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Nehemiah 9

"A Nation Returns to Its Roots"

November 5, 2017

Let's open our Bibles this morning to Nehemiah 9. We've got a big chapter to go through. I know you're all up for it. Well, most of you.

We told you that this book kind of breaks up into two pieces. There is the reconstruction of the wall - it takes six chapters, it covers fifty-two days after 161 years of the wall being down, and God, by His grace and His mercy, gives to His people protection again. From chapter 7 through chapter 13, there is the reinstruction of the people in the ways of the LORD.

And we began last week, in chapters 7 and 8, by looking at Nehemiah giving to us what really are six steps to personal revival for us, individually: a reverence for the Word of God, absolutely essential; a worshipful heart, where we realize who God is; expositional teaching, so we don't just read - we understand the context in which things are given; we need to personally apply God's Word to our heart; it will always result in repentance; but then knowing God's forgiveness will end up in joy that will, then, drive personal obedience. We did that last week. In chapter 8, last week, we looked at the first time that Israel, in 800 years, kept the Feast of Tabernacles because they began to understand the Scriptures. So, in these last many chapters, we find this great revival that's going on, and it is a beautiful insight into what God can do.

This morning, the reason we're taking the whole chapter (and we won't spend as much time on each verse as we might, but we hope that you'll read them on your own and spend some time with them), but I'd like to give you the context in which it is set because that's really the lesson. The prayer is a cry of people who have just come back to the LORD after a week of the Feast of Tabernacles. And it's two days later, and, rather than going home and saying, "Well, that was a great revival week," they came back to fellowship, to cry out for God's help. In fact, thirty-one of the thirty-eight verses that are here have everything to do with looking back. It's like they've been standing six hours a day reading the Scriptures (we read that last time). They've been covering huge portions, and as they got their history back into their hearts, they realized that God had always been faithful, and they had not. And so it drove them to their knees, with great heartbreak. You might remember, in chapter 8 last week, that they began to weep (in verse 9), and the

leadership said, "This isn't a time to weep. This is a time to rejoice in God's deliverance." And so they did....until it was over, and then they realized that, "Oh, my goodness, we have not been very faithful. God has always been faithful." And so it isn't until verse 32 that you actually get to their prayer, and their prayer is pretty short. But the first thirty-one verses are just a summary, an overview of all that they had learned in just reading the Scriptures. God's faithfulness, God's goodness. God had time and again come through. And, if you will, just from a standpoint of getting our heads around it, everything that we've taught through the Bible, to this point - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges - all of that was taught to these people in just weeks, and they just absorbed it and took it in. And so now they go to pray, and it is interesting to me that, in many of these long prayers that are in the Bible - the apostles in chapter 4 of Acts or David in chapter 7 of 2 Samuel or Solomon, when he dedicates the Temple in 1 Kings 8 - they are almost always following the same pattern: "We remember what God has done, and here's what we based our prayer on now because we know what He has done." So you could entitle this chapter, "A Nation Returns to Its Roots," but the prayer is a reflection of the hearts of the people as God's Word began to get back in, and it moved their hearts towards Him.

Verse 1, "Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads. Then those of Israelite lineage separated themselves from all foreigners; and they 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 one-fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshipped the LORD their God. Then" (these guys) "stood on the stairs of the Levites and cried out with a loud voice to the LORD their God. And" (these other guys) "said: 'Stand up and bless the LORD your God forever and ever! Blessed be Your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise! You alone are the LORD; You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and everything on it, the seas and all that is in them, and You preserve them all. The host of heaven worships You.' " Verse 1, like I said, the Feast of Tabernacles ended on the twenty-second. This was the twenty-fourth, so literally a day later. They went from joy of God's deliverance back to what was really going on in their hearts - tremendous guilt and conviction about how they, as a nation, had walked with God over the many generations. I mean, they were still in pretty difficult straits. They had a wall now. They had a people that were back in touch with God, after years. But they didn't have much power. The enemies around were all very

aggressive. They don't have any houses, really, to speak of in town. They had, with great gladness (verse 17 of the last chapter), celebrated what God had done. But now, the impact of the Scriptures upon their hearts drove them to repentance; and we know it was repentance by what we are told. They have sackcloth on, they have dust on their heads. "We're dust." They are fasting. All of those things say sorrow; not happiness, sorrow. "This is not good what we have done." And repentance was heavy upon their hearts.

Notice in verse 2 that they separated themselves from the world around them. They publicly acknowledge, as a nation, their sinfulness and that of their fathers. The LORD says, "Come out from among them, be separate" (2 Corinthians 6:17). And here, they were coming out. They were still like dry sponges. What happens when revival takes place? People are like dry sponges. For three hours a day, they would worship and confess their sins. For three more hours, they would sit and worship. There's always a danger, I guess, when you do things repeatedly, to fall into habits, without a heart. But that's not the case here. This was driven by heart and hunger. These guys were fanatics for a reason. It was a generation that you don't find much of like this in the Old Testament reports; for that matter, amongst the church. It was a time of tremendous corporate worship and singing and studying. And you have to ask yourself, in terms of these chapters - what kind of impact does God's Word have upon you? What happens to you when you study God's Word? And when you're exposed to it, when God teaches you, does it change your life, or does it just kind of leave you the same but you have a head that's filled with information? This impacted the people greatly, and they start worshipping the LORD by acknowledging that He's the great God, He's the Creator, and He's the Preserver. "You've made us, You can keep us." Quite a difference from the remnant who had lived so isolated from the LORD for so long. "You've preserved us." It is Paul that, writing to the Colossians (1:16b-17), said of the Lord, "All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist." It's a word that means to be held together. If you've ever taken any biology classes or microbiology, you should know that in the nucleus of an atom, there are slow-moving neutrons, but there are protons and electrons, and those are positive and negative charges. And kind of like on the end of a magnet, they repel, especially these negative electrons. But in the nucleus itself, they stay together. Now, the scientists have called that which binds them together mesons. But, in reality, if we read the Bible, the Bible would say God holds all things together. He holds all things in His hand. If we move slow-moving neutrons and bombard the nucleus of an atom, they will act according to their

nature and push apart. We call that an atomic explosion so that, even the fissionable material at Hiroshima was only about the size of a dime. But it has that kind of energy. Imagine the LORD just going, "I'm lettin' go." Everything just goes! Because He holds everything together. And here, even in the Old Testament, "You preserve everything that we see, and all that You create, all of the hosts of heaven, worship You."

" 'You are the LORD God,' " verse 7, " '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 a covenant with him to give the land of the 'ites' - to give it to his descendants. You have performed Your words, for You are righteous.' " "God, You have chosen us according to Your will." "Abram" means high father. When God chose Abraham out of the world, He changed his name to the "father of many nations," Abraham; but God chose Abraham, and, as a result, He chose Israel. And, in the same manner (1 Peter 2:9), God chose you. Now here's the good news - God only tells you that He chooses you after you realize who He is. It's one of those blessed insights to the believer; not to the unbeliever, but to you. You come in, and you go, "Lord, I chose You. Oh, I thought I chose You." "No, no. I chose you." "Well, it's better that You choose me than I choose you because I have all the reasons in the world to choose You. You got no reason in the world to choose me." But that becomes the insight that we're given. And they realized, as they read the Scriptures, that God had chosen them. And they said, in verse 8, Abraham was faithful. But, look, go back and read about Abraham - he wasn't all that faithful. There were a lot of bumps in the road for Abraham, but his faith in God covered his transgressions and his weaknesses, and God made a covenant with Abraham to give him a Land of Promise, and God had done what He said. They were living there now. God kept His Word. God was more than dependable. That's what the conclusion was of this nation, reading God's Word in bulk, if you will; being taught it and having it laid out before them. You can count on His Word.

He says, in verse 9, " 'You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, and heard their cry by the Red Sea. 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. And You divided the sea before them, so that they went through the midst of the sea on the dry land; and their persecutors You threw into the deep, as a stone into the mighty waters. 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 which they should travel. You

came down also on Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven, and gave them just ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments. You made known to them Your holy Sabbath, and commanded them precepts, statutes and laws, by the hand of Moses Your servant. You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger, and brought them water out of the rock for their thirst, and told them to go in to possess the land which You had sworn to give them.' " God saw their afflictions, verse 9. He was aware of their plight. Now the people realize this now. God was there. Sometimes I know when you pray, you feel like God's either not available or not aware. "LORD, have You been hearin' what I've been sayin'? It's been a long time." But even in captivity, God knew their needs. When they got to the Red Sea, leaving, He heard their cries. He was aware of what they were going through. He moved to bless His people. It was Jesus, who said to Nathanael, when He made Himself know to Nathanael (early on in John), and Nathanael said (John 1:48), "How do You know me?" and He said, "Oh, I know you. In fact, when you were over there before Philip called you, when you were sitting under the fig tree, I know all about you. I'm God. I know you." You can't get away from God's understanding.

And so here's this wonderful proof that God was always aware of what they were going through. In fact, verse 10, in their summary of what they had been reading, in God's timing, God brought deliverance, He made a reputation for Himself in the world as the only true God. The LORD God of Israel - that was His name. You go back and read in Exodus 9, where the LORD said to Moses, "Moses, now you go talk to Pharaoh, and you tell him to let My people go." In fact, He said this, "You tell him that the LORD God of the Hebrews said, 'Let My people go.' " And then He said, before He sent Moses out, "Indeed for this purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth" (Exodus 9:16). "I'm going to show who's who - through you and through the people." And they read that, and they took that to heart. Because when God's Word is taken to heart, lives change. And here's a generation that was reading and receiving, not just reading. God delivered them from Egypt. God brought them through the Red Sea. Rahab, forty years later (in Joshua 2), was able to say, "We've been afraid of you and your God forever. We heard what He did in Egypt. We heard how you got through the Red Sea." When the children of Israel entered the Promised Land, forty years earlier, God rolled the Jordan River back twenty miles upstream to a place called Adam (Joshua 3:16). And everyone heard about it. Every king heard about it. Every people. They were aware that there was a God with the Jews that was different than all gods. He delivered them (verse 11 and

down through 15 what we read) from their enemies. He led them day and night. He taught them His good ways. He fed them every step of the way. He never left them. He always stayed with them. He did what He said. "You had sworn to give them the land, and they went into the land to possess it."

All that the people could see was two things - "God is good, we're not. God is dependable, we're not. God is faithful, we haven't been." If we hoped anything from God, it's going to have to be that we realize He doesn't owe us anything. We have to come with empty hands but not uninvited. We have to be here to receive.

Notice, verse 16, the word "But." All this good stuff, "But." Never a good word, right? " 'They and our fathers acted proudly, hardened their necks, and did not heed Your commandments. 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.' " I like, "But You're faithful, we're not." If there's ever a distance between you and God, you should know who moved. You did. Because He's always there, and He won't leave. There's a lot of people - you hear them sometimes when they're in trouble, they blame God. "Well, He wasn't there when I needed Him." That's not true. And notice, in their true repentance, that the people willingly admitted, though God had done all of these glorious things, they still kind of rebelled against Him. That still wasn't open in their hearts. So, they had heard the Word of God without responding in obedience. They had walked away when they should have been walking with Him. The convictions that they should have entertained in their hearts, they resisted. They forgot His miracles. They even appointed a guy (in Numbers 14) to take them back to Egypt, "Well, let's just go back to Egypt. This is ridiculous." And they turned from God again and again. But notice what we read, "But God didn't turn from them." His love is found in the midst of their defiance. God's love is found for you in the midst of your defiance. Because the Old Testament God is not a God of wrath. He is the same God that you find in the New Testament. He's a God of mercy. And you can tell that to the devil the next time he lies to you and tells you that God's through with you. He's not through with you! You might have moved, but God is waiting. He is love. Right? Remember that God declared Himself to Moses as He passed before him in that cleft of the rock, and He said to him (in Exodus 34:6), "I am the LORD God. I am merciful and gracious and longsuffering and abounding in goodness and abounding in truth." Moses had said, "I want to see more of You," and He said, "I'll

tell you. I'll show you where I've been." He showed him His afterburners, right? And then He declared of Himself, "I'm good and merciful and gracious." That's how God wants us to know Him, and the people learned that. They learned that.

I look at myself, and I wonder sometimes how God can love me at all. I look at you and wonder the same thing. (Laughing) It's all right, isn't it? Psalm 130 (we read it this morning), verses 3-4 say, "If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared." People got that now. After generations, they got that because there was this continual teaching of the Scriptures and exposure to the Word of God. Look how the Lord loved Paul or the thief on the cross or the prodigal son or Mary Magdalene. Pretty tough life. God embraced them all. God embraces us.

So here's a nation acknowledging God's loving care despite their wickedness. "Oh, God, You are awesome!" And if you go back and start circling some of the verbs that we've just read quickly over, you get this feeling - God chose, God preserved, God gave, God called, God saw, God delivered, God made known His desires. And even after constant "no" from us, rejection, He's still a good God, ready to forgive, unable to forsake them because He's love. That's how God devotes Himself to you. But you only know that if you immerse yourself in the Scriptures and come to know the God of the Bible.

He brings up, in their prayer, one glaring example. And we read, in verse 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, 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. 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. Forty years You sustained them in the wilderness; they lacked nothing; their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell.' " Now they had just gotten done celebrating (for a week) the Feast of Tabernacles. "Look, they provoked You. Moses left. They made a calf. They started worshipping false gods, and You responded with manifold mercies." Manifold. Not like on your car. The word for "manifold," both in Greek and Hebrew, means with many tentacles or with many fingers, in many ways, if you will. The continual goodness of God in the face of rebellion, the mercy of God in the face of people turning away from Him, and the nation with Nehemiah was sure getting an earful

and a heart full as they were being taught, weekly, God's Word. And it changed them. They saw God, and then they see themselves clearly. "We didn't lack a thing." Imagine running for forty years in the wilderness, and you've been fed and miraculously kept, your clothes didn't wear out. They're probably out of style by now, but they didn't wear out. That was a pretty arduous journey, and yet the LORD provided miracle after miracle to sustain them, though much of the time they refused Him. Their dependence was upon Him every waking minute. "If the food don't fall, if the water don't come, we're dead!" And yet God faithfully provided though they didn't necessarily faithfully follow Him. So different. "You gave them the Land of Promise. You provided for them all that they needed."

Verse 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. You also multiplied their children as the stars of heaven, and brought them into the land which You had told their fathers to go in and possess. 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. 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. Nevertheless.' " There's another one of those terrible words. Right? God had gone before them and blessed them. They possessed the land. They found God's favor. There's a psalm, Psalm 44:3. It's a great verse. It covers the same time period, and it says they found favor with God. You are I are finding favor with God, even in the midst of, sometimes, rebellion.

Now Moses had told them when they went in (Deuteronomy 8 and 32) that, "Be careful, when you go into the land, that the prosperity that you're going to find there doesn't turn you from depending upon God. You'll get land and houses and wells they haven't dug. Be careful that the blessings of God don't turn you from the goodness of God." But that's exactly what happened. They delighted themselves in God's goods but not in His goodness. They lived in God's good land, they didn't follow God's good Law. They wanted God's blessing, they didn't want God. It doesn't work that way.

So, although God was blessing these folks and doing everything He promised, "Nevertheless," verse 26. "Nevertheless they were disobedient and rebelled against You, cast Your law behind their backs and killed Your prophets, who testified against them to turn them to Yourself; and they worked great provocations." That just means making God angry. "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. 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, and testified against them." You gettin' the picture? Every time they turned, God was there to bless.

The kingdom of Israel divided into two after the death of Solomon in 931 B.C. The northern kingdom, ten tribes (all but Judah and Benjamin) went north. They had nineteen kings over 209 years. They were all wicked, they were all rebellious. They were living where God didn't want them to live. They worshipped idols and all. In 722 B.C., the LORD sent the Assyrians and wiped them out, giving them no promise of a restoration because they were where they didn't belong. In the southern kingdom, two tribes (Judah and Benjamin) stayed put where God had put His name in Jerusalem. They had twenty kings over 325 years. Eight of them were really good kings. So they lasted longer. But, again, this group also slipped away even though God was so good. And the LORD took them into captivity for seventy years in Babylon and promised to return them when they learned not to worship idols.

But notice, even in verses 26 and 27, before that is that time of the judges - 300 plus years of history where they just coming and going, "doing things that were right in their own eyes." We just recently finished Judges on Wednesday nights.

So, God was good, and even when He brought them into captivity, He didn't give up on them.

Verse 29, "And (He) 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. 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. Nevertheless in Your great mercy You did not utterly consume them nor forsake them; for you are God, gracious and merciful." Same lesson over and over again. But this is what the people walked away from Bible study with: "God has been good to us. God has been faithful to us. God has not destroyed us. He continues to use us." Well, that was their lessons from history from reading the Bible.

Here's their prayer, verse 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. However You are just in all that has befallen us; for You have dealt faithfully, but we have done wickedly." You've been faithful, we're wicked. In two verses, we see all that God has done and all that the people did in response. This is it, right? This is their lesson: "You've been faithful, we haven't been faithful." That's the lesson that they wanted to learn. That's the lesson that God wanted to drive to them. Why should a man complain, a man that is punished for his sins? You can't! But God is faithful, God is good.

Verse 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. 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." Man, what an amazing prayer! Would that our nation would pray that prayer.

Verse 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! 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. And because of all this, we make a sure covenant and write it; our leaders, our Levites, and our priests seal it." This all leads to chapter 10 where they're going to write down their promise to God. "This is what we're going to do, LORD, as a result. We're going to put in writing. We want to start over. We've got a bad history, want to shut the book on that. We'd like to have History 2.0. We would like to start again." They learned from their past. They hoped to make

their future better. They are assured that God would extend mercy time and time and time again. And they were right. "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon" (Isaiah 55:7). God promises that to us. It was Ezra (in the chapters right before this book) who said, "After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, God has punished us far less than we deserved and then still promised us deliverance" (Ezra 9:13).

So, what a beautiful picture of revival. This is what God's Word would do. It would drive you to know Him and know yourself and come to the LORD, not with expectations of owe or debt but with expectations of mercy and grace. God's got a great history of forgiveness and mercy. Right? You can have that today. If you're under guilt and bondage and the lies of the enemy - like God'll never use you - that's a lie. God's really good at scrubbin' you up and gettin' you goin'. Removing your sins as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12). So ask! It's a great chapter. It's what happens when revival takes place in the hearts of the people. You did good, thirty-eight verses. (Congregation claps) Go have breakfast now.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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