

## **Nehemiah: Confession Is Good for the Soul**

**Nehemiah 9:1-38**

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

*The Lord's Day Evening  
January 11, 2009*

Now turn with me, if you would, once again to the book of Nehemiah. We find ourselves this evening in chapter nine. It's a long reading. Most of it is a prayer offered by the Levites and recorded here, perhaps from the pen of Ezra, in the ninth chapter of Nehemiah.

Before we read this chapter together, let's look to God in prayer. Let us pray together.

*Our Father in heaven, as we approach the Scriptures tonight, tonight above all nights we desire to be sincere and honest and open before You. We would not seek to draw a veil between us. We are about to read a passage in which Israel confessed their sin, and we too are sinners greater than we ever acknowledge ourselves to be. And we pray, Lord, for the movement and operation and blessing of the Holy Spirit. Help us as we read the passage to perceive something of its force. Teach us, instruct us; yes, and convict us, we pray. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.*

This is God's word:

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. And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the Lord their God for a quarter of the day; for another quarter of it they made confession and worshiped the Lord their God. On the stairs of the Levites stood Jeshua, 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. Blessed be Your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise.'

“You are the Lord, You alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their 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. 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, and 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. 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 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.

“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, that they might do with them as they would. And they captured fortified cities and a rich land, and took possession of houses full of all good things, cisterns already hewn, vineyards, olive orchards and fruit trees in abundance. So they ate and were filled and became fat and delighted themselves in Your great goodness.

“Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against You and cast Your law behind their back and killed Your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to You, and they committed great blasphemies. Therefore You gave them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer. And in the time of their suffering they cried out to You and You heard them from heaven, and according to Your great mercies You gave them saviors who saved them from the hand of their enemies. But after they had rest they did evil again before You, and You abandoned them to the hand of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them. Yet when they turned and cried to You, You heard from heaven, and many times You delivered them according to Your mercies. And You warned them in order to turn them back to Your law. Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey Your commandments, but sinned against Your rules, which if a person does them, he shall live by them, and they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey. Many years You bore with them and warned them by Your Spirit through Your prophets. Yet they would not give ear. Therefore You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. Nevertheless, in Your great mercies You did not make an end of them or forsake them, for You are a gracious and merciful God.

“Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love, let not all the 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 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.

“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.”

Amen. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

Now, Nehemiah 9 is a prayer. It's a prayer much like the great prayer of Abraham or the great prayer of Ezra in Ezra 9, or the great prayer of Daniel in Daniel 9. It's meant for our instruction. It's meant to help us in our own personal praying.

It's the twenty-fourth day of the month. Back at the beginning of the chapter we were at the first day of the month, the day they gathered at the Water Gate, the day they read the Scriptures all morning long...for three, four, possibly five hours long. The second day, you remember, the heads of households returned. They discovered in their study of the books of the Law of God that they had not been keeping the Feast of Booths — the Feast of Tabernacles, the Feast of Ingathering. So on the fifteenth day of the month they celebrated Tabernacles — the Feast that goes on for seven days. And on the eighth day they held a solemn assembly. And now it's the twenty-fourth day. The solemn assembly would have taken place on the twenty-second day. There was a day's interval, but now they're back again in Jerusalem, and it's a solemn day now. There was joy at the Feast of Tabernacles. You remember Nehemiah's exhortation: “The joy of the Lord is your strength,” he had said, when they'd begun to weep at the reading of the Law. There was a time for joy but there's a time for weeping, and this is that time. They're back again. For a quarter of the day they read the Scriptures — three hours perhaps. And for another three hours they worshiped and confessed their sin.

Now this prayer and the concluding verse in verse 38 falls roughly into seven sections. It begins in verse 6 with praise to God as the Creator. Remember they'd been reading the book of Genesis, and they'd been reminded of God as Creator. Then in verses 7-16, there is a record of God's power and of God's grace up until that day, but largely confined to the period of the wanderings in the wilderness. And then in verses 17-25, there's a testimony to God's forgiveness and His graciousness, and His compassion — a reminder that they lacked nothing in all of God's wonderful provision for them.

In verse 26 through to 31, there is now this confession of sin in the period of the judges and in the period of the monarchy, and right down to the period of the prophets. And there's this refrain, and you can pick it up there in verse 26 and repeated again in verse 31, “They had been disobedient, but God had been gracious.” And over and over there is that refrain — “They had disobeyed, but God had been faithful.” Then in verse 32, we have this wonderful and extraordinary pronouncement of the character of God and the faithfulness of God:

“Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love...”

And then in verses 33 down to verse 37, you have this complaint: they are slaves; they are slaves under the rule of Persia. They don't own their land, nor do they own much of their property. They are heavily taxed. They are not free to do what God had intended them to do in the covenant made with Abraham, and it's because of their sin. They are in the condition that they're in because they have sinned. And then in verse 38 you have this solemn and climactic oath of recommitment and reaffirmation of the covenant that they make with God.

Now what are the lessons for us tonight? There are two distinct sections I want us to think about. The first is about prayer itself, and the second is about covenant renewal.

### **I. The lesson of prayer.**

The first is about prayer. This is a prayer. And I want to say first of all that what we have here belongs to the area of experience. I want us to see that. This is experiential religion that we have here. This is more than just a confession of faith. This is more than just something cerebral. This is more than something that they confess that they know. This is not just like the confession, say, of *The Apostles' Creed* that we recited this morning at the Lord's Supper. This is a confession of their experience. They are convicted. The word of God and the Spirit of God has come home to them as they heard the word read, as the Spirit wrote that word upon their hearts. They are deeply conscious that their fathers and they themselves have sinned. They're not in the relationship with God that they ought to be.

It's deeply moving. It's almost like a broken marriage. It's as though the people of God are like an unfaithful bride, saying to a bridegroom, sensing now with all the apprehension and tension and nervousness that this marriage is breaking apart. And it's almost as though the people of God collectively are coming and they're saying, 'I want this marriage to work. I've been unfaithful. I've been unfaithful. You have every right to throw me out. You have every right to divorce me. But I want to start again. I'll do anything to make it work. I love you.' It's a confession that's coming from a broken heart. The word has broken their hearts, broken their spirits, broken their pride, broken their self-confidence.

I wonder if you've ever come before God like that. Perhaps I should ask, have you come before God like that recently? Has the word broken you? Touched you? Convicted you? Shown you where you have erred and strayed, and been unfaithful as a believer, as a Christian, as a church member, as an officer in the church? I wonder tonight because this is more than just form. This is more than just ritual. We don't want to be here just because it's Sunday evening. We don't

want to be here just because this is a worship service. We don't want to be here just because we are members of First Presbyterian Church. We want to be here to have dealings with God. We want to hear what He has to say to us. And I wonder tonight, has He spoken to you and touched you in the realm of Christian experience? Because that's where this prayer begins.

Notice, secondly, it focuses on God. The focus is on sin to be sure, but the focus is also on God, reflecting on the attributes of God, reflecting on the graciousness of God, reflecting on the character of God, on the mercy of God. Over and over and over, this chapter comes back to God.

It's a great way to reform our praying. It's the Bible way of reforming our Christian lives. It's not all about "me." It's not all about my family. It's not all about my personal security. It's not all about my health. It's about the Lord. It's about God, this covenant Lord, this God of Abraham, the God of our fathers. We want tonight to have dealings with God.

Notice that what has brought them to this point is actually a recognition of the intensity of their failure; that their failures actually grew them in praying. It's a bit like what Ligon was saying this morning from the lesson of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist: that he grew in adversity. Well, there's a sense here too that they have grown in their adversity. There's no hint here of any attempt to excuse themselves.

You notice, in verses 16 -17, they liken themselves to Egypt. They are no better than Egypt. Egypt was their enemy. Egypt was historically their oppressor, but they've come to see that they are no better than their enemy. They are no better than Egypt. They've grown. Adversity has done that. Trial has done that. Yes, failure has done that. Because you see what failure has done? It has taught them to trust in God. It has taught them that they can have no confidence apart from that confidence which lies at the heart of the covenant mercies of God. That's the only sure and safe place to rest.

Samuel Rutherford once wrote those lines, "Grace grows best in winter." Maybe you're conscious of a winter in your soul just now. Maybe you're conscious at the beginning of this new year that you are not what you ought to be, that you're not following the Lord as closely as you should. You're not reading His word or receiving from His word what you should. You're aware of it. You're conscious of it. The Spirit has brought it to your attention. Well, use that. Use that to cast yourself upon the mercies of God. Run to the Lord in your weakness, in your frailty, in your brokenness! "Lord, give me a sense of my sin, that I may have a greater sense of Your beauty." I wonder tonight, is that our experience? Have we grown to appreciate something of the sheer beauty of the grace of God, because God has shown to us in greater clarity the contours of our own personal sin?

## II. The lesson of covenant renewal.

But there's a second area I want us to think about, and that is this area of covenant renewal. And we'll be coming back to this in the next couple of weeks in terms of the specifics of it, but I just want to glance at verse 38, because at the end of this prayer of confession of sin they make a covenant. They write a covenant. Actually they cut a covenant, using the very specific language in the Hebrew of covenant making. This is a covenant renewal, much the same as Joshua 24 is a covenant renewal; much the same as I Samuel 12, before the instigation of a monarchy, was a covenant renewal ceremony. Let me say a couple of things.

First of all, they had a sense here of a new beginning. It will reach its climax in verse 29 of chapter 10:

"...Join with their brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God's Law that was given by Moses the servant of God...."

That's the heart of this covenant. They are promising to walk in God's Law. All of what they've been doing for the last month as they've explored and read and studied the Scriptures together has brought them to this point. They want to start afresh with God. I think we should long for that. I think that should be an objective of ours, that there are moments in our Christian experience and there are moments in our collective experience as the church of God that we sense the need to start afresh, to recommit. They actually wrote this covenant. They actually signed (at least, some of their leaders signed) this covenant.

Our fathers in the eighteenth century saw this as an example for the church itself. The Puritan, Joseph Alleine, wrote about this, and John Wesley took it up and began what we now call the "Watch Night Service," a service held either on New Year's Eve or New Year's Day, a service in which a congregation makes a recommitment to the Lord. In Methodism it became part of their annual observance. At the beginning of the year, the congregation would collectively say a vow promising to follow the Lord with all of their hearts. At the center of that worship service, John Wesley wrote this prayer:

I am no longer my own, but Thine. Put me to what Thou wilt; rank me with whom Thou wilt. Put me to doing; put me to suffering. Let me be employed for Thee and laid aside for Thee; exalted for Thee, or brought low for Thee. Let me be full; let me be empty; let me have all things; let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to Thy pleasure and disposal, and now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Thou art mine and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

It's so very important for us to see this one thing: that the very nature of this

covenant making and this promise making on behalf of the people of God is itself covenantally shaped. That is to say, they make their promises to follow the Lord based on their recognition of the grace that they have already received. This covenant making, this renewal on behalf of the people of God was gratitude. They weren't coming before the Lord and saying, 'I promise to follow You, so look down upon me and see all the good things that I promise to do.' No. They're saying, "Nothing in my hands I bring." We are poor, worthless sinners; and we have been sinners in the past, and we are sinners now, and we are slaves because of our sin. But You have been merciful. Again and again, and again and again, You have shown Your mercy and Your grace to us, so we give ourselves away to You out of gratitude.

I wonder tonight...this may not be where all of you are, but I wonder tonight if that's where some of you are at the beginning of this new year...and tired of the past and tired of failure, and all too conscious of it. And desiring with all of your hearts tonight to say to your beloved One, 'Jesus, I really do love You and I really do want to follow You with all of my heart.' I wonder if that's where you are tonight, saying with John Calvin in that extraordinary motto of his, "My heart I offer to You, promptly and sincerely." Don't say that unless you mean it. But if you mean it, if that's truly where you are tonight, see in this passage the covenant mercies of God, who again and again and again receives His people back to himself and says, "I will never leave you or forsake you."

Let's pray together.

*Father, we come before You tonight perhaps a little touched by Your word, perhaps greatly moved by it. You know our hearts. We pray tonight for each one of us that there might be that earnest desire, that longing of our souls to be out and out for You. We do not want to serve this world. We do not want to take pleasure in sin. We do not want to disobey You, and from the fullness of grace that we have known, the blood of Christ that covers all of our sins, we want to give ourselves away to You in gratitude and to say, 'Lord, do with us as you will. Use us wherever You want. Put us wherever You want, and help us to find our joy and fullness and completion and integration in serving You. For Jesus' sake we ask it. Amen.*

Please stand; receive the Lord's benediction.

*Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.*

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