

The Inexhaustible Mercy of God

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[0 : 0 0] Turn there with me. Our passage today is a summary of the whole Old Testament in one chapter. So if you're new to the Bible, maybe this will be a helpful chapter for you.

But this text is also a prayer. It is a prayer to God for mercy. So let's pray, and then I'll read the text for us.

Amen. God, what a wonderful thought it is that you are everlasting and that your glory will outlast and outstrip and exceed any of the fame that we see in this life.

God, what our hearts are really hungry for is an intimate word from you, our Creator and our Redeemer. So as we draw near to you and your word in this moment, would you speak, God, through your Holy Spirit by your word and help us to see Jesus in fresh ways, Father, we pray.

In his name, amen. Nehemiah chapter 9. 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.

[1 : 2 9] And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and their 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, Bonnie, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Buni, Sherabiah, Bonnie, and Chanani.

And they cried out with a loud voice to the Lord their God. Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bonnie, Hashbaniah, Sherabiah, Hodia, Shebaniah, and Pathahiah 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, 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. 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 to his offspring the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite.

[2 : 5 5] And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous. And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea 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. 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 right 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.

[4 : 05] They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you had 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.

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, you and 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. 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.

[5 : 22] 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.

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.

[6 : 31] 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.

[8 : 00] Behold, we are slaves this day. In the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruits and its 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.

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. We are in great distress.

Now, on the one hand, it's a bit surprising that the people in Nehemiah chapter 9 would describe themselves this way, great distress. After all, as we've seen this summer, God has been at work pretty powerfully during this period in Israel's history.

After all, aren't these the very people who can remember how God, just a generation before, moved the heart of the Persian king to bring them home from exile around 539 B.C.?

[9 : 12] Aren't these the very people who can remember how not so long ago God empowered them to overcome opposition and rebuild the temple in 516? And aren't these the very people who just a month ago, in the sixth month of 445 B.C., didn't they just see God bring them together and complete the massive rebuilding project of rebuilding Jerusalem's walls?

That sounds like a pretty inspiring string of events. You would think that they are flying high spiritually. And yet here in Nehemiah 9, as the people are gathered on the 24th day of the seventh month, having just completed celebrating the Feast of Booths for the first time since the days of Joshua, here they are, calling out to God, saying that they are in great distress.

The key is verse 36. Although the people are indeed in the land that God had promised to Abraham, yet they are still slaves.

A foreign king rules over them, verse 37 says, over their bodies and over their livestock all as they please. On the one hand, the people are free. They are back home in the land of promise and yet at the same time they are not free.

They are slaves, servants of a foreign king. On the one hand, God's promises are already fulfilled. Here we are, we're back in the land and yet at the same time they're not fulfilled. They're still in bondage.

[10 : 46] Now we have to appreciate how disconcerting that reality would have been for the Israelites in Nehemiah's day, not just politically but spiritually. After all, what is the basic story of the Old Testament?

It's this, God frees his people from slavery and then he puts them in the land of promise. That's sort of the basic arc. Out of slavery and into their true home. And now, the people are back in the land of promise.

God brought them back from exile. They're back in the land but paradoxically, they are still slaves. They are free and yet not free.

They are home and yet not home. And perhaps you've begun to feel that this spiritual experience isn't just limited to the people in Nehemiah's day.

Isn't that true of us today as well? On the one hand, living this side of the New Testament, we see so many of God's promises fulfilled.

[11 : 51] The Messiah has come. The Spirit has been poured out. The nations are coming into the people of God. The new creation has begun and yet at the same time, there's still suffering and death and decay and injustice.

And that can cause great distress. We are living in the tension between the already and the not yet.

Already, God's kingdom has come in Christ. Not yet is God's kingdom fully complete. We can feel like we're free and yet not free. Home and yet not home.

And that often puts us in a place of great distress. distress. But the biggest challenge of all, the source of their greatest distress and our greatest distress today, the source of our greatest distress, even living on this side of the New Testament, is it not this?

That in Christ, our sins have been forgiven and yet we still sin. We've been liberated from spiritual slavery and yet so often we return to our chains.

[13 : 04] We've been given an internal inheritance. We've been made a new creation and yet we so often live as if we belong to the old. All of our sins have been forgiven and yet we still sin.

does that not cause great distress in our hearts? For some of us it causes doubt.

For some of us discouragement. For some of us fear. For some of us loneliness and isolation, confusion. What are we to do?

Where are we to go? Well, Nehemiah chapter 9 points the way. You see, this prayer in Nehemiah 9 is more than just a recitation of Old Testament history.

Although it is a beautiful retelling of the whole biblical story up to this point, it's more than that. It's a humble prayer to the God of mercy. In our great distress, we must remember the inexhaustible mercy of God.

[14 : 22] So for a few moments this morning, I want to look at the mercy of God displayed in this prayer. And then once we have God's mercy fully in our sights, we're going to apply it to ourselves and to our neighbors and to our world.

But first, let's look at the prayer itself. Now, there are lots of ways we could approach this lengthy prayer in chapter 9, but I think the simplest way is to just take it in four broad movements.

And that fourth and last movement is what we've already been looking at, verses 32 through 37. The people of Nehemiah's day after the exile calling out to God in the land in their great distress, confessing their sin.

But the first three movements walk us through the reasons why we can call out to God in the first place.

Why should we? Why can we go to God in our great distress? And the first movement of the prayer in verses 6 through 8 tells us this.

[15 : 26] In your great distress, remember that your Creator is a merciful God. Now, in these verses, we don't see God's mercy explicitly referenced.

Compared to verses 16 through 21, where God's mercy is a major theme, or compared to verses 26 through 31, where God's mercy is referenced in nearly every verse, this opening movement of the prayer seems a bit quiet on the theme of God's mercy.

However, that doesn't mean that this opening movement of the prayer is just an introduction. After all, consider everything that transpires in the biblical story between verses 6 and 7 of our prayer here in chapter 9.

In other words, consider all that happens between the creation of all things in Genesis 1 and 2 and the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12. What happens? The fall of Adam and Eve, the murder of Abel by his brother Cain, the worldwide judgment of the flood, the building of the Tower of Babel.

What does God, our Creator, do in the face of humanity's constant rebellion against his goodness? Well, he makes a covenant with Abraham.

[16 : 42] Now, a covenant is a binding promise, and God binds himself to Abraham and Abraham's family, promising to give them a place to dwell and to bless them in order that the effects of curse and sin might be overcome.

That's what God promised Abraham from the very beginning, that in Abraham and in his offspring, all the world would one day be blessed. So this story of creation and covenant in verses 6 through 8 is really a story of God's mercy.

When the world stood under the curse of sin, God made a covenant to bring blessing. Notice how verse 8 ends. And you've kept your promise for you are righteous.

The people in Nehemiah's day were indeed living in the land. God kept his promise. And did that not mean that God would also keep his promise to be merciful to them, to forgive their sin, to liberate them once for all?

Indeed, if this is the God who created heaven with all their hosts, the earth and all that is in it, the seas and all that is in them, if this is the God who not just creates but preserves every living thing every second of every day, if that is who God is, how could he not keep his promise?

[18 : 06] What would stop such a God from keeping his promise? And if this God promises to be merciful, then indeed he will show mercy.

So our creator is a merciful God. But the prayer goes on. In verses 9 through 21, we find the second movement of the prayer. And in the second movement, we find this.

It tells us, in your distress, remember that your Redeemer is a merciful God. Remember that your Redeemer is a merciful God.

These verses retell the story of the Exodus when God liberated, when he redeemed his people from slavery in Egypt. And after liberating them, he led them with a cloud and fire. He gave them his law at Sinai, even fed them with bread and water in the wilderness.

God sees our affliction. He sympathizes with our slavery and he rescues us. Our creator is our Redeemer. But in verse 16, we see that the people acted presumptuously, stiffened their necks, and would not obey.

[19 : 17] They even had the audacity when God had just told them for their own good not to make idols, that is carvings of false gods, and worship them. When God had just told them not to do that, they had the presumption to make a metal calf statue and say, here's the Lord who brought you out of Egypt.

Behold your God, Israel. And what does God do? Does he leave them to wander in the wilderness alone?

Does he revoke his law? Does he allow them to starve? No. No. Verse 19, you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness.

The cloud and the fire remained. God even imparted his spirit to instruct them in the law. The manna continued to appear morning after morning because our Redeemer is a merciful God.

And how could he not be at this point? Having redeemed his people, you see, God's name, as it were, was on this people now.

[20 : 24] They were the Lord's people. And how was he going to forsake them? How could he allow his name to be dishonored in that way? He had bound himself to this people to be their God, to be their Redeemer. In other words, his own reputation was at stake now with his people.

He didn't just look at their affliction and have sympathy on them. He bound himself to them and said, this is my people now. So all the nations looking on would not just see what happened to that people, but would see what this God was like.

God's own reputation was at stake now with his people in the world. And if that was true, how could God forsake them? How would his mercy not remain on them?

Our Redeemer is a merciful God. But the prayer goes on. In verses 22 through 31, we find the third movement of the prayer. And as it walks through Israel's history, it tells us this.

It says, in your distress, remember that your glorifier is a merciful God. Now these verses tell the story of how God gave Israel the land of Canaan and how he made good on all of his promises to fight for them and give them a home, to make them a numerous people, as numerous as the stars of heaven, and how he filled them with good things.

[21 : 42] You see, God not only creates us and redeems us, but he also glorifies us. That is, he brings all of his promises to completion, to consummation. He is our goal and our end and our delight.

God saves us to bring us somewhere and he brings us there to glory. But in verse 26, we see that although God had given the people everything, they still rebelled.

So throughout what's called the period of the judges, a downward spiral takes place in Israel's history. The people would begin serving other gods, the Lord would give them over to their enemies, the people would cry out to the Lord, and then the Lord would send a judge or a savior, as verse 27 puts it, and the people would be liberated for a while.

But then the same thing would happen all over again. They would go back to other gods and experience defeat and cry out for help and another rescuer would come and it would keep going and going on and on. The downward spiral went. And when Israel eventually became a monarchy under Saul and then ultimately under King David, it seemed like maybe things would be different at that point.

It seemed like maybe God would be able to get them out of the downward spiral and yet as the generations of kings went on, the kings proved just as fickle as the people. Until eventually God ultimately gave them up to the Assyrians and then the Babylonians to be ejected from the land, to be sent out into exile.

[23 : 16] And it seemed like that might be the end of the story. Had God simply had enough, was God done once and for all with his rebellious people?

No. Look at verse 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.

Our creator and redeemer and glorifier is a merciful God. A remnant survived the exile and eventually God brought them home.

And that's the story of Ezra and Nehemiah, right, that we've been looking at. And you see, it's on the basis of this history, this history of inexhaustible mercy that the people in Nehemiah's day, knowing their own sin and sensing their own slavery and feeling the dislocation of being in between the already and the not yet, it's on the basis of that history that they call out to God and ask for mercy.

And friends, it's on the basis of that same history that you and I can call out to God for mercy as well.

[24 : 35] It means we can be honest with our sins and our failings. We don't have to try to hide them or cover them up. Don't try to excuse them or pass them off or stuff them down.

After all, God is an almighty. God is the almighty creator. There's no use hiding from a God like that. He keeps your DNA running.

I'm pretty sure you can't keep your secrets from Him. But God's also the almighty redeemer who loves you and longs to receive you and enters into your pain and your suffering.

You don't have to keep secrets from a God like that. You can be confident to go to a God like that and ask for mercy because He knows you. And what's more, God is your glorifier.

He has a plan for you and He has a future for you. A plan and a future that actually no sin and no shame can stand in the way of. But perhaps this morning your sins seem too great.

[25 : 43] Perhaps you know what it's like like the people at the beginning of this chapter to maybe you're not literally throwing dirt on your head and tearing your clothes because your heart is so broken but maybe at a spiritual or existential level you can feel that.

Perhaps doubt and great distress still haunt you. Could God still love me? Could God still receive me? Have I not sinned too greatly? Have I not acted too presumptuously?

Have I not actually stiffened my neck? Have I not refused to obey even when I knew better? How could God be merciful to me? You know, we've been looking back over the story of the Old Testament but for a moment look ahead.

Look at what the New Testament holds and what do you see there? The almighty creator takes flesh and becomes a creature weak and in a manger.

The compassionate redeemer, the one who rescues from slavery with a strong arm takes the form of a servant. The glorifier, the one who lives in perfect beauty and goodness is put to shame.

[27 : 09] Why? Why would such a great, mighty, and awesome God, as our chapter says, why would that God do such a thing? Why would Jesus come and suffer and die?

It's mercy. It's mercy for you, friend. He was forsaken so that you would never have to be.

No matter how great your sins, there's mercy for you in the arms of Christ. So how should we apply this great prayer of Nehemiah 9?

First, to ourselves. And the key word here is peace. For all who are in Christ, the mercy of God covers all your sins, past, present, and future.

So confess your sins to God. Go to Him in sorrow and repentance. Cry out to Him for mercy and you will find it. And let the words of God's mercy bring your heart peace.

[28 : 24] And you know, this is the sort of peace that doesn't give you a license to sort of do whatever you want. This is the sort of peace that causes you to sin less and less. Let me use a somewhat simple illustration.

When I go to the grocery store hungry, what do I usually come home with? What do you usually come home with? I'll tell you what I come home with.

Ice cream. Those New England barbecue chips that are so crunchy and delicious. Some form of baked good that probably has a high fat content.

Oreos. Do you know they make mega stuffed Oreos now? I think when you open up the package it's just white stuff. There's not even a cracker in there. That's what happens when I go to the grocery store hungry and all that food ends up in my cart because my stomach is growling and it all looks so good.

But what about when I go to the grocery store after I've already had a satisfying meal? Well, I usually come home with what's on my list.

[29 : 41] Do you see the spiritual truth here? When your heart is full of the peace and mercy of Christ, when you're able to look back and recite the mercy of God not just through biblical history but on into your own history and to the history of those around you, when your heart is full of that mercy and peace and when you have fellowship with God your creator and redeemer and glorifier and you know that he looks upon you not with condemnation but with favor, when your heart is full with that satisfying peace of forgiveness, then your heart doesn't need the junk food anymore.

Now, if that peace seems elusive to you, find an older, more mature believer or come talk to one of the pastors or elders or maybe your small group leader and open your heart to them.

That can be a very vulnerable thing to do but in that safe place of a trusted brother or sister, open your heart to them because sometimes we need the word of mercy to come from the outside so we can really get down deep on the inside.

That's the beauty of confessing your sins to one another in the spiritual family of the church. Open up your heart to another trusted friend but that's often the way to experience this mercy and peace in a fresh way, the peace that satisfies you.

second, let's apply this mercy to our neighbors. If the word to ourselves was peace, the word toward our neighbors is patience.

[31 : 26] When we know God has been merciful to us, when we've experienced that over time, we become much more patient towards others. not perfectly, but gradually.

Because let's be honest, people sometimes annoy us. People sometimes disappoint us. People sometimes hurt us. And we wonder, how long do we really have to put up with them?

But in those moments, it's good to pause and consider how long God has put up with us. How many of your sins has God overlooked? How many of your failures has He patiently endured?

How often has He taken you back again and again with no contempt and no conditions but with gentleness and love? Now, this isn't saying we don't need to have good boundaries at times with people, but those who know mercy become patient people.

Patient because God has been so mercifully patient with us. But last, this mercy applies in our relationship to the world.

[32 : 44] Peace, patience, but the word here when we look out at the world is hope. You know, it's easy to look out at the world and get pretty discouraged. Things like poverty and racism and violence and corruption, they never seem to end.

And the longer you care about these things as we should as followers of Christ, you know, the longer you care about these things, the harder it can be because so often good plans for change don't often bring change about.

But a people in touch with God's mercy will always have hope. Why? Because hope, you see, is something much different than a wish.

You wish for something, but you hope in someone. Do you see the difference? We often wish for something, but hope, real hope, is hoping in someone.

Now, wishes aren't bad. It's good to have and good to desire specific, concrete changes that we'd like to see. It's good to work for them and long for them. But the reality is, friends, in a fallen world, often these wishes will not materialize.

[34 : 02] But hope is different. Even when things don't go as we planned, hope in God grows.

We may not know how or when God will come and make all things new. We don't know when His kingdom will break forth and give us signs of the coming day. But we know that it will.

How do we know? Because our Creator and our Redeemer and our Glorifier, the Lord Jesus, is a God of mercy. He will bring to completion the good work He began.

Justice will roll down like waters and righteousness will come like an ever-flowing stream and that kind of hope will sustain us even when our wishes don't materialize the way we want. The people who know mercy, in other words, are a hopeful people.

So peace and patience and hope. It is possible even in our great distress to know these things, to know peace and patience and hope. Why? Because our God is a merciful God.

[35 : 11] And the more you know this God, the more you'll be able to say with the psalmist, surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Let's pray. Why don't we take just a moment and ask the Holy Spirit to come and show us in our hearts where we need in particular to feel and to experience God's mercy?

Perhaps it's sins that you've been wrestling with, something in your past, something even in your present. Perhaps it's a relationship that's been bringing out the worst in you.

Perhaps it's a weariness because your labors in the world seem to be bearing so little fruit. Lord Jesus, we praise you that you are a God of mercy.

would you equip us and encourage us this week to go forth from this place to really live into and press into that mercy in a way perhaps that we've never done before.

[36 : 55] You must do this work, God. You must do it by your Spirit so we look to you. We yield to you, God, and ask you to come. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen. Well, church, let's stand.