

May 18, 2025

Nehemiah 9:31-38

³¹ Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God. ³² “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. ³³ Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ 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. ³⁷ 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. ³⁸ “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.

“Sin is rebellion against the authority of God...”
-Agustine

“All wickedness flows from a rebellious opposition to God.”
-John Calvin

“Sin is cosmic treason. Sin is treason against a perfectly pure Sovereign. It is an act of supreme ingratitude toward the One to whom we owe everything.”
-R.C. Sproul

“The author shows how the emphasis on God’s Word resulted in the people’s commitment (or re-commitment) to obey God.”
-Mervin Brenneman



The Hand of God to Renew Through Mercy Nehemiah 9:31-38

BIG IDEA: Despite our history of failure and rebellion, the LORD stands ready to receive and renew those who turn to Him in repentance.

OUTLINE

1. An Embarrassingly Awesome God
2. An Embarrassingly Consistent People
3. An Embarrassingly Gracious Opportunity

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These “Sermon Discussion Questions” are designed for study during the week for believers in a wide variety of ages & stages in their walk with Christ.

1. How have you responded when someone you love continues to make the same mistake? What was your posture towards them when they realized what they had done and asked you to forgive them again?
2. Read Nehemiah 9:32. List the reasons the Levites give for why God is awesome (refer to verses 6-25). What is God’s most awesome work (read Colossians 1:15-20)? What happens in your heart when you think about the awesomeness of God?
3. Read verses 9:16-17, 26, & 29. What is “embarrassingly consistent” about God’s people? In what ways did God’s people rebel against him? How do God’s people rebel against him today? In what ways have you rebelled against God?
4. Refer to verse 38. Why did God’s people rededicate themselves to a life of service to God and not rebellion against him? What moved them to this decision? Read verses 17 & 31. What attribute of God do these verses emphasize? In light of who God is and what he offers to sinful, rebellious people, what might this reality compel you to do?

“This entire section emphasizes God’s abundant mercy....the people could still address God as ‘our God’ because they knew he was merciful...the covenant relation between God and His people is central in the Bible. The people knew God was faithful and merciful because of His actions in the past.”

-Mervin Brenneman

“God’s mercy is so great that you may sooner drain the sea of its water, or deprive the sun of its light, or make space too narrow, than diminish the great mercy of God.”

-Charles Spurgeon

“The ultimate test of our spirituality is the measure of our amazement at the grace and mercy of God.”

-Martyn Lloyd-Jones

Praise to Jesus. We can know and name the Christ in whom all the promises of God are “yes” and “Amen”. The Old Testament people of God knew that God was full of grace, truth, mercy, & forgiveness. Today, we see grace and truth itself embodied in Jesus Christ. - adapted from the Gospel Transformation Study Bible

Repentance through Jesus. Confess and repent for viewing worship as entertainment where you primarily come to receive rather than give. Confess placing politics, materialism, or nationalism above Christ’s lordship, and confess ignoring sin in the name of love and inclusivity; confess viewing church as a business or corporation rather than as God’s house of worship, prayer, and discipleship.

Consecration to Jesus. Despite our history of failure and rebellion, the LORD stands ready to receive and renew those who turn to Him in repentance. Let us be about that work of repentance and renewal in Jesus and for Jesus.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This is the longest recorded prayer in the Bible. It confesses before a faithful God the history of a faithless people. The prayer unfolds history as God’s acts of grace and mercy—from creation, to the Abrahamic covenant, to the deliverance from Egypt, to God’s wilderness provisions, to a kingdom in a rich land. This outpouring of God’s faithfulness is interrupted by two sections that confess the people’s rebellion against him. But there are repeated appeals to a merciful God, “abounding in steadfast love”. The focus is on God’s “covenant and steadfast love”, ever the basis on which his people approach him.

-ESV Gospel Transformation Study Bible

FOR FAMILIES AND YOUNG CHILDREN

These questions are written to aid parents in leading family devotions with their children.

1. How long did the Israelites read the book of the Law? How long did they confess their sins and worship? (In verse 3 we read that they read the Law for “a quarter of the day” and “for another quarter of it they made confession and worshiped the LORD their God”. That means they were together in this worship time for half of the day. That is amazing!)

2. Verses 5-37 are a prayer. What is the theme of the beginning section of the prayer from verses 5-6? (The prayer begins with praise for God as the creator.)

3. What is the focus of the prayer in verses 7-8? (It speaks to God’s faithfulness in making and keeping the covenant with Abraham and His descendants. In verse 7 they use the covenant name of God that is translated “LORD”, which in the Hebrew is Yahweh. That was the name God told Moses in Exodus 3:14.)

4. In verses 9-12, what was the topic of the prayer? (They remembered in prayer how God miraculously saved the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.)

5. In verses 13-31, they prayed about the history of the Israelites, recounting times of faithfulness and obedience, but also times of sin and disobedience. Why would it be important to pray this way? (This type of prayer reminded the Israelites of God’s patience, grace, and faithfulness. It also reminded them of God’s holiness and justice.)

6. How does the prayer end in verses 32-37? (It ends with a focus on God and praising Him. They also pray about their distress and therefore are hoping for God’s aid.)

7. What did you learn about prayer in this passage? What did you learn about God? How can this passage assist in your prayers?

Scriptures for further study:

Matthew 6:5-13

Ephesians 1:15-23

Ephesians 3:14-21

FOR STUDENTS

Scriptures for further study:

Exodus 34:6-7

Lamentations 3:22-23

1 John 1:8-9

Hebrews 4:12

James 1:22-25

Romans 12:1-2

Ezekiel 36:26-27

2 Corinthians 5:17

1. Think about how you've responded when someone you care about makes the same mistake over and over. How does your response compare to the way God responds to His people in this chapter?

2. In verses 6–25, the Levites describe God's greatness by listing all He has done. What stands out to you about who God is in this section? How does thinking about God's faithfulness shape how you see your own story?

3. Read verses 16–17 and 26–29. What patterns do you notice in how the people responded to God? In what ways do people still rebel against God today? Where do you see that in your own life?

4. Verse 31 says, "Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them." What does this tell us about God's character? How should that impact the way we respond to Him when we've messed up?

5. The people confess their sins and recommit themselves to God in verse 38. What would it look like for you to honestly repent and rededicate your life to God this week? Is there an area where you feel God calling you to change or return to Him?

6 How does this long, honest prayer help you understand what real prayer can look like? What might change in your own prayer life after reading this chapter?

FOR SEEKERS AND NEW BELIEVERS

1. First, take note (v.3) that the people on this occasion read from the Book of the Law for a quarter of the day! While we may not necessarily read the Bible for this many continuous hours, we should be strongly encouraged to devote ourselves to the regular reading of Scripture.

Question: Why do you think reading the Bible is so critical? What is your current practice? How might you get with others in the church to read and study the Bible more together?

2. The second thing the people did on this occasion was to pray. Let's consider this prayer and see what we can learn and practice from the example it provides.

A. How to pray:

We learn here that our prayer should be honest, sincere, and urgent.

When we come before God, we bring our true selves, warts and all. And we pray earnestly and urgently.

B. Focus on God:

Our prayers should concentrate on God, just as Jesus taught us to begin our prayers by acknowledging "Our Father in heaven."

C. Praise and thanks:

Praise God for all that he has created (v.6). And then praise him for all that he has so faithfully done for his people and for you personally. According to this prayer in chapter 9, God has: chosen us, he is faithful, he has acted powerfully on our behalf, he has delivered us, he has led faithfully, he has provided and sustained, he has kept his promises, he has forgiven us, he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, he has kept his covenant with us.

D. Confession:

Whereas God has been so faithful to us, we have been unfaithful to him.

Take some time to sincerely confess your sins. This is no time for excuses.

Consider fasting (v.1) as a way of reinforcing the sincerity of your prayer.

Pray (as one commentator suggested): "Lord, give me a sense of my sin, that I might have a greater sense of your grace and beauty." (Derek Thomas)

E. Recommitment:

Looking ahead, let us take note of v.38. After praising God and confessing their sin, the people recommitted themselves to the Lord.

Question: In what ways might you also do the same?

The Hand of Our God and His Divine Sovereignty in the Return and Renewal of God's People



The Ancient of Days, William Blake, 1794.

About the artwork and artist.

The Ancient of Days, found in prophecies of Daniel, is the subject of William Blake's engraving in which he shows us the Hand of Our God and His Divine Sovereignty in the Return and Renewal of God's People, the sermon series title for Ezra and Nehemiah.

The Ancient of Days is the cover art for Blake's Poem Europe: a Prophecy (1794). The Ancient of Days is a name for God the Father, whom the prophet Daniel spoke of in Daniel 7, where he saw Jesus, the Son of Man, "given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed."

Blake's poem "Europe", depicts a world filled with suffering based on the political climate of Europe and politics in England in the 1790s. It is appropriate in light of the suffering of God's people described in Ezra and Nehemiah. The artwork by Blake serves to remind and encourage God's people to know that He is still active and on the move with His plan of redemption despite their surroundings and circumstances. William Blake (1757-1827) was committed to connecting the prophecies and visions of the God of the Bible with the events in his country; the poet, printmaker, and painter was unrecognized and died impoverished. Despite their circumstances, William and his devoted wife Catherine, whom he taught to read and write, enjoyed a happy marriage and life together.

Today, William Blake is considered one of the greatest poets in the English language and one of the most original visual artists of his day.

Barker, (2004) (Barker, William Blake 1757-1827, 2004)

Introduction to Nehemiah

From January to May 2024, we heard sermons from the Book of Ezra. The introduction to Ezra, recorded sermons, and discipleship resources can be found on our church website at this address; <https://www.fpcrome.org/pdd-ezra/>

Ezra and Nehemiah were, for centuries, received as one book narrating the return of God's exiled people to their land, as under Persian rule they were allowed to resettle and rebuild Jerusalem. These two books cover three different waves of returning exiles, from 538 to 433 BC. But they tell one story: the restoration of God's covenant people according to his Word—which they are now called afresh to obey.

This restoration required, first of all, the rebuilding of the temple and the reinstitution of ceremonial worship. The first leader, Zerubbabel, led the initial wave of exiles back to Jerusalem to accomplish this goal (Ezra 1–6). The second wave came more than half a century later, led by Ezra, who rebuilt not the temple but the people, teaching them—and calling them to obey—the law of Moses (Ezra 7–10).

Thirteen years after Ezra arrived, Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem. He first led the people to rebuild the wall (Nehemiah 1–6). Then, along with Ezra, he sought to restore the people (Nehemiah 7–13) as God's holy nation, followers of his Word.

The restoration was not complete, however. These books picture God's people regathered but struggling; they are poor subjects of a foreign king; their city is devastated; enemies oppress from without; sin threatens from within. We see the faithful hand of God mercifully preserving his people according to his promises. We also see the dire need for the perfect fulfillment of God's promises in the salvation accomplished by his Son. (For further background, see the ESV Study Bible.)