

Notes on Nehemiah Chapter 9

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II. Review of the History of Israel – Chap. 9

Step 10 in usefulness to God: Lead people to recognize and repent of sin.

Verses 1-3

1. What did the people do on the 24th day? What were some specific things they did (v1)? (Think: What is the significance of these acts?)
2. What else did they do (v2)? Explain and give other Scriptures regarding separation from foreigners?
3. What else did they do (v3)? How long did this take? (Think: What can we learn regarding willingness to worship God?)
4. Why is confession of sin important? Give other *passages*.

A special assembly of the people to worship and confess to God

Again on the 24th day of this 7th month, the people were assembled, fasting, and indicating sorrow by wearing sackcloth and dust on their heads. The feast of the tabernacles in chap. 8 had taken from the 15th through the 22nd day of the month, with the assembly of the eighth day of the feast occurring on the 22nd (Lev. 23:34ff). This means that this meeting on the 24th must have been a separate voluntary meeting not required by any feast day.

The people separated themselves from foreigners (cf. Nehemiah 13:1-3; Ezra chapters 9 & 10; Deuteronomy 23:3-6). This could refer to specific separation from foreign wives, as in Ezra 9 & 10. Or it may mean they did not make alliances with these foreigners. Or perhaps it means in general that they turned away from all evil influences among these people.

The people took ¼ of the day to read the book of the law of God and then another ¼ of the day to confess their sins and worship God. So they spent half their day in this special voluntary period of worship and study even after they had spent the eight days of the Feast of the Tabernacles in reading the law and worshipping (8:18). This shows the zeal and desire of the people to communicate with God. We need such zeal among God's people today. Too many do not want to spend more than an hour a week in worship and study, and many won't do that much.

In particular, confession of sins is vital if we expect God to accept our worship. See Acts 8:22; Matthew 6:12; 21:28-32; 2 Corinthians 7:10; 1 John 1:8-10; Proverbs 28:13. God will not accept worship from those who claim to be His children but who disobey His word and will not repent (1 John 2:15-17; Romans. 12:1,2; James 4:4; etc.).

Verses 4-15

5. Vv 5-15 describe the praise of God, then vv 16-38 describe the people's confession of sin and God's reaction. From vv 5-15 list at least 7 characteristics of God and 7 works of God. Then list other *passages* about them:

Praise of God's Greatness

Leaders begin the period of worship

This confession and worship was led by the men named in vv 4,5. They stood on the stairs (presumably so people could see and hear them), then cried aloud and led the people in praising God. They called on the people to stand up and bless (praise) the Lord God.

They then began the prayer of confession and praise by honoring God whose name is exalted so high we cannot bless and praise Him highly enough. God's name stands for the Person and all He is. To praise God's name is to praise Him Himself (see 1 Chron. 29:13; Matthew 6:9).

God is Lord because God is Creator.

God is praised as the only true Lord. He is Lord because He made heaven and the host of heaven (the heavenly bodies), the earth and sea and everything in them. As Creator of all, He deserves the praise and service of all that He created. Note that God's place as God and Ruler is the consequence of His work as Creator. To deny or doubt His power as Creator is to deny or undermine respect for His right to rule. See Genesis chap. 1; Exodus 20:11; Psalm 33:6-9; 102:25; 89:11; 90:2; 104:5-9,24-28; 19:1; 24:1,2; 95:5; 146:6; 136:5-9; 8:3,6-8; 148:5; Jeremiah 10:12; 27:5; John 1:1-3; Acts 14:15; 17:24; Isaiah 42:5; 45:18; 40:26; Hebrews 1:10; 11:3.

He not only *made* everything, but He *preserves* all that He made (Psalms 36:6; Colossians 1:17). He upholds the continued existence of that which He made. If He were to cease willing them to exist, they would all immediately perish. The fact the world continues to stand is proof of God's continued existence, just as the origin of the world is the proof of His authority over all.

The host of heaven (heavenly bodies) worship Him, not in the sense that they consciously, knowingly praise Him as intelligent beings would do, but their very existence shows forth His power and greatness and thereby honor Him.

God's covenant with Abraham

Just as the creation showed reason to praise God, so does the history of His dealings with man, especially the descendants of Abraham. So the people praised God for the great things done for their ancestors, starting with Abraham. Throughout their history, Jews have loved to recount the story of Abraham and God's subsequent blessings to him. This is the basis for their claim to be God's special people, which indeed they were during the Old Testament.

God chose Abraham and called him out of the land of Ur and brought him to the land of Canaan (Gen. 11:31; 12:1ff). Because of Abraham's faithfulness (Gen. 15:6; chap. 22, especially v16), God changed his name to Abraham, meaning a father of many nations (Gen. 17:5). God made the covenant with him (Gen. 15:18-21) to give to his descendants the land of Canaan, including the territory of all the nations specified – these are the same nations repeatedly specified as occupying the territory God would give Israel.

Because God is righteous, He performed these words. This clearly means that the Israelites received the land God promised. This was done in the past – i.e., prior to Nehemiah 9; it was not something to happen yet in the future. See also vv 23,24; Josh. 21:43-45; 23:14. This proves the error of modern premillennialists, who claim Israel still has not received the land fully, but will receive it at Jesus' second coming. The consequence of this view, according to the context here, is that ***God is not righteous!***

For further information, see our articles about premillennialism at our Bible Instruction web site at www.gospelway.com/instruct/.

God delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage

As time passed, God also blessed the Israelites who had been captives in Egypt. He saw their affliction and heard their cry (Ex. 2:22-25; 3:7). God performed great wonders against Pharaoh and all the Egyptians (the 10 plagues – Ex. chap. 7-14). He did this because they had acted proudly against Him, thinking He could not overpower them. By His great miracles, He made a name for Himself (Jer. 32:20).

So God led the people from captivity. He parted the Red Sea so the people passed through on dry land, but the enemies were destroyed (Ex. 14:20-31). He then led them by pillar of cloud by day and fire by night (Ex. 13:21,22).

All this showed God's power and exalted His name before the world. And all this gave Israel great reason to honor and serve Him. But we will see that they were not faithful, which is the ultimate point of this history.

God gave Israel the law and provided for them in the wilderness.

God then revealed His law to the people at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 19,20), a good and just law (Rom. 7:12). This law included the Sabbath (Ex. 16:23; 20:8-11; 23:12; 31:13-17; cf. Gen. 2:3) and other precepts and statutes given through Moses. God also fed them with manna in the wilderness (Ex. 16), and gave them water from the rock (Ex. 17:6; Num. 20:8-11). He led them to the land He had sworn to give them and told them to go in to possess it (Deut. 1:8; Num. 13,14).

The expression “made known” surely seems to imply that the people had not known the Sabbath prior to the giving of the law, at least it was not revealed prior to that time that the people were to observe it. The first time we read of people being told to observe the Sabbath was regarding the gathering of manna (Ex. 16). Though this happened shortly before their arrival at Mt. Sinai, it was in the wilderness near to Sinai (Ex. 16:1) and the context probably refers to the whole period in which God gave the law.

If this is the correct conclusion, then God rested on the seventh day of creation and that is the reason He hallowed it (Gen. 2:3), but it was not till later at Mt. Sinai that He revealed that man should keep it. In any case, it is clear from the passages listed above that He addressed the command specifically to the nation of Israel. No one else has ever been required to keep the Sabbath, and no one is required to keep it now that the Old Testament has been removed (Hebrews 10:1-10; 7:11-14; 8:6-13; 9:1-4; 2 Corinthians 3:6-11; Galatians 3:24,25; 5:1-6; Romans 7:1-7; Ephesians 2:11-16; Colossians 2:13-17).

For further information, see our articles about the old law today at our Bible Instruction web site at www.gospelway.com/instruct/.

Summary of God’s qualities and works

Note from the things the people have spoken, some of the great qualities of God that the people were praising, and some of the works He has done that prove He has these qualities. We too should praise God in these same ways for these same reasons:

Characteristics	Works
Power	Creation
Wisdom	Preservation
Uniqueness (one God)	Covenant with Abraham
Righteousness	Plagues on Egypt
Faithfulness to promises	Crossing Red Sea
Love, care, concern	Pillar of cloud/fire
Justice	Gave law
Guidance/ authority	Food & water
Provision	Canaan land
Grace, mercy, forgiveness	Great nation

Verses 16-18
 6. After God blessed Israel (vv 8-15), how did Israel respond (v16)? What specific examples of this rebellion are mentioned (vv 17,18)? Give **b/c/v** about these.

Corruption of Israel

Having told how great and good God was, the people now confess how corrupt their fathers had been.

The people refused to obey.

The people confess that their ancestors had acted proudly. They hardened their necks – i.e., they were stubborn (Deut. 1:26-33; 31:27). They did not obey God’s commands and did not remember the good He had done them (Psalms 106:6; 78:11,42-45).

Specifically, they refused to enter the promised land, but appointed a leader and wanted to return to Egypt (Num 14:4; Acts 7:39). Imagine how offensive this was to God. Here He made

such great efforts and did such great miracles to get them out of Egypt to Canaan, and what do the people do when they get there? They refuse to enter and want to go back to the place He just led them out of! Consider how this is like some people today. God sent His Son Jesus to die on the cross to lead them out of the curses of sin. And what do the people do? They feel sorry for themselves and think they were better off before they were converted!

Also they worshiped a golden calf saying it was the God that brought them from Egypt (Ex. 32:4-8,31). God did such great things for them, and what did they do? They made an image and attributed all these great works to an idol they made with their own hands. They had committed this great sin even as Moses was on the mountain receiving God's law! Imagine how God must have felt about this!

Yet even so, God was gracious, slow to anger, and abundant in kindness. He did not forsake them despite their sins (Joel 2:13). He punished them and demanded repentance, but He did not destroy them as He had the right to do.

Verses 19-21

7. How did God deal with them in response (v19)? What specific blessings did He give (vv 20,21)?

God's continued goodness

Yet for all their evil provocations, God did not completely give up on them, as they deserved (Psalms 106:45). He continued to lead them through the wilderness by the pillar of cloud and fire. He also guided them by the Spirit; this refers to the inspiration of the prophets that taught them – see v30; Num. 11:17. And despite their sins, He gave them the manna and water for 40 years sustaining them as they wandered in the wilderness as punishment for their sins. Their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell (Deut. 8:4; 29:5). They had none of the problems you would expect on such a long journey. God provided all they needed.

The contrast is between a righteous God and unrighteous people!

Verses 22-25

8. What did God do when they reached Canaan (vv 22-25)? List some specific things they received.

9. Explain the connection between vv 22-25 and vv 7,8.

God gave Israel the land promised to Abraham.

God continued to give the people blessings after they wandered in the wilderness. He led them to the promised land and gave them the nations of the people who had been there, beginning with the lands of Sihon, king of Heshbon, and Og, king of Bashan (Num. 21:21-35).

They became a great nation of many people like the sand of the seashore as promised to Abraham (Gen. 15:5; 22:17; Heb. 11:12). And again the people plainly state that God did give them the land. We are expressly told that God led them into the land He had told the fathers to go in and possess. So the people went in and possessed the land. God subdued the inhabitants before them and gave Israel the people and the land. See notes on vv 7,8. Again this proves the people did receive the land as promised to Abraham, which in turn disproves premillennialism. Cf. Josh. 1:2-4; 18:1; Psalms 44:2,3.

The land was prepared for them to live in without the need for them to work to prepare the land. They took cities, houses, goods, cisterns already dug, vineyards, olives groves, etc. All this happened because of the goodness of God, and the people grew fat (Deut. 32:15) and delighted in that goodness (Hosea 3:5).

Verse 26

10. What did Israel do after God so blessed them (v26)? Give **b/c/v**.

The people's return to evil

For all God's goodness, the people still disobeyed and rebelled against God and cast the law behind their backs (Judges 2:11; 1 Kings 14:9; Psalms 50:17). What is worse, they even killed the messengers (prophets) God sent to tell them to repent. God knew the people were disobeying Him, He sent warnings, and what did the people do? They killed the messengers!

We are often told of the people doing this (Matthew 23:37; Acts 7:52; 1 Kings 18:4ff; 19:10). We read such records and tend to take it as a matter of course. But imagine being one of the prophets! We get upset if somebody gets mad at us or ceases to be our friend because we talk to them about Jesus. Surely God was greatly provoked.

Compared to God's character and works, as before, note the character and works of the people:

Character	Works
Proud Stubborn Disobedient Ungrateful	Refused to enter the land Worshipped the golden calf Killed prophets

Verses 27-29

11. Describe the punishment God gave Israel for their disobedience (vv 27-29). (Think: When did this happen?)

Further Punishment of the People

God allowed enemies to oppress the people

God punished the people by allowing enemies to defeat them (Judges 2:14; Psalms 106:41). They would then repent and God would deliver them (Judges 2:18; Psalms 106:44). But then the people would go back into sin after awhile. So God would leave them in the hands of their oppressors, hoping this would teach them a lesson (Judges 3:12; Psalms 106:43). They would then finally repent and call on God, so He would again show them mercy and deliver them. This was a cycle continually repeated in the times of the judges and kings. Having delivered them from enemies, God warned them to obey, but they refused and stubbornly, proudly refused to listen.

The law requires that, in order to live, one must do what the law said (cf. Leviticus 18:5; Gal. 3:12). The wages of sin is death (Ezekiel 18:20; Romans. 6:23; Genesis 2:16f). Often the law required physical death. But even more important is that spiritual death is the consequence of sin. If one wanted to have a relationship with God (often called spiritual life), one had to obey. If he sinned, he was cut off (death).

So under the system of the law, the only way to avoid that death was to live without sin. Even one sin would condemn to death before God. So only those who lived sinlessly could live. But the people repeatedly refused to obey. Again, they shrugged their shoulders, stiffened their necks, and would not listen (see v26).

This is the main lesson of the Old Testament. We should not think we are much better. We too sin again and again and need God's patient forgiveness. One main lesson we should learn from these accounts is our own sinfulness and our own need for God's mercy. The law ultimately could not provide forgiveness for the people, so why should we today want to return to that law? We need a system of forgiveness through Jesus. But we also need to learn the importance of obedience and the terribleness of sin.

Verses 30-32

12. Why did God not automatically destroy Israel (v31)? What troubles of the people specifically are mentioned (v32)?

God bore patiently with the people for many years.

This pattern of rebellion by the people continued for many years. Yet God, in mercy, did not completely destroy the people. He continued to testify to them of their sins by means of the messages sent them by the Holy Spirit through the prophets (see notes on v20; 2 Kings 17:13-18; 2 Chronicles 36:11-20; Jeremiah 7:25; Acts 7:51; 1 Peter 1:11; 2 Peter 1:20,21). Note that the Old Testament expressly says that the prophets were guided by God's Holy Spirit. This is confirmed by the New Testament, which then claims the same inspiration for the New Testament apostles and prophets.

Also God continued to deliver them to their enemies. But despite these punishments, God's mercy led Him to continue to spare a remnant of the people. He did not completely consume them, because He is a God of compassion and mercy (Jeremiah 4:27).

The people in Nehemiah's day knew this had happened in ancient times. But it had also happened more recently. Their recent ancestors and rulers had been led to captivity by Assyria and Babylon. So they then called upon God to show mercy upon them and spare them. They urged Him not to consider their needs and troubles to be insignificant. They too needed God's mercy (2 Kings 15:19; 17:3-6; Ezra 4:2,10).

Verses 33-35

13. How did the people compare the conduct of Israel to God's conduct (vv 33-35)?

The people confess their own unrighteousness

This entire history is summarized in v33: God had been just and faithful in dealing with the people, but they had done wickedly (Psalms 119:137; 106:6; Daniel 9:14,5-8). That in a nutshell is the point of the context. God had repeatedly revealed His will, warned the people, and shown them mercy when they repented. Yet they had repeatedly turned from His will to do evil. That is surely the history of Israel, and even today it is the history of God's people. Let us learn, as they needed to learn, to turn from sin and confess our own errors.

They openly said that their own kings, priests, and ancestors had failed to obey God's law. They had not served God, though He had given them so many good things in the land He gave them. They continued to sin and often would not turn from their sins.

Verses 36-38

14. How did the Jews summarize their current circumstances (vv 36,37)?

15. What did they intend to do about this (v38)?

The people renew their covenant commitment to serve God.

The people then stood before God as His servants. God had graciously moved the Persians to allow them to return, so they were now back in the land God had given their fathers (Ezra 9:9). They were again enjoying its bounty, even as their fathers had. The land gave its increase.

But the people realized they were not ultimately free to enjoy the blessings of the land. They were still subject to foreign kings (the Persians). Because of their sins, much of the bounty of the land went to the foreign rulers. These rulers had dominion over the people and their animals. So they were in great distress (Deut. 28:33,51,48). Just as their ancestors had suffered at the hands of foreign oppressors and then had repented, so these people were being oppressed and had come to God to confess sin and repent.

But they determined to go further and to renew the covenant with God. They volunteered to make a covenant with God and write it down. Their leaders, the priests and Levites, would lead

the people in it and would seal it with official approval. (2 Kings 23:3; 2 Chronicles 29:10; Ezra 10:3; Nehemiah 10:1)

Events in the following chapter describe the sealing of the covenant and the people's commitment to it. So all this was apparently written down as their covenant commitment to return to serving God. Of course, it is written here for us, but it was apparently also written in their day as a reminder of their serious need to serve God.

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