

The Longest Prayer

Nehemiah 9:24-38

This section of the prayer in Nehemiah 9 traces Israel's history from the time of the Conquest, when the Israelis entered the land of Canaan, right down to Nehemiah's time. This prayer is the longest prayer recorded in the Bible, and it was part of the revival that took place in Jerusalem after the city walls were rebuilt. The Babylonians destroyed the walls when they conquered Jerusalem and took the surviving Jews into exile in 586 BC.

Nehemiah, who led the people in the wall-rebuilding project, was present here, but he was not the one who was praying.

The people were praying! So it's not "Nehemiah's prayer" – it's the prayer of the people of Jerusalem. Some scholars believe that Ezra wrote the prayer, but we can't be sure. (Read about Ezra the scribe, priest and teacher of God's Law in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.) In any case, whether Ezra wrote it, or someone else wrote it, several Levites led the people in this great prayer (v5). We'll study the rest of this prayer in two sections.

Nehemiah 9:24-31 - *"So the people went in and possessed the land. You subdued before them the inhabitants of the land: the Canaanites, and gave them into their hands with their kings and the people of the land, that they might do with them as they wished.*

²⁵ *And they took strong cities and a rich land, and possessed houses full of all goods; cisterns already dug, vineyards, olive groves, and fruit trees in abundance. So they ate and were filled and grew fat, and delighted themselves in Your great goodness.*

²⁶ *"Nevertheless they were disobedient and rebelled against You. They cast Your law behind their backs and killed Your prophets, who testified against them to turn them to Yourself; and they worked great provocations. ²⁷ Therefore You delivered them into the hand of their enemies, who oppressed them; and in the time of their trouble, when they cried to You, You heard from heaven; and according to Your abundant mercies You gave them deliverers who saved them from the hand of their enemies.*

²⁸ *"But after they had rest, they again did evil before You. Therefore You left them in the hand of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them; yet when they returned and cried out to You, You heard from heaven; and many times You delivered them according to Your mercies, ²⁹ and testified against them, that You might bring them back to Your law. Yet they acted proudly, and did not heed Your commandments, but sinned against Your judgments, 'Which if a man does, he shall live by them.' And they shrugged their shoulders, stiffened their necks, and would not hear.*

³⁰ *Yet for many years You had patience with them, and testified against them by Your Spirit in Your prophets. Yet they would not listen; therefore You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. ³¹ Nevertheless in Your great mercy You did not utterly consume them nor forsake them; for You are God, gracious and merciful."*

Background Notes for verses 24-31

Most of this long prayer is a recital of Israel's history from the perspective of how God continually cared for Israel - even when they were unfaithful, and He had to discipline them. In verses 24-31, we follow Israel's history from the Conquest of Canaan through the time of the judges, and right down into the time of the kings and prophets.

Some skeptics of the Bible say that the Bible must be in error, because archaeological excavations in Israel do not reveal “enough destruction” in the time period that the Conquest took place (v25). They say, “If the Bible is accurate, why don’t we find more evidence of destruction in the Late Bronze Age, when Israel conquered the land?”

The answer is that we should not expect to find destruction in the land at the time of the Conquest! The Bible says here that when the Israelites conquered the land, they didn’t destroy the cities - they took them over! *“And they took strong cities and a rich land, and possessed houses full of all goods; cisterns already dug, vineyards, olive groves, and fruit trees in abundance.”* (v25). So Israel did not destroy the Canaanite cities. The Bible teaches that only Jericho, Ai, and Hazor were burned at the time of the Conquest. All the other cities were taken over and possessed, and the Israelites lived in them. So we should not find a lot of destruction in archaeological excavations for the time of the Conquest.

Doctrinal Point for verses 24-31

God must discipline His children.

As we trace the history of Israel in this prayer, we are amazed at the grace and mercy of God, but we also see His hand of discipline. *“Therefore You delivered them into the hand of their enemies, who oppressed them (v27)... Therefore You left them in the hand of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them (v28)... “Yet they would not listen; Therefore You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands (v30).*

God must discipline His children. Hebrews 12:6 says that *“the Lord disciplines those He loves and punishes everyone He accepts as a son.”* If you’re a Christian, you’re in God’s family - and so you will experience God’s discipline. But God’s discipline is always designed for our eventual good - it’s never God venting His anger over us. Are you experiencing God’s discipline? Maybe for some sin? Submit to the hand of God, and you’ll come to know His comfort and blessing!

Practical Application for verses 24-31

We cannot escape God’s discipline, but neither can we exhaust God’s patience.

Verses 28-31 teach us that although God disciplines His children, He has unlimited patience: *“And many times You delivered them according to Your mercies (v28)... Yet for many years You had patience with them (v30)... Nevertheless in Your great mercy You did not utterly consume them nor forsake them for You are God, gracious and merciful (v31).”*

Aren’t you glad that God is a patient God? If you’re parent, how patient are you with your children? Although we sometimes run out of patience (especially if we have to discipline for the same act of disobedience over and over again!), God’s amazing patience with us is never exhausted. He never gives up on us.

We’ve all seen the bumper sticker, “Be patient - God isn’t finished me with yet!” We really should add “because **He** has a **lot** of patience!” We cannot escape God’s discipline - but neither can we exhaust God’s patience.

Nehemiah 9:32-38 - *"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. ³⁸ "And because of all this, we make a sure covenant and write it; and our leaders, our Levites, and our priests seal it."

Background Notes for verses 32-38

The final section of the prayer traces Israel's history from the time of the kings and prophets through the captivity and right on to the time of Nehemiah. At the end of the prayer the people included a written covenant that they would not forsake the Lord.

Verse 32 mentions the kings of Assyria and the trouble they gave Israel. We read of several of these Assyrian kings in the Old Testament during the time of the kings and the prophets. One of the most well known is Sennacherib. He attacked Jerusalem in 701BC, during King Hezekiah's time. Although God permitted Assyria to oppress Israel, in His grace God delivered Judah with a great miracle. Isaiah 37:36-37 - *"Then the angel of the Lord went out, and killed in the camp of the Assyrians one hundred and eighty-five thousand; and when people arose early in the morning, there were the corpses—all dead. So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and went away, returned home, and remained at Nineveh."*

By the way, this miracle is recorded three times in the Bible - in Isaiah 37, 2 Kings 19, and 2 Chronicles 32. It is also documented extra-biblically in "Sennacherib's Prism," an archaeological relic that is on display at the Oriental Institute in Chicago.

A tremendous miracle - evidence of God's great grace! God kept His covenant with His people, but Judah soon forgot God's gracious intervention and returned to sinful ways.

Doctrinal Point for verses 32-38

God does not break His promises.

Verse 32: *"Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and awesome God, who keeps covenant and mercy.* The Hebrew word that is translated "mercy" here is sometimes translated "love" or "loving-kindness." It occurs about 250 times in the Old Testament! This word is translated as "love" in the recurring refrain in Psalm 136, that great psalm of thanksgiving: *"Your love endures forever."*

It's difficult to translate this Hebrew word into one English word, and it's best translated by several words. It's **God's loyal, steadfast, faithful love**. It's **God's covenantal love**. He loves us in spite of what His people do. And God doesn't break His promises!

What about the promise of John 10:28? Do you think you can lose your salvation, when the Lord has promised that "no one can pluck you out His hand"! No way! If you're truly a Christian, You **can't** lose your salvation! God does not break His promises.

Practical Application for verses 32-38

We don't have to be slaves on our own land!

In verse 36-37 the people said, "*We are servants today*" - we are slaves on our own land! "*The kings You have set over us...have dominion over our bodies.*" The Jews were vassals - "slaves" - to a foreign government on land that was rightfully theirs. The Persian Empire required the people of Judah to pay taxes and tribute for living and working on their own land. But if they had followed the Lord and obeyed Him, this would never have happened. They would never have gone into captivity, and they would never have become vassals. They were slaves on their own land because of their disobedience.

Today, God has given His people a "land of spiritual blessing" - a "land of rest," as the book of Hebrews says. It's a land of peace and joy that can be enjoyed no matter what our external circumstances may be. But just as the surrounding enemies oppressed the Jews, and they were unable to rest and enjoy the rich land God had given them, many Christians today don't enjoy the land of spiritual blessing. They're slaves to the sin of anxiety about their security, or about the future. Instead of enjoying the peace and rest and blessings of the "land" God has provided, they're letting Satan rob them of their joy by raising doubts and fears and questions.

We don't have to be slaves – we can live at rest in the land of blessing that God has already given us! Let's not be slaves on our own land!