

Ezra and Nehemiah

Our Forgiving God

Lesson #7 for November 16, 2019

Scriptures: Nehemiah 9; Daniel 9:4-19; Colossians 1:16-17; Romans 5:6-8; Proverbs 28:13.

1. In our last lesson covering Nehemiah 8, we learned what a tremendous effect it had on the people to come together and hear the Word of God explained to them.
2. Nehemiah 9, which we cover in this lesson, is a direct follow-up from what happened in Nehemiah 8. When the children of Israel understood how far they had wandered from God's plan for their lives, they wept. In this chapter, we will find that they offered a prayer to God recounting God's goodness, their own sinfulness, and the sinfulness of their fathers; and then, they had it written, and they signed it as a contract with God.
3. A short outline of Nehemiah 9 would look something like this:
 - I. The people read from the Book of the Law (*Neh. 9:1-3*).
 - II. Prayer of confession (*Neh. 9:4-38*)
 1. Praising God (*Neh. 9:4-8*)
 2. God's faithfulness in spite of Israel's unfaithfulness in Egypt and in the wilderness (*Neh. 9:9-22*)
 3. God's goodness in spite of Israel's unfaithfulness in the land of Canaan (*Neh. 9:23-31*)
 4. Praising and petitioning God (*Neh. 9:32-38*)—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 93. [Italic type is in the source.][†]
4. After their weeping as described in Nehemiah 8, they were told not to weep any longer but, instead, to celebrate. Christians usually understand that confession should come first and then celebration. But, we must not forget Romans 2:4 where it tells us that the "goodness of God" leads us to repentance. It is certainly appropriate to praise God and to feast when thinking of His goodness. But, we must not forget that we need His forgiveness, cleansing, and renewal.

Nehemiah 9:1-3: ¹⁻² On the 24th day of the same month the people of Israel assembled to fast in order to show sorrow for their sins. They had already separated themselves from all foreigners. They wore sackcloth and put dust on their heads as signs of grief. Then they stood and began to confess the sins that they and their ancestors had committed. ³For about three hours the Law of the LORD their God was read to them, and for the next three hours they confessed their sins and worshipped the LORD their God.—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Nehemiah 9:1–3). New York: American Bible Society.

5. About 10 days after they finished the previous celebrations, they came together again on the 24th day of the month, asking to have additional portions of Scripture read to them. They separated themselves from the foreigners among them because they recognized that some of the sinfulness of their ancestors did not involve associations with foreigners. On that occasion, they came together, recognizing their own sinfulness and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads as signs of grief. After hearing the law of God read for about three hours, they began to confess their sins. However, only 1-2% of the Jews had returned to

Palestine.

Their corporate prayers and confession demonstrated a deep understanding of the nature of sin. The Israelites could have been angry that their predecessors messed up and led their whole nation into exile. Or they could have spent time complaining about the choices of their leaders and the lack of godliness displayed by the previous generations, which had led them to where they were right now—just a small group of returnees. However, instead of harboring hatred and grievances, they turned to God in humility and confession.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Sunday, November 10.

6. What kind of effect would it have on members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 2019 if a portion of Scripture was read in a formal ceremony for three hours? Would it make a difference what portion of Scripture was chosen? How many would fall asleep?
7. Read Daniel 9:4-19. In this fantastic prayer, Daniel recognized that his people had sinned and that they deserved what had happened to them. He did not separate himself from the rest of the people even though he himself was probably much less guilty. And he spoke to God as one might speak to a Friend. (See John 15:15.)
8. Then, Daniel concluded his prayer by making a powerful argument to God. He essentially said: *Your* people, God, who used to worship in *Your* temple which has now been destroyed are looked down on because *Your* city and *Your* sacred hill are in ruins. *You* promised that *You* would restore *Your* people after 70 years. That time is near. We are not claiming that *You* should do something because we have done right, instead, because *You* are so merciful. Lord, hear us. Lord, forgive us. Lord, listen to us, and act! In order that **everyone will know** that *You* are God, do not delay! This city and these people are *Yours*.
9. Notice the emphasis in Daniel's prayer. How often do we pray about God's reputation? How often do we act in ways to correctly represent Him?
10. After hearing the Scripture read, the people in Nehemiah's day responded with a fairly lengthy prayer to God. They were led in that prayer by the Levites who were named specifically and who encouraged them to stand up and praise the Lord their God. They recognized the worthiness of God. The children of Israel had come back to Palestine. Their prayer was: "You, Lord, you alone are Lord." (Nehemiah 9:6) Then, their prayer turned back to recognizing, first of all, that God is our Creator. That is always an appropriate way to begin a prayer to God. Then, they praised God for choosing Abraham and giving them the land formerly belonging to the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Jebusites, the Perizzites, and the Girgashites. They praised God for choosing Abraham and giving him that land.

Nehemiah 9:4-8: ⁴ There was a platform for the Levites, and on it stood Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, and Chenani. They prayed aloud to the LORD their God.

⁵ The following Levites gave a call to worship: Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodia, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah. They said:

"Stand up and praise the LORD your God;
praise him for ever and ever!

Let everyone praise his glorious name, [i.e., know the worthiness of God]
although no human praise is great enough."

⁶ And then the people of Israel prayed this prayer:

"You, LORD, you alone are LORD;

you made the heavens and the stars of the sky.

You made land and sea and everything in them;

you gave life to all.

The heavenly powers bow down and worship you.

⁷ You, LORD God, chose Abram and led him out of Ur in Babylonia;

you changed his name to Abraham.

⁸ You found that he was faithful to you,

and you made a covenant with him.

You promised to give him the land of the Canaanites,

the land of the Hittites and the Amorites,

the land of the Perizzites, the Jebusites, and the Girgashites,

to be a land where his descendants would live.

You kept your promise, because you are faithful.”—*Good News Bible*.^{*†}

11. In our day, people are given names, more or less, arbitrarily. Whatever the parents choose to call that new life becomes his or her lifelong name. In biblical times, by contrast, people were often given names that represented their characters. God’s name, *Yahweh*, His personal name, is more or less equivalent to our verb, *to be*. This may sound strange to us; however, it signifies that God is the Source of all things. His existence has no known beginning and no known ending; but, at the same time, He is a personal God.

Colossians 1:15-17: ¹⁵ Christ is the visible likeness of the invisible God. He is the firstborn Son, superior to all created things. ¹⁶For through him God created everything in heaven and on earth, the seen and the unseen things, including spiritual powers, lords, rulers, and authorities. God created the whole universe through him and for him. ¹⁷Christ existed before all things, and in union with him all things have their proper place.—*Good News Bible*.^{*}

12. Why did God choose Abraham? Why did God ask him to leave his homeland and travel to Palestine, the land of those other powerful nations? The prayer of the people of Jerusalem recognized God as Creator, Preserver, and Promise Keeper.
13. While Abraham had a number of faults and certainly did not follow God all the way every day, the fact that he was willing to sacrifice his one promised, miraculous son as a burnt offering as recorded in Genesis 22 suggests that Abraham was ultimately faithful. When talking about the *heart* in the Bible, it is referring to the *mind*—“the thinking and action part”—that God sees in our actions every day.
14. Seventh-day Adventists believe that the teaching about God as Creator is very important. We believe that same God wants a personal relationship with us. So, He asks us to come apart from our weekly activities and worship Him one day out of seven. That is a very large commitment. For those who practice it, the Sabbath recognizes the important role we believe God plays in our lives every day.
15. Read **Nehemiah 9:9-22**. In these verses they recounted the wonderful things God had done in rescuing them from Egyptian bondage. There were the plagues on Egypt, the miraculous passing through the Red Sea, and the appearance of God on Mount Sinai. God Himself descended to speak to them, giving them good laws and sound teachings. Then, He gave them that special day as a memorial and a time of fellowship.
16. But, despite all that God had done for them, they rebelled against Him! He fed them and cared for them for 40 years in the wilderness; and then, He helped them to conquer their

enemies as they entered the land of Canaan. And they learned that whenever they followed God's directions exactly, the results were miraculous. But, when they turned away from God and did their own will, the results were disastrous! What can we learn from those experiences? If one was born in the wilderness, the only food he had eaten was manna!

17. God, in fact, blessed the Israelites unbelievably. Why do you think they responded with pride in themselves, stubbornness, and disregard of God's gracious acts toward them?
18. How many times has God had to start over by finding some person or group that were or are willing to work with Him? There has been: Adam, Noah, Abraham, the Hebrews, the returnees from Babylonian exile, Jesus, the Christian church, the protestant movement, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church? Is it really possible that we will be the last group? What are we doing or what are we going to do that others have failed to do?
19. If you were to recount your personal experience with God or, perhaps, even the experience of your family as a group, is there anything that stands out like this story related by the Israelites in Nehemiah's day?
20. Think of the generous and unbelievable blessings that God has promised us if we are faithful. But, there is nothing that we can do that earns our salvation. That salvation has already been won by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

When through repentance and faith we accept Christ as our Saviour, the Lord pardons our sins, and remits the penalty prescribed for the transgression of the law. **The sinner then stands before God as a just person; he is taken into favor with Heaven, and through the Spirit has fellowship with the Father and the Son.**—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*,* November 3, 1890, par. 1; *Selected Messages*,* book 3, 191.2.†

All true obedience comes from the heart. It was heart work with Christ. And if we consent, He will so identify Himself with our thoughts and aims, so blend our hearts and minds into conformity to His will, that when obeying Him we shall be but carrying out our own impulses. The will, refined and sanctified, will find its highest delight in doing His service. When we know God as it is our privilege to know Him, our life will be a life of continual obedience. Through an appreciation of the character of Christ, through communion with God, sin will become hateful to us.—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages** 668.3.† [How does that happen?][‡]

21. How do we respond personally when the Bible or the Holy Spirit points out our sins? Do you humbly confess and repent? Or, do you rise up in rebellion? The Israelites had records to show that their ancestors had rebelled against God so many times; and, always, God came back and took them back. Can you think of times in your own life when you rebelled against God? And then, hopefully, before long, you recognized that God was still appealing to you to be His friend.
22. Read **Nehemiah 9:23-31**. Once again, they continued in their discussion of the blessings of God in contrast to the response of their ancestors, saying: "They ate all they wanted and grew fat; they enjoyed all the good things you gave them." (Nehemiah 9:25, *GNB**)
23. Why is it so easy to rejoice in God's gifts and at the same time forget the Giver?
24. When the Bible talks about *growing fat*, it is not just speaking about nutrition! There are only three places in the Bible where this particular expression is used. Here in Nehemiah 9:25; and also in Deuteronomy 32:15; and in Jeremiah 5:28. In each case, it has a very negative connotation. Why do you think that is? See Proverbs 30:7.

25. Do we always praise God and appreciate Him for all of His gifts to us? Why doesn't the multitude of God's gifts lead us to a closer walk with Him? Why do we tend to focus on the gifts, and, while enjoying them, seem to forget the Giver? That would be a fatal deception.
26. That is not to suggest that God does not want us to be happy and rejoice and be thankful for the gifts. He wants us to be happy. Let us not allow our enjoyment of these gifts to become a stumbling block in our relationship with God Himself. A careful review of God's dealing with the children of Israel down through the generations reveals two major important issues: (1) Israel cast God's law away, and (2) They persecuted God's prophets.
27. Are we gradually casting away our end-time prophet, Ellen White?
28. In Nehemiah's day, they realized that God's law and His prophets were essential to their development as a godly nation and as individuals. God intends for us to live by following His laws for our lives. (Nehemiah 9:27; Leviticus 18:5)
29. Read **Nehemiah 9:32-38**. Once again, the people's prayer turned back to honoring God for the great things that He had done. Then, they recalled the times of trouble they had been through from the time they were overcome by the Assyrians down to their time.
- Nehemiah 9:33**: "You have done right to punish us; you have been faithful, even though we have sinned."—*Good News Bible*.*
30. Read Deuteronomy 17:18-20, God's careful instruction to them about the future.
- Deuteronomy 17:18-20**: ¹⁸ "When he becomes king, he is to have a copy of the book of God's laws and teachings made from the original copy kept by the levitical priests. ¹⁹He is to keep this book near him and read from it all his life, so that he will learn to honour the LORD and to obey faithfully everything that is commanded in it. ²⁰This will keep him from thinking that he is better than his fellow-Israelites and from disobeying the LORD's commands in any way. Then he will reign for many years, and his descendants will rule Israel for many generations."—*Good News Bible*.*
31. How different would the story of the children of Israel have been if they and their kings had followed those instructions?
32. What are the implications of the fact that the children of Israel at that time made a solemn covenant agreement and had it read, written, and sealed by their leaders, saying that they would obey and follow God? As we will see later, that covenant, or agreement, with God is described in detail in Nehemiah 10.
33. In the final section of Nehemiah 9, we note with interest that they called themselves *servants* or *slaves*. They were in great distress, (Nehemiah 9:37) and they reminded God that this paralleled the position and experience of the children of Israel while they were still slaves in Egypt. (Nehemiah 9:9) Finally, they appealed, once again, to God's grace and mercy—not because of anything they had done or their ancestors had done—asking for the Lord's intervention on their behalf.
- Romans 5:6-8**: ⁶ For when we were still helpless, Christ died for the wicked at the time that God chose. ⁷It is a difficult thing for someone to die for a righteous person. It may even be that someone might dare to die for a good person. ⁸But God has shown us how much he loves us—it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us!—*Good News Bible*.*
34. In Nehemiah 9:25, we read: "They enjoyed all the good things you gave them." This expression, *they enjoyed themselves* comes from the same root as the name Eden in the

Garden of Eden. In other words, they *edenized* themselves! Think of how Adam and Eve must have enjoyed themselves in that garden. But, unfortunately, *edenized* is not a verb.

35. God's "original" plan for the children of Israel was for them to occupy the crossroads of the civilized world of those days. They were to carry the good news about God to all corners of that world, creating the closest reflection of Eden that would be possible on this earth.
36. Once again, we remind ourselves that it is not wrong to delight ourselves or enjoy God's gifts! The sin is in forgetting who gave us those gifts. (Ezekiel 23:35)
37. Read Matthew 13:22. What was Jesus talking about when He mentioned, "The deceitfulness of riches." (NKJV) What does that have to do with this prayer from the children of Israel? It is very easy for a person to be consumed by "the love of money." (1 Timothy 6:10) Often, those who have more of it are consumed even more by it!
38. Recognizing God as our Creator is the first step in recognizing how dependent we are on Him. If He had not created us and our environment like the Garden of Eden in the beginning, how could we be sure that He could recreate us and restore the Garden of Eden to us in the end?
39. In this lesson we have discussed corporate repentance. The children of Israel gathered together and repented of the sins done by their ancestors. Two biblical scholars, Robert Weiland and Donald Short, made an intensive study of the 1888 General Conference session of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Minneapolis. In the book that they later produced about that experience, they suggested that the Adventist Church will not succeed in its mission until we corporately repent of the mistakes we made in 1888. Do you think that is true? (See 1SM 233-235.)
40. The people recognized that they were not welcome back in their own territory—their own land—by the people of the surrounding nations. They had endured persecution and slavery. They had been working hard, trying to rebuild their beloved city. Then, they asked God to intervene, to act, to see and hear, and to respond.
41. They appealed to God from that time forward to be with them and to prevent them from falling back into those old sins. But, as we will learn, some of them quickly fell back into some of the sins that their fathers had committed and others like the Pharisees went into the other "ditch."
42. The prophet Ezekiel told us of a time when at least in prophetic imagery, God departed from Jerusalem. See Ezekiel 5:11 and Ezekiel 8:6. How do these verses compare with Matthew 23:37-38 which talk about Jesus weeping over Jerusalem?
43. Read Ezekiel 43:1-5 and Ezekiel 48:35. Even though God left the devastated city of Jerusalem and followed His people to Babylon and then to Medo-Persia, He came back with them in a special sense and told them to call the new city, "The-Lord-Is-Here!" (Ezekiel 48:35)
44. Are we prepared to admit our sins and develop that kind of a relationship with God? Has the time come for the Seventh-day Adventist Church to repent corporately?
45. Why does God pursue His children so relentlessly? It is because He wants to be close to us. He wants to treat us as friends. Are we prepared for that kind of relationship? What might happen if we determined to confess our sins as Israel did in Nehemiah's day? Would God come in the form of the Holy Spirit to guide us to the finishing of the gospel on this earth?

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