

“They Made Confession and Worshiped the Lord”

The Eighteenth in a Series of Sermons on Ezra-Nehemiah

Texts: Nehemiah 9:1-15 (sermon covers entire chapter); Romans 5:1-11

In Nehemiah chapters 8-10 we read of a dramatic covenant renewal ceremony which took place in Jerusalem, shortly after the people of Israel had completed the arduous task of rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls and gates. In chapter 8:4-9, Nehemiah recounts the reading of Book of the Law to the people of Israel by Ezra, as well as a second reading of the law which followed shortly after (Nehemiah 8:12). After the law was read again the people of Israel celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles with renewed faith and zeal, this time as prescribed in the word of God, complete with the building of shelters and tents recounting Israel’s time of sojourn in the wilderness exactly as prescribed in God’s word. A reformation was occurring within Israel—brought about by the Holy Spirit through the sustained reading and studying of God’s word.

According to Nehemiah 8:9, when the law was read the people of Israel who assembled outside the Water Gate were overcome with emotion and wept—this was certainly understandable. This was after all a remarkable day in Israel’s history because the people present were former exiles who returned to the land after their forbears came under God’s covenant curse because of their prolonged disobedience. On this day, they were celebrating the fact that Jerusalem’s walls were finally rebuilt and the city could now return to its former glory. Add to this the fact that the demands of the law expose the depths of our sin and reminds us how deeply sin resides within each of us. There were good reasons to weep.

But this was not to be a day of weeping. With the support of the Levites, Nehemiah exhorted the people to rejoice, because on this day God’s law was read and the people understood it as it was expounded and explained to them. The people heard the account of YHWH’s mighty acts of redemption in creating the nation of Israel as his own covenant people, and as a consequence, the people’s sorrow now turned to joy. This joy, in turn, became the basis for a renewed celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. And it is the conclusion of the feast which sets the stage for the scene described in Nehemiah chapter 9. This fits Nehemiah’s larger purpose in recounting that the reading of Scripture leads to true joy and creates a renewed strength in the Lord, as well as leading to the recovery of biblical practice. This sets the stage for the covenant renewal ceremony recounted in chapter 10.¹ Before the covenant renewal ceremony takes place, the people of Israel become overwhelmed with the guilt of their collective sin, which they confess before YHWH—the theme of Nehemiah 9.

As we turn to our text, the entire 9th chapter of Nehemiah (so you will need to have your Bibles handy), the law will be read for the third time (9:3), and is then followed by a lengthy prayer of confession—which runs from the last part of verse 5 through to the end of verse 37. The prayer and recounting of YHWH’s mighty acts in redeeming his people sets the stage for the renewal of Israel’s covenant with YHWH as recounted in the next chapter.

In verses 1-5, Nehemiah sets the stage for the prayer which follows—a prayer which will lead to what

¹ Breneman, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Logos Bible Software, on Nehemiah 9.

some have described as a “Reformation” within Israel.² We read in verse 1, “*now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads.*” The fact that the people assembled on the 24th day of the seventh month indicates that this was the day after the Feast of Tabernacles had concluded. It is remarkable that the Israelites celebrated a “feast” only to follow it a day later with a fast. This was a time when ordinarily the people would have returned home having celebrated the feast as prescribed in Exodus 34:22 and Leviticus 23:42-43.³ Instead, the people chose to remain in Jerusalem, intent upon renewing their covenant with YHWH.

All of this—the return to a biblical celebration of the Feast and the desire to renew the covenant with YHWH—is the fruit of the reading of the Book of the Law (the Pentateuch) on at least the three occasions mentioned by Nehemiah. The people have been reading, studying, and reflecting upon the commandments of God. They have been hearing the biblical accounts of YHWH’s faithfulness to his people, seen in his mighty acts of redemption and through his covenant promises—promises which he always keeps. God’s Spirit is now at work within Israel, and true reformation is the result.

The wearing of sackcloth (which is a coarse garment made of woven goat’s hair) and the act of covering oneself with dirt is a powerful reminder that as the people heard the Book of the Law read aloud they realized how many times and in how many ways they had broken their covenant with YHWH. They were guilty for both their personal and national sins. Going from a celebratory feast to a solemn fast, and dressing as though they were in an official time of mourning shows us that the Holy Spirit has created faith in the hearts of the people, bringing forth the fruit of repentance through the Word. The assembled people of Israel are now convicted of their sin and confess it to YHWH. We read in verse 2, “*and the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.*” The words of Psalm 106:6 echo here. “*Both we and our fathers have sinned; we have committed iniquity; we have done wickedness.*”

Nehemiah uses the term “seed” (*zera‘*), which is a reference to the “seed of Israel” and translated “Israelites” by the ESV. The term echoes Genesis 3:15 and account of the seed of the woman (Christ—the Messiah who will come as the redeemer through the seed of Israel) and the seed of the serpent (in this case, those who had allied themselves with Antichrist figures such as Sanballat, Tobias, and Geshem) and who opposed both the rebuilding of the temple and the walls of Jerusalem. The Jews (during this time of repentance and mourning because of their sin), have completely separated themselves from those Gentiles (“foreigners”)—those who do not belong to the “seed” of Israel by ancestry and who are not mentioned in the genealogies of Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7. Such people were not parties to YHWH’s covenant with his people at Mount Sinai. This is a covenant between YHWH and Israel (his chosen nation), and the Israelites are to separate themselves from all those not parties to this covenant.

According to verse 3, “*and [the seed of Israel] 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.*” Six hours of reading from the Pentateuch was followed by six hours of worship. This time of repentance is directly tied to the reading of the Word of God, which included the reading of the five Books of Moses, with both explanation and exhortation mixed in—in other words, this

² Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part sixteen)

³ Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 110.

was very much like a modern sermon.⁴

God's Spirit is at clearly work among the people as the Levites led the Scripture reading and the confession of sin. We read in verses 4-5, "*on the stairs of the Levites stood Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, and Chenani; and they cried with a loud voice to the LORD their God. Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah, said, 'stand up and bless the LORD your God from everlasting to everlasting.'*" After the law had been read and expounded for six hours, the Levites call the people to worship, exhorting them to stand and bless YHWH. They did so for six hours more! As one commentator puts it so eloquently, "The barely habitable city, the encircling heathen, and the poverty and seeming insignificance of the Jews are all transcended by the glorious reality of God."⁵

It is likely that the prayer which follows actually begins in verse 5b with the opening petition, "*Blessed be your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise.*" The lengthy prayer to YHWH which follows includes a number of great moments in Israel's history which are recounted back to God by his people as a form of worship. The people do not beg, ask, nor demand anything of God. They simply recount their history as a people—a history of their sin and God's covenant faithfulness.

The prayer begins with a reference to the creation account in verse 6, followed a brief recital of the history of Abraham in verses 7-8. The Exodus from Egypt is mentioned in verses 9-12, as is the giving of the law to Israel at Sinai (vv. 13-14). This is followed by recounting Israel's time in the wilderness (vv. 15 ff.), and the conquest of the promised land in verses 22-25. The prayer moves on to recount the era of the judges, the prophets, and the captivity of Jerusalem in verses 26-37. There is a reason we why utilize the redemptive-historical model of preaching at Christ Reformed, because we find this emphasis upon God's mighty acts in history throughout the Bible (especially when the Apostles preach the message of Christ crucified throughout the Book of Acts). But we also see redemptive history emphasized during a service of praise and prayer when the people of God worship YHWH by simply remembering and then recounting to him all the wonderful things he has done for us. All of these things demonstrate God's faithfulness which is why Israel's worship is grounded in God's story, as should ours.

In verse 6, the prayer opens just as the Bible itself does, with an affirmation of the uniqueness and holiness of God. "*You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you.*" As a number of commentators and Reformed theologians have noted about passages such as this one, the Bible may distinguish but never separates YHWH's work as creator from his work as redeemer. God created all things and pronounced them good. After the Fall and the curse, God will, in the end, redeem all things—not only his elect by re-uniting body and soul in the resurrection of our bodies, but also by ushering in a new heaven and earth which is the home of everlasting righteousness, as the Apostle Peter speaks of it.

Both verses 6 and 7 open with the phrase '*attah hu*', making the point that the creator of verse 6 and the

⁴ Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 110.

⁵ Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 111.

redeemer of verse 7 are one and the same.⁶ YHWH is the creator of the heaven and earth and everything in them, he also sustains all that he creates. The doctrine of creation (all things were created by God from nothing) also entails the parallel doctrine of providence (nothing God creates exists independently of his will and purpose). The fact that YHWH is creator and redeemer is the basis for the on-going worship of YHWH (after which we model our earthly worship) and in which the entire heavenly host (the angels and all unseen creatures) worship YHWH continuously throughout eternity.

Verses 7-8 recount YHWH's covenant promise to Abraham and his descendants (the promised seed). *"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. And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous."* The first pivotal moment in Israel's history is when God made a covenant with Abraham—a gracious covenant, and much different from the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai. God promised Abraham a people (the Israelites), that he would make them a great nation and give them the land of promise conditioned upon Israel's obedience, part of which the exiles in Jerusalem worshipping YHWH currently occupy.

God's promise to give Abraham so many descendants that they cannot be counted is fulfilled by the countless "children of Abraham" as Paul calls all believers in Jesus. The prayer reminds us that at the heart of this covenant of grace is the doctrine of election. It is YHWH who chose Abraham (v. 7) and created faith in his heart. It is YHWH who brought Abraham to the land of promise (where this prayer is being offered). And it is this people who will bring forth the promised "seed" (Jesus, Israel's future Messiah). It is YHWH who has kept his promise, because YHWH alone is righteous.

In verses 9-12, the focus of the prayer shifts to the Exodus and God's deliverance of his people from the cruel hand of Pharaoh. This is the second pivotal moment in Israel's history. *"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."* YHWH keeps his covenant promise to Abraham by delivering his people Israel from their bondage and captivity in Egypt.

God will save his people even if that entails the destruction of his enemies (i.e., the armies of Pharaoh). And how often does the theme of redemption of God's own people through judgment resurface in redemptive history? Especially with those praying this prayer, whose parents and grandparents witnessed YHWH's judgment upon Judah and Jerusalem (Nebuchadnezzar sacking and burning the city), even as those present witnessed and participated in rebuilding both the temple and the walls. More importantly here in chapters 8-10, they now participate in the renewal of God's covenant made with Israel at Mount Sinai—the third pivotal moment in Israel's history mentioned in the next section of the prayer.

In verses 13-14 the focus of the prayer moves to the giving of the law at Mount Sinai and to Israel's time in the wilderness. *"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*

⁶ Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part sixteen).

Sabbath and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses your servant.” YHWH gave his people right rules, true laws, the Sabbath day of rest, as well as all the innumerable blessings which distinguished the Israelites as the people of God, while pointing them ahead to the coming of a Messiah. YHWH was present with his people while he gave them their national charter as his chosen nation (the commandments). And he made his will so clear to them in the law that there could be no doubt as to what YHWH expects from his people.⁷

In verse 15, the prayer takes us back to Israel’s difficult days in the wilderness, with loud echoes from Exodus 16-17. *“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.”* God is gracious to his people even when they fall into sin and unbelief. When he sends the Israelites into the wilderness and keeps them there because of their disobedience, he also feeds and sustains his people. YHWH fed them with heavenly bread and quenches their thirst with water from a rock. Both of which points us ahead to Jesus who is the living bread and the source of the only water which can truly quench our thirst—“living water.”

But how did God’s people respond to his gracious provision? In verses 16-21, the prayer unpacks the people’s sin—but with the emphasis always falling upon God’s grace toward them when they rebelled. *“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 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 in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness. The pillar of cloud to lead them in the way did not depart from them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night to light for them the way by which they should go. 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.”* If Israel’s history teaches us anything, it is that God’s people are sinful, hard-hearted and headstrong, and that God is gracious to us despite both our sin and our best efforts to please him. Perhaps the key line in the prayer is that found in verse 17. *But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them.* God did all of these things for Israel—leading from the front (as they say). He does all of this and more for us through the person his Son in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Verses 9-15 have all been in the second person (“you”) until we come to verse 16, which begins with “they” (third person). “They” acted presumptuously. “They” stiffened their necks. And so on. Back in verse 10, Nehemiah used a verb to describe the Egyptians acting arrogantly, and repeats it here in reference to the Israelites. The point is that while in the wilderness, the Israelites were behaving as the Egyptians had done—arrogantly. As one commentator puts it, “there is an Egyptian nature within Israel.”⁸ It wasn’t as though this was a momentary lapse, because it did not take long for the Israelites to demonstrate that they were just as sinful as their captors and tormentors. The difference between the Israelites and Egyptians is YHWH’s electing grace and mercy. This is spelled out in verse 17, which

⁷ Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part sixteen).

⁸ Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part sixteen).

makes the unmistakable point that YHWH is a God of forgiveness. He does not forsake his people.

The prayer continues in verses 22-25. *“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, 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.”* The fact that the people “delighted” themselves in YHWH’s goodness and became “fat” is especially noteworthy in light of the people’s continuous rebellion against YHWH. The blessings depicted here originate in God’s goodness and mercy, not in Israel’s own righteousness or obedience to the Lord. “God’s gifts are no sign of our righteousness.”⁹

The next section of the prayer (vv. 26-31) moves on to discuss the history of Israel in the days of the judges and prophets. Once again, the people of God act in rebellion and unbelief. *“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.”* The people may dwell in the land of promise but nothing has changed since the days Israel was in Egypt and the wilderness. The people of Israel continue their cycle of unbelief, disobedience, and rebellion. Yet, YHWH heard them when they cried out to him and he delivered them. He bore with them. He did not forsake them or wipe them out. The words of Exodus 34:6-7 echo loudly here. *“The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.”*

As the prayer draws to a close in verses 9:32-37, the Levites simply describe Israel’s present condition. *“Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love, let not all the hardship seem little to you that has come upon us, upon our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and all your people, since the time of the kings of Assyria until this day. 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*

⁹ Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part sixteen).

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 to our fathers to enjoy its fruit 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.” Throughout the closing verses of the prayer, the Levites plead that YHWH remember his people and their years of trouble. They have been under the thumb of enemies since 722 BC when Assyria first conquered the northern kingdom. Yet the people know, YHWH acted righteously. “You dealt faithfully, we acted wickedly. Thus, we are slaves, much as we were back in Egypt.” The Israelites are back in the land of promise, but they are vassals of a pagan king, a new Pharaoh. They hope their cries will be heard just those of their forbears were.

The people confess their sins and acknowledge their dire condition. “We are slaves. We are in distress. We are in sin and we have nothing to offer except to trust in your mercy and compassion that you will complete what you have begun.” There are no whiny petitions, no promises to do better, no attempts to bargain with God. Just a simple recitation of all the good things that YHWH has done for Israel from the time he formed them until the moment the prayer is offered. The chapter ends with the declaration of covenant renewal, the theme of chapter 10. “*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.*”

What then do we take with us by way of application? In many ways this prayer serves as a model for our own prayers. There is nothing wrong with asking God for what we need—we should. But prayer is not about getting God to change his mind so as to give us what we want. Prayer is about God changing us to accept and embrace his will. This is why recounting all the things he has done for us is so important when we pray. When we reflect upon God’s goodness all of our momentary troubles are put in their proper perspective.

It falls to Paul to remind us that our struggles—like those of Israel—have a purpose. In Romans 5:1-6, (part of our New Testament Lesson), the apostle informs us of something the Levites could not have known. Israel’s history will continue until the coming of Jesus. Which is why Paul can say, “*Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.*”

Beloved, Jesus has secured for us peace with God—something Israel struggled to realize. Because Christ has turned aside God’s anger from us our struggles produce character, endurance, and hope. The reason YHWH forgave his people was the cross of Jesus. In fact, when we recount God’s blessings to us back to him in prayer, lets us not forget the cross and empty tomb, as we make confession and worship the Lord.