in the light of your nevertheless nevertheless they were disobedient verse 26 nevertheless verse 28 they did evil again verse 29 nevertheless they acted presumptuously the killer verse 30 nevertheless they would not give ear this this feckless four steps of flagstone that break away into their exile and at each point we see what

God is doing nevertheless he saved nevertheless he delivered nevertheless he bore!

he bore with until it finally has to say nevertheless he gave them over God is so loving that even in times of hardship when your faith fails and he provides you should know that in times of plenty when you presumptively move away from him he will save for a while deliver for a bit bear with you for a long time but just as a father disciplines his children so he will treat the church as his own son and he will give him over to discipline that we might learn holiness through that suffering this is

[ 32 : 49 ] Israel's history look at verse 31 nevertheless in your great mercies even when they were in exile nevertheless you did not make an end of them that's as good as he can get nevertheless he didn't take you out nevertheless you're still drawing breath nevertheless you're still sitting you're still breathing look at that phrase again nor did he forsake them that idea of not forsaking then comes at the endness at the end of his presence in the midst of hardship verse 19 and it comes again at the end of his gracious provision in the midst of your happiness verse 31 this is what the prayer wants you to know that God in his great mercy has never neglected you never been away from you never forsaken you and that is magnified given our fallenness before him

I want to think about this for just a minute how is it that he cannot forsake his people how can a righteous holy just God overlook our sin does he just turn a blind eye does he sweep it under the rug does he not leave his people because well you just my people no the answer is actually prophesied at a time in Israel's history before this when David was still on the throne take a look just for a minute at psalm 22 it's worth turning to one other place and you'll see that when

David was considering God's mercy toward his people he says in verse 4 in you our fathers trusted they trusted and you delivered them to you they cried and were rescued in you they trusted and were not put to shame in other words he looks back on Israel's history and says God when it comes to the people you have been consistently one of deliverance and rescue and keeping them from shame and yet the king the savior king David who prefigures our king opened up psalm 22 with these words my god my god why have you forsaken!

me why are you so far from saving me the anointed savior leader bears the forsakenness of god so that he can continue to be gracious to his people this is what happens when Jesus is on the cross in mark 15 where he says echoing these words my god my god why have you forsaken me he's picking up psalm 22 and saying to the world with it says a loud voice same words we have in 9 4 where the Levites are crying out this prayer in a loud voice the Levites cry out with a loud voice you have never forsaken us and Jesus cries out with a loud voice you have forsaken me this is the love of God for his people not that he has turned a blind eye to our frailty not that he has swept our undoing this under a rug not that he doesn't care about your fallenness and sinfulness but that

when he sees his son on the cross he is bearing in his death unwarranted by his life a substitution of sorts that in him and his forsakenness god can actually not forsaken me now when you consider that when you consider what god has done the prayers outcome isn't then god what are you going to do for me now the prayers outcome in our life as it was in this text is god what can i do for you why not to earn your love but to respond to your love not to gain hold through some activity his blessing but because we have been blessed in in your earliest history god has been kind in your hardest days god has been merciful in your happiest moments god has been gracious and it is magnified because from our earliest moment we did not seek him in our hardest times we often left him in our happiest moments we grew fat without him and nevertheless in christ in jesus we have a love that is eternally welling up unto life and so then the prayer closes and i'm almost done and in my seat that little last unit between verses 32 to 37 talks even about in a post exilic world he's kind of like saying lord whether you removed us from the land verse 32 to 36 35 or even when you returned us to the land we need you you have always been righteous you have always been good you have always been kind and with that the prayer closes and with that our answer is made what seeds need to be sown in the soil of your soul that would bring forth flowers of fresh fragrant offerings that are made in a renewal of promises and in pledges given to him what gracious provisions of God would compel you to actually give your life to him in fresh ways it is his love it is his love we pledge ourselves to him joyfully because he has provided for us persistently I make an oath or an obligation to him with gratitude because he has ever demonstrated himself to be gracious I love him because he first loved me this is what compelled the congregation of Nehemiah to come next with their name on a piece of paper and a promise to love [ 41 : 18 ] God and a pledge to maintain his house not not legalism not works righteousness but the outcome of the prayer was the making of an oath the bringing of an obligation under the signature of one's own name next Sunday I'm going to preach on chapter 10 and you're going to see the promise they made and the pledge they brought and you're going to have an opportunity not to do the same thing they did but to do something in line with what they did you're going to be able to walk down this aisle with your name on a piece of paper and a willing voluntary free offering to say oh

God let me give something to the restoration of a place whereby your name would be known and your word would be honored and your people would be holy we've never done anything like it before I doubt we'll ever do anything like it again but this week I would ask you to pray to pray this kind of prayer to read through chapter nine over and over and over again maybe once a day and reflect on the abundant mercy of God from the earliest moment of your history reflect on the gracious provision of

God through the hardships of your life reflect that those graces are magnified given the fallenness of our obedience reflect on the provisions that he's made on the blessings that he's given on the work that he's done on the place that he's put you reflect on whether or not he has removed blessings from you or restored blessings to you he has been faithful may a prayer then not be this week oh God what will you do but oh God in light of all that you've done I've come ready to indicate to you what

I will do our heavenly father we we know that the generosity of our life rightly understood is a derivative of the graciousness of your love may your steadfast love be our portion this week that we might respond even next Sunday with an equally lavished conviction of what we might do for you we ask you in Jesus name amen