

Men's Unfaithfulness / God's Faithfulness

Nehemiah 9:7-23

Nehemiah 9 contains the longest prayer in the Bible. Here's an interesting fact: the three great prayers in the Old Testament are found in chapter 9 of three books: Ezra 9, and Nehemiah 9, and Daniel 9. The prayer in Nehemiah 9 is the longest prayer in the Bible.

The occasion of this prayer was the revival that followed the rebuilding of the city wall around Jerusalem. The wall was destroyed when Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian armies conquered Jerusalem in 586BC. Under the Persian Empire, the Jews were allowed to return from captivity in 538BC. They rebuilt the Temple, but the city wall remained in ruins for almost 100 years.

God wanted a strong defensive wall around the city of His Temple, so He stirred the heart of Nehemiah, a cupbearer to Artaxerxes I, the Persian emperor. Nehemiah traveled to Jerusalem and motivated his fellow Jews to rebuild the ruined wall. Under his godly leadership, the wall was completed in just 52 days - a tremendous accomplishment!

Following the completion of the wall, there was a great revival. In chapter 8 we learned that the revival was centered in Scripture. That would be true of any revival. Then in chapter 9 there was a great emphasis on prayer - also typical of any true revival.

This great prayer of Nehemiah 9 was in the context of confession and worship (v1-6). In the first part of the prayer, the people praised God as the Creator of everything (v5-6), and in verse 7 they praised Him as the God of history.

Let's read the rest of the prayer in sections.

Nehemiah 9:7-15 - *"You are the Lord God, who chose Abram, and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans, and gave him the name Abraham. ⁸ You found his heart faithful before You, and made a covenant with him to give the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites and the Girgashites— to give it to his descendants. You have performed Your words, for You are righteous.*

⁹ "You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, and heard their cry by the Red Sea. ¹⁰ You showed signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his servants, and against all the people of his land, for You knew that they acted proudly against them. So You made a name for Yourself, as it is this day. ¹¹ You divided the sea before them, so that they went through the midst of the sea on the dry land. Their persecutors You threw into the deep, as a stone into the mighty waters. ¹² Moreover You led them by day with a cloudy pillar, and by night with a pillar of fire, to give them light on the road that they should travel. ¹³ "You came down on Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven, and gave them just ordinances and true law - good statutes and commandments. ¹⁴ You made known to them Your holy Sabbath, and commanded them precepts, statutes and laws, by the hand of Moses Your servant. ¹⁵ You gave them bread from heaven

for their hunger, and brought water out of the rock for their thirst, and told them to go in to possess the land You had sworn to give them.”

Background Notes for verses 7-15

“Ur of the Chaldeans” (v7) was located where the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers run into the Persian Gulf. That’s the land of ancient Babylon - modern day Iraq. Abraham traveled about 1000 miles of travel from Ur to the land of Canaan.

“The Canaanites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, and the Girgashites” (v8) were peoples who were living in the land of Canaan when Abraham arrived there, sometime before 2000BC.

Verse 11 is a description of the crossing of the Red Sea. It’s interesting to notice the phraseology: *“You divided the sea before them, so that they went through in the midst of the sea on the dry ground; and their persecutors You threw into the deep, as a stone into the mighty waters.”* Some critics of the Bible try to water down the miracle of the crossing of the Red Sea by saying that that the Israelites only passed through a shallow area called the “Sea of Reeds.” The people in Nehemiah’s day knew the truth! In their prayer they recalled that God threw the Egyptians *“into the deep... into mighty waters.”*

Doctrinal Point for verses 7-15

God’s laws are good.

“And gave them just ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments” (v13).

Many unbelievers can’t stand God’s commands. They see His laws as limiting their freedom and their personal fulfillment. They see God as a tyrant, oppressing people with His rules. But just the opposite is true! God’s laws are good.

When we obey God’s commands, we find freedom and fulfillment. What happens if a railroad train says, “I don’t like the restraint of these tracks. I want to be free of the rule that binds me to these tracks. I want to romp around in those beautiful meadows”? The minute that train leaves the track, all its freedom is gone! It’s going nowhere!

The minute a person breaks free from the moral laws of God, they lose their freedom - and they will never find true fulfillment. God’s moral laws are **good** for people. A number of times in Psalm 119, the longest psalm, David said, *“I love your laws. I delight in Your statutes.”* God’s laws are good!

Practical Application for verses 7-15

Count your blessings - pray them one by one!

We sing, "Count your many blessings, name them one by one" - but we should do more than just count them. We should name our blessings in prayers of thanksgiving! That's exactly what the people of Jerusalem did. They started with their national roots - Abraham. Then throughout the rest of the chapter they traced their history and recounted all the events, good and bad. And they traced God's hand of blessing through it all!

We should do the same. Have you ever prayed through your whole life? "Lord, I thank you for my family, and the home in which I was raised. Although I had some difficult childhood experiences, I thank you for your grace and your discipline." Then continue on through your life. It will be a great prayer - maybe longer than Nehemiah 9! That's what the Bible is teaching here: "Count your many blessings - pray them one by one."

Nehemiah 9:16-23 - *"But they and our fathers acted proudly, hardened their necks, and did not heed Your commandments. ¹⁷ They refused to obey, and they were not mindful of Your wonders that You did among them. But they hardened their necks, and in their rebellion they appointed a leader to return to their bondage. But You are God, ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, and did not forsake them. ¹⁸ "Even when they made a molded calf for themselves, and said, 'This is your god that brought you up out of Egypt,' and worked great provocations, ¹⁹ yet in Your manifold mercies You did not forsake them in the wilderness. The pillar of the cloud did not depart from them by day, to lead them on the road; nor the pillar of fire by night, to show them light, and the way they should go. ²⁰ You also gave Your good Spirit to instruct them, and did not withhold Your manna from their mouth, and gave them water for their thirst. ²¹ Forty years You sustained them in the wilderness; they lacked nothing. Their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell. ²² "Moreover You gave them kingdoms and nations, and divided them into districts. So they took possession of the land of Sihon, the land of the king of Heshbon, and the land of Og king of Bashan. ²³ You also multiplied their children as the stars of heaven, and brought them into the land that You had told their fathers to go in and possess."*

Background Notes for verses 16-23

Did you know about the miracle in verse 21? We remember the miracles of the wilderness, like the crossing of the Red Sea, and the pillar of cloud by day, and the pillar of fire by night, and the manna and the water - but what about this one? "Their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell"! Deuteronomy 29:5 says, "I have led you forty years in the wilderness. Your clothes have not worn out on you, and your sandals have not worn out on your feet." Quite a miracle! Don't you wish you had clothes and shoes that would last that long? You might be out of style, but you'd save a lot of money! I don't know how the Lord did this miracle, but it was a forty-year miracle. It lasted the entire wilderness journey - even when the people complained and murmuring.

Doctrinal Point for verses 16-23

Even when believers are unfaithful, God is faithful

All during the wilderness wandering, the people were unfaithful. They murmured, and they complained, and they disobeyed God's good laws. They even wanted to appoint a leader to take them back to Egypt (v17; Numbers 14)! They bowed down before the golden calf (v18). And yet, during all this time, God was faithful! The pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night did not depart (v19). Their clothes and shoes did not wear out. The manna fell every day (v20) - even on the day they worshiped the golden calf!

More importantly, look at verse 20: *"You also gave Your good Spirit to instruct them."* What a lesson in God's faithfulness! No wonder the people of Jerusalem praised God in their prayer: *"But You are God, ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, and did not forsake them"* (v17).

God is the same today as He was then. He may have to discipline us, as He had to discipline them. But even when we are unfaithful, **God is faithful!**

Practical Application for verses 16-23

Our travels through the wilderness are not across God-forsaken land.

In Hebrews 13:5, the Lord promised never to leave us - but did you ever feel as though you're wandering in the wilderness of Christian experience? You don't feel spiritual. You feel dry and barren. No joy or happiness. It seems like God is not near. Maybe it's happening because of our own sin, or God is teaching us a lesson in trusting Him.

Whatever the reason that we feel we're in the wilderness, remember that **we are not traveling across God-forsaken land!** God is there, just as He was with Israel in the wilderness. He's still providing for us. He's still guiding us. He's still protecting us.

Some time ago I felt I was in the wilderness of Christian experience. I was in the midst of making a major decision. I was anxious about the future, and I was worried about my security. I felt that God wasn't giving me any guidance. I wanted to know God's long range plans for me.

But then I remember the way God led His people in the wilderness - one day at a time -and I realized that God was leading me one day at a time. He was providing for me one day at a time, and I knew He would guide me. I also realized that it's quite a blessing **not** to know the future!

Remember: Whenever we travel in the wilderness, for whatever reason, **we are never traveling across God-forsaken land!**