

NEHEMIAH 9

This chapter follows directly on from chapter 8. God's word has been read, the people have been cut to the heart realising their failures (8:9), but Nehemiah has called the people to obedience by keeping the feast of tabernacles and to have joy in the LORD. The feast is now over, and the time for mourning over their sin begins. In chapter 9 we have a record of their prayer of confession – a kind of longer, corporate version of the prayer which opened the book (see Nehemiah 1:5-11).

It is a long chapter, but worth reading in its entirety at the start of the study because in doing that you will pick up its main themes and emphases quickly.

What prompts this confession of sin in this chapter? (Vs 1-3)

This confession of sin does not come out of nowhere. It comes as a response to the reading of God's word, which continues here (notice how long they spend reading it – verse 3). Confession should be a response to God's word on our life. He is the standard, and reveals our sin to us.

Who leads the confession of sin? (Vs 4-5)

The Levites, those particularly responsible for the worship of God at the temple.

How does this confession begin (verses 5-6)? Why is this significant?

The prayer begins with a recognition of who God is. This is what makes why sin is sin – because it is rebellion against God, our creator (so he owns us). For God's people sin is doubly wrong, as God is also our LORD (we belong to him in a covenant relationship).

Look over the prayer in full. What are the people doing as they pray?

The whole prayer is an overview of their history as God's people – from the promise to Abraham up to the present.

What do they emphasise

- About their existence as a people?

They are a people not because they have chosen to exist, or due to quirks of history, but because of God's choice (verse 7), his covenant (verse 8), his promises and love.

- About their actions?

Repeatedly they have not been faithful to the LORD. They did not obey God's commands (verse 16, 26, 28, 30, 34, 35).

- About the character of God?

He is good and loving and at every step has provided for their needs abundantly (e.g. verse 15), and dealt with their enemies.

Despite their sin God has been faithful and has not deserted them (verse 17-19, 27, 31). Even though God brought them into exile, he has not completely wiped them out (verse 31). This is due to God's grace and mercy.

Is there value in remembering our history as God's people?

- In what way is Neh 9 our history?

Yes, there is value in remembering our history! Each of us can look back over our individual lives and see God's gracious mercy towards us, but we should also look back over the history of the Christian church and see God's mercy towards us as his people. The history the people recount in this chapter is the opening chapter of our history – so we have no right to be judgemental of their failures! The mercy God showed to them is mercy towards us. Yet we have so much more to be thankful for as we can see God's dealings with us from Nehemiah's time onwards. The fact that we still exist as God's people today despite our sin is a testament to God's great mercy and love.

- What more do we have to add to this prayer?

Most of this prayer is a collection of direct quotes from different Biblical passages, which presumably they have just heard read over the previous 24 days (see 8:2 and 9:1). How should our Bible reading feature in our praying?

For examples compare verse 11 with Exodus 15:5, verse 15 with Ex 6:8 and verse 23 with Gen 22:17 (there are lots more). We should be praying God's word back to God, as it reveals our sin, but in it God also tells us his promises.

What has happened most recently to this people? Does this signal the end of God's covenant with them?

The exile is the most recent part of this prayer (verse 29-31). Although God acted here in discipline, it was still an act of mercy as the people were not wiped out (verse 31). There is still hope!

Do the people distance themselves from what has happened in their history? (Verse 32-37 – notice how the language changes)

Notice that the language changes from "them" to "us", showing that those praying take personal responsibility for the sins they have been praying about. They do not distance themselves, but recognise that they are the same and need God's mercy as well. This is like Nehemiah's prayer in chapter 1, where he confesses the sins of his people.

What do they emphasise in their repentance?

The fact that the LORD is faithful to his covenant (verse 32), but that they are not faithful to his law (verse 34).

Where is their hope? Why are they praying like this?

They are praying because they are in a desperate situation. Although the wall has been rebuilt, they are still occupied by the Assyrians and not free in their own land. They are slaves again (verse 36,37). However they cry out to God, who has showed grace and mercy to them throughout their history, despite their sin. Their hope is in him, not in themselves.

Can you think of any ways in which attempt to confess our sins which fall short of true confession, as it is described in the Bible?

Confession which is vague, unspecific, which avoids the real nature of sin (rebellion against God), which excuses sin, and which has confidence in ourselves to change is not true Biblical confession.