

# God's Covenant with the Returned Exiles

Nehemiah 9:32-38; 10:28-29

SS Lesson for 10/29/2017

**Devotional Scripture:** Ps 103:1-22

## OUTLINE

### INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW AND KEY VERSE OF THE LESSON

*Key Verse: Nehemiah 9:33*

*Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary*

*Commentary from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary*

LESSON INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

*From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary*

### MAJOR THEME ANALYSIS

FAILURE TO KEEP THE COVENANT (NEH 9:32-37)

*Faithfulness of God (32-33)*

God is faithful because He never changes (Mal 3:6)

God is faithful because He never fails (Zeph 3:5)

God is faithful because of His love for His creation (Ps 36:5-7)

God is faithful because He stands firm forever (Ps 89:1-2)

God is faithful because He is merciful and forgiving (Dan 9:9)

*Unfaithfulness of the people (34-35)*

Unfaithfulness that comes from our own actions (Ps 7:15-16)

Unfaithfulness that is caused by bad choices (Prov 1:29-31)

Unfaithfulness that comes from disobedience (Jer 18:9-10)

Unfaithfulness that comes from forsaking God's word (Jer 9:13-14)

Unfaithfulness that comes from violating God's covenant (Deut 17:2-5)

Unfaithfulness that blasphemes God's Name (Rom 2:23-24)

Unfaithfulness that comes from not remaining faithful to God's covenant (Heb 8:9)

*Experiencing the consequences (36-37)*

Consequences of God's pronouncement of punishment (Num 16:28-33)

Consequences of man's pronouncement of punishment (Dan 6:24)

Consequences of sharing the punishment of sin (Josh 7:20-24)

Consequences of not partaking of the good things of God (Jer 29:32)

RECOMMITMENT TO THE COVENANT (NEH 9:38; 10:28-29)

*Recommit by agreement and signing (9:38; 10:28)*

Agreement and signing by confirming and pledging ourselves (2 Kings 23:3)

Agreement and signing by seeking God with all our heart and soul (2 Chron 15:12)

Agreement and signing by committing to be God's people (2 Chron 23:16)

Agreement and signing so that God's anger would turn away from us (2 Chron 29:10)

Agreement and signing by separating from foreigners (Neh 9:2)

*Recommit through an oath and curse (29)*

A curse if they did not obey the covenant (Deut 27:26)

An oath made with loud acclamation and shouting (2 Chron 15:14)

An oath made with confirmation (Ps 119:106)

An oath made based on help from the Holy Spirit (Ezek 36:27)

### CONCLUSION AND OTHER THOUGHTS

COMMENTARY THOUGHTS FROM THOMAS CONSTABLE

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS FROM THE NIV STANDARD LESSON COMMENTARY

HEART OF THE LESSON FROM THE BIBLE EXPOSITOR AND ILLUMINATOR COMMENTARY

PRACTICAL POINTS FROM THE BIBLE EXPOSITOR AND ILLUMINATOR COMMENTARY

# Introduction

## Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson

The lesson reviews the understanding of the covenant that God's people made related to **God's Covenant with the Returning Exiles**. The **study's aim** is to sense the importance of periodic covenants with God to obey Him. The **study's application** is to covenant with God to give renewed obedience in any neglected areas in our lives. *(Adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary)*

### Key Verse: Nehemiah 9:33

*However You are just in all that has befallen us; For You have dealt faithfully, But we have done wickedly*

### Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

“The Word of God had a tremendous impact on the Restoration community. It pointed the people to their sin (8:9), led them to worship (8:12, 14), and gave them great joy (8:17)” (J. Carl Laney, *Ezra/Nehemiah*, p. 104). Now the Word led to their confession of sin.

**9:1-5a.** The Feast of Tabernacles concluded on the 22nd day of the month (see 8:14). After one day's interval, the 23rd, the people assembled **on the 24th**. They **separated** from **foreigners** (cf. 10:28). Then they confessed their sins, evidenced by **fasting, wearing sackcloth** (cf. Gen. 37:24; Es. 4:1-4; Pss. 30:11; 35:13; 69:11; Isa. 22:12; 32:11; 37:1-2; Lam. 2:10; Dan. 9:3), a dark coarse cloth made from goats' hair, **and having dust on their heads** (cf. Josh. 7:6; 1 Sam. 4:12; 2 Sam. 1:2; 15:32; Job 2:12; Lam 2:10; Ezek. 27:30). These were signs of mourning and grief. For about three hours the people again **stood** (cf. Neh. 8:7) while **the Law** was **read**. Then for another three hours they **confessed their sins** and worshiped **the LORD**. Several **Levites**, some of whom were mentioned in 8:7, were involved in leading the people in their **praise** of the eternal **God**. Five of the eight Levites in 9:4 are listed in the group of eight in verse 5 (**Pethahiah** is also mentioned in 11:24). These five may have been the same or different men. One group was involved in petition (v. 4) and the other in praise (v. 5). **The stairs** (lit., “ascent”) may have led to some part of the temple complex or they may refer to the platform mentioned in 8:4.

**9:5b-31.** The material in 9:5b-10:39 follows the normal covenant form used in the ancient Near East: preamble (9:5b-6), historical prologue (9:7-37), acceptance of the covenant (9:38-10:29), and the stipulations (10:30-39). The prayer in 9:5b-31 was voiced by the Levites on the people's behalf. It rehearses major events in Israel's history, first stating God's glory (v. 5b), uniqueness (v. 6a), and Creation of the universe (v. 6b). The Levites then spoke of God's work with **Abram**—calling him from **Ur** (Gen. 12:1) and making **a covenant with him** (Gen. 15:4-21). Then they recounted God's deliverance of Israel from **Egypt** (Neh. 9:9-12; cf. Ex. 1-15), and the giving of the Law (Neh. 9:13-14) and of manna (**bread from heaven**) and **water** (v. 15; cf. Ex. 16-17). On God's swearing an oath by His **uplifted hand**. **But** the Israelites' ancestors became disobedient and rebellious against God even to the point of worshiping a **calf-idol** (Neh. 9:16-18; cf. Ex. 32). However, God was still **gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love** (cf. Ex. 34:6; Num. 14:18; Pss. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). God continued to **guide them... instruct them**, and provide for them (Neh. 9:19-21). He helped them conquer their enemies **Sihon** and **Og** (v. 22; cf. Num. 21:21-35), and brought them into **the Promised Land** under Joshua (Neh. 9:23-25). In all this they enjoyed God's **great goodness** (cf. v. 35). Again the people **rebelled** (v. 26; cf. v. 17) so God gave them over to oppressors. But because of His **great compassion** He raised up **deliverers**, the Judges, who freed them (vv. 27-28). Through the centuries of Israel's sin (v. 29) God continued to be **patient** and to admonish them **by the Holy Spirit... through the prophets** (v. 30). But as a result of their ongoing sinning they were taken into exile (vv. 30-31).

**9:32-37.** In this concluding part of the Levites' prayer, they asked for relief, again acknowledging God's power, majesty (cf. 1:5; 4:14), and loyalty. Throughout Israel's history she experienced **hardship** because of her disobedience. **Assyria** was the first great power after Egypt that menaced Israel and Judah, beginning in the ninth century, over 400 years before Nehemiah's time. Even while the Israelites were **enjoying** God's blessings (from His **great goodness**; cf. 9:25) in the **land**, they were still sinful. Now they were **slaves** in their own land! (v. 36) Being slaves meant that they had to pay taxes to Persia, and Judah's governmental leaders had to give the Persian **kings** tribute from the produce of the land. Nehemiah's prayer ended with a plaintive admission of their **great distress**.

**9:38-10:27.** The **civil leaders**, religious leaders (**Levites and... priests**), and all the people agreed to put **their seals** to a written **agreement** that they would obey the stipulations of the Mosaic Law (cf. v. 29). The

list begins with **Nehemiah**, who again set an excellent example for the people. Many of the 24 names in 10:1-8 are listed in 12:12-21, names of heads of families. **These were... priests** (10:8). Ezra is not listed, but he was a descendant of **Seraiah** (v. 1). After the priests, 17 **Levites** were listed, 6 of whom were involved in reading the Law (8:7). The other group of signers of the agreement were 44 **leaders**, that is, heads of families. Some of them are listed in 7:8-25.

**10:28-29. The rest of the people** did not place their seals to the written agreement, but they did **join in binding themselves... to follow God's Law. Gatekeepers, singers, and temple servants** were listed in 7:44-60. All others are included under the rubric **all who separated themselves from foreign peoples** (cf. 9:2). Their commitment, though not indicated by seals, was evidenced by **a curse** (that called down calamity if they failed to carry through on their agreement) **and an oath**. The curse may refer to the cursings God stated in the Deuteronomic Covenant (Deut. 28:15-68). 10:30-39. The stipulations they spelled out in the agreement include (a) avoidance of intermarriages (v. 30; cf. Ex. 34:16; Deut. 7:3-4), (b) keeping **the Sabbath** and the sabbatical **year** (Neh. 10:31; cf. Ex. 20:8-11; 23:11-12; 31:15-17; Lev. 25:2-7; Deut. 15:1-3), and (c) supporting the temple **service** by giving a **third of a shekel** (about one-eighth of an ounce) annually (Neh. 10:32-33). According to Exodus 30:11-16 the temple gift was to be one-half a shekel annually, but here it was valued lightly. These temple **offerings** gave the **priests and Levites** money for maintaining the bread on the table of the Presence (Ex. 35:13; 39:36; Num. 4:7), for making various **offerings**, for celebrating monthly and annual **festivals**, and carrying out other **duties**. (See Neh. 13:10-11 regarding the people's failure to keep this commitment.) Other responsibilities to which the leaders and people pledged themselves were (d) contributing **wood** for the fire on **the altar** of burnt offering, which was to burn continually (Lev. 6:12-13), (e) giving **the firstfruits of their crops** (Ex. 23:19; Deut. 26:1-3) and their **firstborn... sons** and animals (Num. 18:15-17; Deut. 12:6) to the Lord, and (f) paying annual **tithes** (Lev. 27:30; Num. 18:21-24). **The Levites** were to tithe **the tithes** they received (Neh. 10:38-39; cf. Num. 18:26) to help provide for the priests' needs. The final statement of the agreement, **We will not neglect the house of our God** (Neh. 10:39), summarizes obligations (c) through (f). Under Ezra's and Nehemiah's leadership the people had been led to place a higher priority on spiritual things, including the care of the restored temple. This was even more important than restoring the city's walls

### **Commentary from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary**

Our text comes in the midst of a great prayer of confession and recommitment on the part of the returned exiles following the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem under Nehemiah. An outbreak of revival is described in Nehemiah 8; this prepared the people to return in obedience to God. As part of this turning, they remembered God's covenant (9:32) and poured out their hearts afresh to Him. This is no doubt one of the longest prayers in the Bible. The presumption of the prayer is that because God is a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God, we can always return to Him, no matter how much we have wandered. Israel wandered mightily over their long history in the Promised Land. As this history was recounted in the long prayer of Nehemiah 9:5-38, we see two simple themes: "God's faithfulness" and "Israel's unfaithfulness." Our text clearly reflects this. God was just in everything He did, and Israel was always prone to wickedness. Line by line the prayer confesses the glory of God in Israel's history, as well as Israel's failures. It mentions Abraham, to whom the covenant was first given, the Exodus, the wandering in the wilderness, the conquest, the periods of the judges and kings and prophets, continuing all the way up to the Exile and return. God was always faithful, but Israel consistently failed to respond to Him in faith and obedience. All this made for a very long prayer! The intent of the prayer was that through confession and petition the people might recommit themselves to covenant obedience (Neh. 9:38). As chapter 10 relates, several aspects of Israel's covenant obligations were renewed, including such practices as tithes and Sabbath observances. The people were recommitting themselves to the covenant that God had given the nation centuries before, a covenant that had fallen into neglect for so long. We learn some things about recommitment through this text. First of all, we learn that recommitment is invited by God's covenant faithfulness. God is always willing to bless His people when they return to Him in repentance and obedience. We all fall into neglectfulness and sin at times. But we see that God is always ready to forgive (Neh. 9:17). God is a pardoning God who wants a relationship with us. We should never be afraid to seek the Lord's face afresh. We also learn that recommitment lends support to our faithfulness to God. It really is not recommitment if this does not happen. The Israelites wrote down their commitments on this special day. They returned to the authority of God's Word and sought to return to faithful obedience. That is what should emerge in our times of recommitment. Finally, we learn that recommitment brings joy. Although there were some tears in this section of Nehemiah, the more significant result was fullness of joy as the

people realized that they could return to God (cf. 12:27). Because God is faithful to His covenant promises and filled with mercy, we can joyfully repent, confess, and return obediently to God.

## **Lesson Introduction and Background**

### **From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary**

September 11, 2001, lives long in American memory, the terrorist attacks of that day claiming about 3,000 lives. On every anniversary, the names of the victims who died in New York City are read aloud there against a background of somber music. Memorial services are also held at the Pentagon and in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Lessons of the past, even very painful ones, can help us prepare for the future. The exile to Babylon was a painful experience for the people of God. Upon returning, the exiles took time to reflect on their past and seek guidance for their future.

Today's study comes from a Scripture text taken from the time near the conclusion of Old Testament history. God's people in the northern kingdom of Israel had been conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BC. To the south, the kingdom of Judah fell to Babylon in 586 BC. But the time of captivity in Babylon that followed was not a period (in grammatical terms), as though it marked the end for God's people. It was a comma, a pause during which God disciplined his wayward people with the intent to bring them back home. Isaiah, writing some 150 years before that homecoming occurred, prophesied that it would happen and even gave the name of the ruler (Cyrus) who was to issue the decree that permitted the captives to do so (Isaiah 44:24-45:1; 2 Chronicles 36:22, 23). There were three return trips to Judah after Cyrus's decree. The first was in 538 BC, led by Zerubbabel, Sheshbazzar, and Joshua (or Jeshua). About 50,000 made the trip (see Ezra 1-6). The second journey came in 458 BC when Ezra traveled to Judah with fewer than 2,000 fellow returnees (Ezra 8); the reason was to provide needed spiritual guidance (7:6-10). The third journey was led by Nehemiah in 444 BC. Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the king of Persia when he learned the distressing news that the walls around Jerusalem still lay in ruins (Nehemiah 1). That was nearly 100 years after the first return to Judah! He felt compelled to rectify this situation personally so the city could properly defend itself from attack. Thanks to Nehemiah's steady, courageous, and prayerful leadership, the wall was completed in less than two months (6:15). Nehemiah, working with Ezra, understood that while protecting the city physically was vital, maintaining the spiritual defenses of the people was even more critical. Nehemiah 8 records a time of concentrated teaching from God's law. Later that month (the seventh month), God's people observed the Festival of Booths, or Tabernacles, as prescribed in the law (8:13-18). Later that same month, the people began a time of intense prayer and reading of the law. The prayer is recorded in Nehemiah 9:5-37; a special focus of the prayer was confession of sin. Our text is taken from the conclusion of this prayer. Indicators of the intense earnestness of this prayer are seen in how the people dress, from whom they disassociate themselves, and in the amount of time spent reading God's law, confessing sin, and worshipping (9:1-3).

## **Major Theme Analysis**

*(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)*

### **Failure to Keep the Covenant (Neh 9:32-37)**

32 "Now therefore, our God, The great, the mighty, and awesome God, Who keeps covenant and mercy: Do not let all the trouble seem small before You That has come upon us, Our kings and our princes, Our priests and our prophets, Our fathers and on all Your people, From the days of the kings of Assyria until this day.

33 However You are just in all that has befallen us; For You have dealt faithfully, But we have done wickedly.

34 Neither our kings nor our princes, Our priests nor our fathers, Have kept Your law, Nor heeded Your commandments and Your testimonies, With which You testified against them.

35 For they have not served You in their kingdom, Or in the many good things that You gave them, Or in the large and rich land which You set before them; Nor did they turn from their wicked works.

36 "Here we are, servants today! And the land that You gave to our fathers, To eat its fruit and its bounty, Here we are, servants in it!

37 And it yields much increase to the kings You have set over us, Because of our sins; Also they have dominion over our bodies and our cattle At their pleasure; And we are in great distress.

## **Faithfulness of God (32-33)**

*God is faithful because He never changes (Mal 3:6)*

6 "I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.

*God is faithful because He never fails (Zeph 3:5)*

5 The Lord within her is righteous; he does no wrong. Morning by morning he dispenses his justice, and every new day he does not fail, yet the unrighteous know no shame.

*God is faithful because of His love for His creation (Ps 36:5-7)*

5 Your love, O Lord, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies. 6 Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your justice like the great deep. O Lord, you preserve both man and beast. 7 How priceless is your unfailing love! Both high and low among men find refuge in the shadow of your wings.

*God is faithful because He stands firm forever (Ps 89:1-2)*

I will sing of the Lord's great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations. 2 I will declare that your love stands firm forever, that you established your faithfulness in heaven itself.

*God is faithful because He is merciful and forgiving (Dan 9:9)*

9 The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him;

## **Unfaithfulness of the people (34-35)**

*Unfaithfulness that comes from our own actions (Ps 7:15-16)*

15 He who digs a hole and scoops it out falls into the pit he has made. 16 The trouble he causes recoils on himself; his violence comes down on his own head.

*Unfaithfulness that is caused by bad choices (Prov 1:29-31)*

29 Since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the Lord, 30 since they would not accept my advice and spurned my rebuke, 31 they will eat the fruit of their ways and be filled with the fruit of their schemes.

*Unfaithfulness that comes from disobedience (Jer 18:9-10)*

9 And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, 10 and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.

*Unfaithfulness that comes from forsaking God's word (Jer 9:13-14)*

13 The Lord said, "It is because they have forsaken my law, which I set before them; they have not obeyed me or followed my law. 14 Instead, they have followed the stubbornness of their hearts; they have followed the Baals, as their fathers taught them."

*Unfaithfulness that comes from violating God's covenant (Deut 17:2-5)*

2 If a man or woman living among you in one of the towns the Lord gives you is found doing evil in the eyes of the Lord your God in violation of his covenant, 3 and contrary to my command has worshiped other gods, bowing down to them or to the sun or the moon or the stars of the sky, 4 and this has been brought to your attention, then you must investigate it thoroughly. If it is true and it has been proved that this detestable thing has been done in Israel, 5 take the man or woman who has done this evil deed to your city gate and stone that person to death.

*Unfaithfulness that blasphemes God's Name (Rom 2:23-24)*

23 You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? 24 As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.

*Unfaithfulness that comes from not remaining faithful to God's covenant (Heb 8:9)*

9 It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord.

### **Experiencing the consequences (36-37)**

*Consequences of God's pronouncement of punishment (Num 16:28-33)*

28 Then Moses said, "This is how you will know that the Lord has sent me to do all these things and that it was not my idea: 29 If these men die a natural death and experience only what usually happens to men, then the Lord has not sent me. 30 But if the Lord brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the grave, then you will know that these men have treated the Lord with contempt." 31 As soon as he finished saying all this, the ground under them split apart 32 and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them, with their households and all Korah's men and all their possessions. 33 They went down alive into the grave, with everything they owned; the earth closed over them, and they perished and were gone from the community.

*Consequences of man's pronouncement of punishment (Dan 6:24)*

24 At the king's command, the men who had falsely accused Daniel were brought in and thrown into the lions' den, along with their wives and children. And before they reached the floor of the den, the lions overpowered them and crushed all their bones.

*Consequences of sharing the punishment of sin (Josh 7:20-24)*

20 Achan replied, "It is true! I have sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel. This is what I have done: 21 When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them. They are hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath." 22 So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent, and there it was, hidden in his tent, with the silver underneath. 23 They took the things from the tent, brought them to Joshua and all the Israelites and spread them out before the Lord. 24 Then Joshua, together with all Israel, took Achan son of Zerah, the silver, the robe, the gold wedge, his sons and daughters, his cattle, donkeys and sheep, his tent and all that he had, to the Valley of Achor.

*Consequences of not partaking of the good things of God (Jer 29:32)*

32 this is what the Lord says: I will surely punish Shemaiah the Nehelamite and his descendants. He will have no one left among this people, nor will he see the good things I will do for my people, declares the Lord, because he has preached rebellion against me."

### **Recommitment to the Covenant (Neh 9:38; 10:28-29)**

9:38 "And because of all this, We make a sure covenant and write it; Our leaders, our Levites, and our priests seal it."

10:28 Now the rest of the people — the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the Nethinim, and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, everyone who had knowledge and understanding —

29 these joined with their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God's Law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes:

### **Recommit by agreement and signing (9:38; 10:28)**

*Agreement and signing by confirming and pledging ourselves (2 Kings 23:3)*

3 The king stood by the pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord—to follow the Lord and keep his commands, regulations and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the covenant written in this book. Then all the people pledged themselves to the covenant.

*Agreement and signing by seeking God with all our heart and soul (2 Chron 15:12)*

12 They entered into a covenant to seek the Lord, the God of their fathers, with all their heart and soul.

*Agreement and signing by committing to be God's people (2 Chron 23:16)*

16 Jehoiada then made a covenant that he and the people and the king would be the Lord's people.

*Agreement and signing so that God's anger would turn away from us (2 Chron 29:10)*

10 Now I intend to make a covenant with the Lord, the God of Israel, so that his fierce anger will turn away from us.

*Agreement and signing by separating from foreigners (Neh 9:2)*

2 Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers.

## **Recommit through an oath and curse (29)**

*A curse if they did not obey the covenant (Deut 27:26)*

26 "Cursed is the man who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out." Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

*An oath made with loud acclamation and shouting (2 Chron 15:14)*

14 They took an oath to the Lord with loud acclamation, with shouting and with trumpets and horns.

*An oath made with confirmation (Ps 119:106)*

106 I have taken an oath and confirmed it, that I will follow your righteous laws.

*An oath made based on help from the Holy Spirit (Ezek 36:27)*

27 And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

## **Conclusion and Other Thoughts**

### ***Commentary Thoughts from Thomas Constable***

#### **Verses 1-4**

#### **The preparations for prayer (9:1-4)**

Two days after the solemn assembly (Nehemiah 8:18), the people were still mourning over their sins (Nehemiah 9:1). This was a genuine spiritual revival. In obedience to God's Law the people broke off forbidden alliances with non-Jews (cf. Deuteronomy 23:3-8). They also confessed their ancestors' sins as well as their own, listened to the reading of the Law, and worshipped God (Nehemiah 9:2-3). Seven Levites led the people in confession and worship (Nehemiah 9:4).

"It is of interest that the congregation did not only confess their own sins, but also those of their ancestors. This is a recurring theme in the books of Ezra -Nehemiah. They felt their solidarity with past generations." [Note: Fensham, p223.]

". . . "separation" [Nehemiah 9:2] has nothing to do with simply disliking someone. Separation has to do, principally, with religious commitment-with the idea of covenant." [Note: Holmgren, p129.]

#### **Verses 1-38**

#### **2. The prayer of the people ch 9**

The people were not content to go about their business as usual after hearing the Word of God read. They realized they needed to hear more and to get right with God more completely.

#### **Verses 5-38**

### **The prayer of praise (9:5-38)**

A second group of seven Levites (Nehemiah 9:5) led the people in the prayer of praise that Nehemiah included in this book, perhaps on a different day than the prayer he wrote about in Nehemiah 9:1-4.

"The prayer is intended to instruct the readers. It gives us a survey of the history of Israel with emphasis on certain events in the life of the Chosen People. This approach is comparable to that of Psalm 78 , 105 , 106 , 135 , , 136." [Note: Fensham, pp227-28.]

It is especially helpful to read this prayer through the eyes of the returned exiles. They had experienced many of the same things their forefathers had. We, too, can identify with their appreciation of God's grace, since we have seen these things in God's dealings with us.

This is one of the great prayers of the Old Testament. It praises God for His character and conduct. It describes God's greatness seen in His creation of the cosmos (Nehemiah 9:6), and His grace and faithfulness in calling Abraham, promising him the land of Canaan, and fulfilling that promise (Nehemiah 9:7-8). The returned exiles could identify with God's miraculous deliverance of their forefathers when they were slaves in Egypt (Nehemiah 9:9-11).

"Some forty Hebrew words are used to speak of miracles; they are used approximately five hundred times in the Old Testament. Half of these five hundred occurrences refer to the miracles of the exodus." [Note: Breneman, p237.]

The returnees could also appreciate God's supernatural guidance of them and His faithful provision for them until He brought them to the Promised Land (Nehemiah 9:12-15). They also voiced thanks to God for choosing them and for giving them His Law (Nehemiah 9:13-14). While the second Exodus motif is strong in the biblical writers' concept of the restoration, the idea of pilgrimage and procession to Zion is equally strong. [Note: Eugene H. Merrill, "Pilgrimage and Procession: Motifs of Israel's Return," In Israel's Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison, pp261-272.] In spite of their forefathers' rebellion (Nehemiah 9:16-17 a): God forgave them and graciously guided them (Nehemiah 9:19), provided for their physical needs (Nehemiah 9:20-21), and gave them victory over their enemies (Nehemiah 9:22). He also multiplied them (Nehemiah 9:23), brought them into the Promised Land (Nehemiah 9:24-25 a), and established them there (Nehemiah 9:25 b).

During the period of the judges and during the monarchy, the Israelites disobeyed and rebelled many times. Nevertheless, God delivered them when they repented (Nehemiah 9:26-29) and sent the prophets to turn them back to Himself (Nehemiah 9:30). This shows God's further grace and compassion toward His people (Nehemiah 9:31). The returned Jews then called on God to remember their sufferings in exile (Nehemiah 9:32). They acknowledged that the exile was a consequence of their disobedience to God's Word (Nehemiah 9:33-34). Even in exile, most of the Israelites had not returned to God (Nehemiah 9:35). Consequently, much of the Jewish nation was still in bondage to its Persian rulers (Nehemiah 9:36-37).

"This sad confession, like that of Ezra 9:9, affords clear proof that the leaders of post-Exilic Judaism did not regard their return from Babylon as final fulfillment of such prophecies of Israel's restoration to the land as Isaiah 11:11-16; Isaiah 14:1-2." [Note: Whitcomb, p442.]

Nonetheless now they, the faithful remnant of returnees, were ready to make a formal commitment to obey Yahweh again (Nehemiah 9:38).

### **Verses 10:1-27**

#### **The signers of the document (10:1-27)**

The names in Nehemiah 10:2-8 are those of the heads of 21 priestly families (cf. Nehemiah 12:12-21). Nehemiah 10:9-13 record the names of 17 Levites. Then the writer gave the names of 44 heads of other leading families (Nehemiah 10:14-27).

#### **Verses 1-39**

3. The renewed commitment of the people ch10

Nehemiah explained the agreement he previously referred to in Nehemiah 9:38 in this chapter. Conviction of sin (ch8) led to confession of sin (ch9) and resulted in a covenant with God (ch10).

" Nehemiah 10 , despite its forbidding portal of 27 verses of proper names, is in reality a small treasure house of post-exilic interpretations of earlier Israelite law." [Note: David Clines, " Nehemiah 10 as an Example of Early Jewish Biblical Exegesis," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 21 (1981):111.]

## **Verses 28-39**

### **The pledge to keep the Law 10:28-39**

The rest of the restoration community joined those who signed their names pledging to obey the Mosaic Law (Nehemiah 10:28-29). The "curse" they took on themselves was submission to the curse that God promised would come on those who did not keep His Word (Nehemiah 10:29; Deuteronomy 28:15-68). "Law" (Heb. *torah*) refers to all God's instructions, "commandments" are His rules, "ordinances" are His judicial pronouncements, and "statutes" are His permanent decrees (Nehemiah 10:29; cf. Deuteronomy 4:45).

These Jews promised, specifically, not to intermarry with pagans (Nehemiah 10:30) and to keep the Sabbath day and the sabbatical year (Nehemiah 10:31). They further committed to support the temple service financially (Nehemiah 10:32-34), to give their firstfruits to God (Nehemiah 10:35-37 a), and to pay their basic tithe tax (Nehemiah 10:37-39). The last sentence in Nehemiah 10:39 shows that the primary concern of the people was the worship that was the heart of their national life. Their priorities were proper.

The Law required Israelites 20 years old and older to pay one-half a shekel as a temple tax (Exodus 30:11-16). This particular congregation only promised one-third of a shekel (Nehemiah 10:32). Perhaps Nehemiah reduced the amount since the returned exiles were now poor (cf. Nehemiah 5:1-5). [Note: Laney, p109; Whitcomb, p442.] Another explanation is that the people may have pledged this one-third shekel in addition to the other one-half. [Note: Judah J. Slotki, Daniel., Ezra., Nehemiah., p246.] A third possibility is that a different system of evaluating the shekel had replaced the older one. [Note: McConville, p133.] The text is not specific on this point. In any case the people responded sacrificially.

*(Adapted from URL: <https://www.studyliht.org/commentaries/dcc/nehemiah-9.html>)*

## **Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary**

One of the most noteworthy characteristics of Nehemiah (both the book and the man) is the priority of prayer. Most of the prayers mentioned in the book are quite brief (Nehemiah 4:4, 5; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31). In two cases praying is referred to, but nothing is said of the contents (2:4; 4:9). A longer prayer comes at the beginning of the book after Nehemiah learns the distressing news about the city walls (1:5-11). By far the longest prayer is found in the passage from which today's lesson text is drawn (9:5-37). The title of today's lesson (and the theme for this unit of studies) highlights God's part in making covenants with various individuals and groups in the Old Testament. Even so, the importance of prayer as part of the covenant renewal ceremony in today's study must not be bypassed. We live in a time (in Western society) when the resources for studying the Bible and planning various church programs are incredibly numerous. Just a few seconds with a computer provides us with access to scores of such materials. While consulting all these resources, it's easy to forget to consult our most important and needed resource: earnest prayer. In fact it is an insult to count prayer as just another "resource" to aid us in getting our work done. As Oswald Chambers put it, "Prayer does not fit us for the greater work; prayer is the greater work." Many churches used to schedule "prayer meetings" for the middle of the week. True, sometimes these gatherings focused on physical or personal needs more than larger spiritual concerns; but nowadays prayer meetings seem to have gone the way of revivals and community youth rallies. The perceived needs of church members have resulted in some churches adding staff to meet those needs. Thus we have ministers of visitation, ministers of education, ministers of missions, etc. There are even "ministers" of technology and sports on some church staffs! Is it time to consider creating a staff person designated as a "minister of prayer"? Can you think of someone in your congregation who would be able to fulfill such a role? If you can't think of anyone, what does that say?

## ***Heart of the Lesson from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary***

Have you ever been in great distress, not a momentary frustration but genuine life-and-death distress? Sometimes we call this the breaking point, the point at which if something does not change, we will die—either physically, mentally and emotionally, or spiritually. It is in these times of desperation that we find ourselves willing to make changes that previously we refused to do. The children of Israel found themselves in desperate times.

**Learning from the Levites' prayer (Neh. 9:32-33).** The Levites provide a few great lessons for us on prayer. First, remember the character of God. For whatever reason we find ourselves in desperate times, it is not God's fault. Our God is great. Our God is mighty. Our God is awesome. Our God keeps His covenant. God is not a deal breaker; unfortunately, man is. This leads us to the second thing that the Levites taught us about prayer. If we are aware that something is our fault, we should confess it. Both of these lessons are shown in verse 33: "Howbeit thou art just in all that is brought upon us; for thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly."

**Begging for mercy (Neh. 9:34-37).** As the Levites prayed, they were really pleading their case. They knew that God was just. They were well aware of the iniquities and transgressions that everyone in the kingdom— from the kings of Israel to the slaves— had done in the sight of the Lord. They were not asking for special treatment. They were asking for mercy. They were in great distress. They were slaves in their own country. Other nations were enjoying the plunder of the land that God had given to the Israelites. There are times in life when the circumstances surrounding us are overwhelming. There are times when we are well aware that we have made wrong choices and bad decisions, and we know that the only one who can deliver us is Almighty God. When this happens, the best place to start our prayers is with confession and repentance. The heart of God moves when humility and faith are present.

**Seeking to renew the covenant (Neh. 9:38; 10:28-29).** Most of the time in the Word of God, we read how God wants to make a covenant with man. In this portion, the Israelites were begging God to renew His covenant with them. The people were in great distress. They wanted God to know that they had reached the end of their ropes. They finally recognized they had failed, but now they were coming together as one nation to seek God's face. They wanted the Lord to know that they were willing to enter into the covenant that the Almighty had made with the generations before them. They were willing to follow God's law, as given through Moses His servant, and to carefully obey all the commandments, regulations, and decrees of the Lord their God. When desperate times call for desperate measures, are we willing to seek God? Are we willing to pray and fast, trusting that God will answer on our behalf? Are we willing to make necessary changes in our everyday lives? Maybe our times of great distress are for the purpose of awakening our spirits to our need for God. He is the strong tower that the righteous run to and are safe in. A repentant heart always finds the path to God's tower.

## ***Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary***

1. As you endure hard times, be encouraged that God remembers you (Neh. 9:32)
2. God is just and punishes sin to refine and restore us (vs. 33)
3. God has given us His Word, His servants, and His Spirit; His expectations abundantly are clear (vs. 34)
4. Be careful not to let things and people that are precious to you become idols that draw you away from God (vss. 35-36)
5. Misplaced priorities and disobedience enslave us when God wants us to be free (vss. 37-38)
6. Any day, especially today, is the right day to begin again with God (10:28-29)