



Finer Grounds

Nehemiah

Lesson 9: Nehemiah 9

As you have probably figured out by now from reading through Nehemiah, chapter 9 is very different from the rest of the historical narrative. We do not have the time or the space to work through this chapter verse by verse. However, we will try to answer some critical questions that will help us understand the events occurring in this chapter as well as the overall purpose for why it is written the way it is. You already know that the spiritual restoration in Jerusalem has begun, so instead of trying to read through the whole book in one sitting this week, just focus on reading chapter 9 very carefully. As you read through the chapter, pay attention to the mood, see if you can identify how it's organized and pinpoint themes you see within the text.

Read Nehemiah 9:1-4.

What is the mood or tone in this passage?

Thinking back to chapter 7, why might the Levites separate themselves from the rest of the people and begin this 'chant' in the midst of their worship?

Unless you know something about Jewish customs, it may be tricky to pick up on the mood of the assembly. Verse 1 says they were "fasting,

in sackcloth and with dirt upon them." Sackcloth was a garment made of dark goat hair and was worn by mourners who wished to express remorse or repentance (TWOT, 882). You can picture an enormous sea of teary eyed faces crying out in sorrow and regret as this broken people "confessed their sins" (v. 2). As sad and emotional as the people are, I think it is important to note that they still observed orderly worship. One of their intentional, organized efforts that stands out is that they conducted it after separating themselves from all non-believers (v. 2).

Why do you think they made such an effort to engage in this worship without any Gentiles present?

Was this wrong of them?

Do you think they should have been making more of an effort to include the Gentiles in their worship in hopes of converting them?

The concept of "separation" is a major theme in Nehemiah's work. Early on, Nehemiah set the



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tone by forbidding the Gentile rulers of the land from having a part in the restored city of Jerusalem (cf. 2:20). At the end of the book, God's people excluded Gentiles from all of Israel (cf. 13:3). Really, when you get down to it, it was the Jews intermingling with pagans that led to their spiritual downfall and time in captivity in the first place. God has always called His people to be *holy* (i.e. set a part for a special purpose). As the people of God rededicate themselves to His covenant in this great worship assembly, it was imperative they remind themselves of their holy calling by separating themselves from the pagans around them. This genuine time of worship was not for the non-believers, it was a about the Jews and their covenant relationship with God. This was a time for Jews to confess and mourn for their sins; a time for Jews to praise their God. This was not a time to focus on proselytizing the Gentiles.

It's also significant to see that assembly of the Jews was being led in worship by the only appropriate people; the Levites. Remember the census in chapter 7 and the controversy over priests who could not substantiate their genealogies? God is very concerned about how His people organize to worship Him.

Read 1 Chronicles 15:15-22.

What specific job did some of the Levites have?

Why is that important for understanding the genre of this chapter?

Through the authority of God, King David established the final and complete criteria He expected for musical worship among His people. However, only a select number of Levites (who had a very specific lineage) were commissioned to lead in songs or play God's commanded instruments. This very likely gives us an idea as to what is going on in verses 5-38.

Read Nehemiah 9:5-15.

As you read the text, ask yourself questions about the text. What style does it seem like the Levites are using here?

Why does that matter?

Can you identify a theme or themes for this section?

What mood do the Levites express here (praise/admonition/pleading)?



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What is the subject or big picture of this address?

Although it does not specify in the text, we may be able to assume that the Levites address God in a chant-like song. In verse four it says the Levites “cried with a loud voice.” It would be very strange if they all just started yelling at the same time (and they just so happened to be yelling the same words). However, if we read this as a levitical song, it makes a lot of sense. The song would most likely have been sung in an unmetred chant (LBD, “music”).

Given that this is most likely a song, and given the subject matter, why is it significant that it is being presented in a song rather than a sermon on this occasion?

One of the main things that you may have noticed about this section of text is that the Levites are addressing God, not the Jews. Think about our worship today and why we sing? We sing today to encourage, teach and admonish each other (cf. Colossians 3:16). We also sing as an offering of our praise and repentance to God in worship. Although this certainly served to admonish and teach the people, this song in Nehemiah 9 was a direct offering to God.

You may have also noticed that in this first section, the primary mood is that of praising and adoring God. Specifically, exalting Him for everything He has done on behalf of His chosen

people. How often do we enter our worship assemblies with a mindset completely focused on giving to God, and offering Him what He deserves from us? Unfortunately, we may have a tendency to come into our worship assemblies with our mindset focused on what *we get* out of worship, rather than focusing on what we should be *putting into* that special time.

As you read this section, what did you notice about how the Levites organized their praise?

This praise to God isn’t simply a string of random exaltations. You probably already noticed that it is a chronological retelling of most of the pivotal Jewish historical events. Think about it! The Jews had various parts of their history retold to them annually in their established festivals. However, these Jews are recently out of captivity and haven’t heard much of their history for a long time. Can you imagine growing up and going through school without learning about American colonialism, the Revolutionary War, the Louisiana Purchase, the Civil War, Westward Expansion and other major events in U.S. History? Many of these Jews could be hearing about these events for the first time. In verses 5-15, the Levites chronicle the wonderful, powerful and miraculous works God did from Creation, to providing for His people in their wilderness wanderings.

Read Nehemiah 9:16-31.



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Pay close attention to the structure of this section. What patterns are you seeing?

This section is so heart breaking to me. The Levites just finished praising God for all He did to establish His people, and here is where we see their response. Nothing they do is positive, and they repeat their ungrateful mistakes over and over. They acted arrogantly (v. 16), they refused to listen (v. 17), they became stubborn and acted as if they had better lives when they were enslaved to the Egyptians (v. 17) and they worshiped man-made gods (v. 18). Throughout all of their rebellion, God was always ready to forgive them and continued to provide them with all the guidance they needed. He established His commands and brought them to the Promised Land, and yet how did they respond? Over and over the Jews disobeyed, and then God had to discipline them in order to bring them back to their senses. The people inevitably cried out for help. God, being the patient God He is, would forgive them. Think about how significant this must have been to the Jews in Nehemiah's time. They just recently have returned from foreign captivity (discipline) and now they are trying to restore their faith as they cry out to God for help. Hearing these words might have brought many feelings of great shame (regarding the failures of the generations before them) and guilt for their spiritual shortcomings as well.

In verses 16-31, the Levites' song is organized in a very specific pattern. This pattern becomes much more obvious when you make visual markers in your Bible.

Going through the entire chapter, choose three colored highlighters or colored pencils and highlight the pronouns "You" (as it refers to God), "they" (as it refers to these Jews' ancestors), and "we" (as it refers to the people in Nehemiah's day).

By using different colors, it becomes obvious that in verses 16-31, the song is organized in a very specific pattern. We see God's actions, immediately followed by the people's response; and the cycle repeats itself.

Several attitudes and character traits of the Jews are repeated over and over. What character traits do you see in the text that were most responsible for the spiritual failure of the Jews? Make a list of the most repeated culprits.

Do you think much has changed regarding which character flaws are the most dangerous to the spiritual prosperity of God's people today?

Looking at your list, identify some specific examples where these character traits were at the root of the spiritual decline of Christians in modern times.



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Read Nehemiah 9:32-38.

How do the Levites their change direction and focus when we get to this final section?

The transition in verse 32 is made obvious by their use of “Now therefore” as well as the immediate change to first person pronouns to refer to the Jews, rather than third person (“we”, “our” and “us” instead of “they”). Whenever we see the word “therefore” in the Bible, we need to ask ourselves, “What is it there *for*?” Grammatical markers like this are tremendous helps in both interpretation, as well as structural breakdowns. Everything in verses 31-38 is their direct response to how their ancestors mistreated God. These Jews are fully committed to rededicate themselves to their service and obedience to God, as well as the purpose and image God gave them.

Read Verse 38 carefully. Do you think it was necessary for the Jews to take these kinds of measures?

How is this gesture more helpful than just orally making a commitment to God and/or offering the usual temple sacrifices?

Why is it important to know that this document was “sealed”?

This verse stands out as very unique in this passage. It describes a very specific call to action on their behalf. This verse also transitions us into chapter 10 which will describe this “agreement” (or later this “oath”) in more detail. Physically writing down the people’s commitment/oath of their renewed faithfulness to God does a lot more to reinforce the need to make major changes to please God. Drastic times call for drastic measures, and that certainly fits the circumstances of the people in Nehemiah’s day. They were at a huge turning point in their lives, and that needed to be memorialized. When we make goals, studies show we are far more likely to achieve them if we actually write them down and keep them in an accessible place. (Matthews).

When they mention that the document was “sealed”, that doesn’t mean it was shut or closed in any way. You have probably seen many documents printed on a company’s official letterhead with signatures of important members of that company. That communicates that the content reflects the company’s values with the full approval of whoever signed the document. They are putting their “seal” of approval on it. That’s exactly what the Levites have in mind in verse 38. Chapter 10 will continue describing the contents and nature of this written agreement the Israelites make as an oath to God.



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