

Nehemiah 9: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Nehemiah chapter 9. 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 worshipped the Lord their God. On the stairs of the Levites stood Jeshua, Benai, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bani, Sherubiah, Benai, and Canani, and they cried with a loud voice to the Lord their God. Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Benai, Hashabneah, Sherubiah, Hodia, 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 hosts, 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, 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. 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 that 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 manner 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 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.

[4 : 36] 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. The people had fasted in response to Ezra's reading of the law on the Feast of Trumpets on the first day of the seventh month. However, that was supposed to be a day of rejoicing, and their mourning was inappropriate on it. Yet mourning for their sins in the light of the law was important, and something that needed to be done at an appropriate time. Two days after the end of the Feast of Tabernacles and the subsequent feast, Nehemiah chapter 9 describes the people gathering together to mourn as they had intended to do earlier. A day of collective repentance and rededication was important at this point. The people expressed their mourning and penitence with fasting, sackcloth, and earth on their heads. The day of fasting specifically concerns the sins of the people of Israel, not just or even primarily their personal sins, but the sins of the entire congregation.

Consequently, they separate from the foreigners among them in order to confess. They devoted a quarter of the day to listening to the reading of the law. By this point, over the course of the month, the Jews had listened to three marathon readings of the law. After this reading, confession and worship took up another quarter of the day. The confession and worship was led by two groups of Levites with similar sets of names. The fact that we see so many of the same names in the two lists is likely an indication that certain of the Levites participated in both of the two groups, and it seems most likely that the two groups were led by the first few names mentioned. Jeshua, Kadmiel, and Benai opened both of the two lists. The first group led the people in crying out with a loud voice to God, and the second led the people in the great prayer of confession that follows. The long prayer of confession that follows Israel's history and the Lord's dealing with them to that point in time, drawing heavily upon earlier scripture, and telling a narrative that ties together much of the Old Testament historical witness. At many points in what follows, we'll hear echoes of the wording of earlier historical narratives. We find comparable passages in places like Psalm 78. The people's covenant relationship with the Lord is a collective and intergenerational reality, and at pivotal moments of covenant renewal, they reconnect themselves with the thread of God's dealing with them. The prayer opens with praise, taking its introductory words from the Psalms. The account of the Lord's great deeds begins with creation itself. The Lord is the creator and sustainer of all, the one upon whom all creation depends, and the one worshipped in the heavens above. Everything, both in the heavens and the earth, is created by him. As the creator, the Lord is unique. In the ordering of the Psalms, we see a similar prioritization of creation and providence in the recounting of the Lord's great deeds, in places like Psalm 104, which precedes Psalms speaking of covenant history. There is a categorical and ultimate difference between the creator and all creatures, and the Lord alone is the creator.

From creation, the prayer moves to the story of the Lord's call of Abram, the great father of Israel, whom he called out of Ur of the Chaldeans. In two verses, it summarizes his story. He was called, referring to chapters 11 and 12 of Genesis, and he was renamed Abraham, referring to chapter 17, when the Lord confirmed his covenant with him. Verse 8 seems to refer back to Genesis chapter 15, especially verse 6, and he believed the Lord and he counted it to him as righteousness.

The prayer declares that the Lord made his covenant with Abraham as he was found faithful. In that chapter, the Lord made a covenant with Abraham, promising him the land of Canaan, of whose peoples the prayer gives an abbreviated list. Looking back upon the promise that the Lord made to Abraham, their father at that time, the Levites declare that the Lord has kept his word, because he is a righteous God who keeps covenant. Throughout the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, there are multiple allusions back to the story of the Exodus, a story with which the returnees seem to have felt a peculiar resonance. Unsurprisingly, in the Lord leading them back to the land, they saw some resemblance between what had happened to them and the Lord's first leading his people out of Egypt and bring them into the land in the first place. The Lord's faithfulness to his promise to Abraham, along with his power as the creator and his justice as the judge of the world, was manifest in the deliverance from Egypt and the judgment upon Pharaoh and his people in the plagues and in the Red Sea. The Lord made a name for himself in the presence of the nations. He also showed his closeness to and cared for his people in leading them by the pillar of cloud and fire. We can hear echoes of the language of Moses' song at the sea in the statement of verse 11,

[11 : 19] And you cast their pursuers into the depths, as a stone into mighty waters. The Levites were clearly praying this prayer as people who had been steeped in the word of scripture. At Sinai, the Lord spoke to his people, giving them the law by Moses. The prayer here emphasizes that the Lord made known his Sabbath to them at this point. The Sabbath, in addition to being the fourth commandment, was arguably the great sign of the covenant that was comparable to the sign of circumcision given to Abraham as the sign of the Abrahamic covenant. It was a sign of the Lord's power as creator. He rested on the seventh day of creation. Also a sign of his deliverance of his people from Egypt. It formed the basis of their festal calendar. Their whole calendar was ordered around sevens. Not just their religious life, but also their civil life as a people was supposed to be shaped by this. The way they gave their servants rest one day every week, and then the way that they released people in the Sabbath year and in the year of Jubilee. In the conclusion of the account of giving the law, we read in Exodus chapter 31 verses 12 to 17, And the Lord said to Moses, You are to speak to the people of Israel and say,

Above all, you shall keep my Sabbaths. For this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I the Lord sanctify you. You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days shall work be done. But the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed. The observance of the day of the Sabbath and also of its principles of release are clearly important issues in the book of Nehemiah. Leading the people through the wilderness, the Lord had also shown his power and his provision for them. The Levites here mention the gift of the manna and the provision of the water, alluding back to chapters 16 and 17 of the book of Exodus. However, although the wilderness was a time of divine provision and protection for the people, it was also a time when they repeatedly tested and tempted the Lord, where they disobeyed, rebelled against him, and grumbled against him and his servant Moses. The Levites mention the two most egregious sins of the wilderness generation, although they reversed them in their order. In Numbers chapter 13 and 14, after the spying out of the land, they had refused the land and determined, rejecting the Lord's gift, to turn back to slavery in Egypt instead. This sin in the second year of their time in the wilderness led to them wandering for 40 years. However, the Lord did not utterly cast off his people at this time. The Levites here allude back to the Lord's statement of his name in Exodus chapter 34 verses 6 to 7.

The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, 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, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation. That statement had been made in the context of the people's sin with the golden calf, which the Levites mention after the sin of refusing to enter the land. This was the people's great act of idolatry. Nonetheless, even after the people's blasphemies and their rejection of his great gifts, the Lord did not strip them of his mercies. He continued to lead them by the pillar of cloud and fire, and he continued miraculously to provide for them with water from the rock and with the manna. And in addition to such provision for their basic necessities, he also showed his kindness to them in preserving their clothing and preventing their feet from becoming sore and swollen as a result of the walking. Even in the wilderness, they were never without what they needed. From the wilderness experience, the Levites move on to tell of the people's taking of the land. This is told in two key stages. First of all, the people capture the Transjordan, defeating the kings Sihon, king of Heshbon, and Og, king of Bashan. Having captured the

Transjordan, they enter into the land of Canaan itself. The Lord subdues both before them, delivering their peoples into their hand, and giving them a rich land and resources that they had not built for themselves. In verse 25, the Levites echo the language of Deuteronomy chapter 6, specifically verses 10 to 12. And when the Lord your God brings you into the land that he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you with great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and cisterns that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant, and when you eat and are full, then take care lest you forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. Recalling this verse and the later words of the Song of Moses in chapter 32 verse 15, But Yashurim grew fat and kicked, you grew fat, stout, and sleek. Then he forsook God who made him, and scoffed at the rock of his salvation. We might have a sense of ominous foreboding about what is going to be said next. Sure enough, in verses 26 and following, the people's failure when they had entered into the land is recounted in detail. They rebel, are disobedient against the Lord, cast his law behind their back, and kill his prophets. They are also said to have committed great blasphemies. We might think of all the stories of idolatry in the Old Testament.

As a result of their sin, the Lord gives them into the hand of their enemies, but he does not utterly abandon them. He raises up saviors for them. Again, we might think of the story of the judges here. The yo-yoing character of the people's relationship with the Lord during the period of the judges is represented in places like verse 28.

[17:11] But after they had rest, they did evil again before you, and you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies. Yet when they turned and cried to you, you heard from heaven, and many times you delivered them according to your mercies. God's wrestling with his people was for their own good.

The Lord warned his people in order to turn them back to his law, and if they obeyed his law and observed it, they would live by it. It would be a means of their blessing and fulfillment as a people. The Lord was patient with them and dealt with them by his spirit through the prophets, and even when he gave them into the hands of the nations, he did not utterly cast them off or forsake them, because he is gracious and merciful.

Considering the amount of reading of the law that had occurred over that past month, it should not surprise us to hear within the words of these Levites, the metabolization of the words of the Torah into prayer. In verse 32, the Levites moved from recounting what God has done in the past, to petitioning on the basis of what God has done in the past, and the way he has revealed his character through those things, for him to act decisively in their situation in the present. The people of Israel had been under the dominance of the great empires of the region since the time of Assyria. Assyria, which had threatened the southern kingdom and wiped out the northern one, Babylon, and now more recently Persia. In this, the Levites saw the faithful hand of the Lord in judging his people. In his treatment of them, the Lord had kept his covenant with his people, even though they had forsaken him. The people and their leaders had sinned in the most aggravated fashion, rejecting the Lord even in the midst of his bounty. Now as a result, even as the fortunes of Jerusalem are starting to change, and the Lord is raising up its walls and returning its people, the people are in a continued state of slavery on account of what they have done.

They are weak among the nations, and the wealth of the land still goes to Persia. They are ruled over by foreign pagan kings, who have dominion over their very bodies. Even as they experience a window of relative blessing at this time, they are in great distress. The Levites' response to the situation is to lead the people in making a firm covenant in writing, a sealed document signed by all of their leaders. In this document, they would rededicate themselves to the service of the Lord, whose praises and whose faithfulness in their history they had just recounted.

A question to consider. There are a number of examples in scripture of retelling the story of God's dealings with his people. Such retellings serve a number of different purposes, and depending upon the purpose that's being served, different things can be brought to the foreground. Can you identify some other examples of retelling covenant history and scripture, and identify some of the things that are being foregrounded within them, and the purposes that they are serving?