

International Sunday School Lesson Study Notes

Lesson Text: Nehemiah 9:2, 6-7, 9-10, 30-36

Lesson Title: Corporate Confession of Sins

Introduction

In Nehemiah chapter 8 the people stood and listened to the reading of book of the Book of the Law of God for six hours (Nehemiah 8:3). As a result of hearing God's Word explained by Ezra and the spiritual leaders, the people reacted to the truth they had heard. They reinstated the celebration of the Feast of Booths in celebration of God's provision for them and held a solemn assembly according to God's Word (Nehemiah 8:13-18). Their actions serve to remind us of several factors that are necessary for spiritual renewal and revival. One is the word of God (Nehemiah 8:1, 8) and the other is worship (Nehemiah 8:13-18). Both are essential to a right relationship with God and one cannot exist without the other.

A third factor in spiritual renewal and revival is confession of sin. Although the worship of God was a time of joyful celebration, the people needed to express genuine repentance and brokenness. There is no contradiction in worship and confession of sin. There is a time to rejoice and there is a time to be broken over sin. Brokenness over sin is rarely experienced in churches today. Worship has for the most part today become very self-centered. Any mention of sin or calling sinners to accountability and repentance is viewed as a hindrance to worship rather than part of worship. However, both the Old and New Testaments stress the importance of biblically dealing with sin (2 Chronicles 7:14; 1 John 1:9). In fact, there will be no biblical worship until sin is confessed. Worship is a natural expression of those who have confession sin and are personally right with God (Nehemiah 9:5).

As Nehemiah chapter 9 opens the people of God are gathered together on a special day set aside for repentance and confession of sin. The Bible says, "*...the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, and with sackclothes, and earth upon them*" (Nehemiah 9:1). These are ancient and biblical practices that demonstrated a deep mourning and heaviness of heart for their sin (2 Samuel 1:12; Jeremiah 6:26; Joel 2:12). Our lesson focuses around a great gathering called by Ezra and Nehemiah because they realized the need for God's people to be called back to a right relationship with God. While Ezra, Nehemiah, the Levites, and all the people

participated and audibly prayed and confessed it is assumed that Ezra is the leader or the one confessing and praying for the nation. That assumption is based on the flow of the text since the word "he" in Nehemiah 8:18 is a reference to Ezra it is logical that he is still speaking in Nehemiah 9.

Confession of Sin and Separation (Nehemiah 9:2)

Verse 2

"And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers, and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers."

A true prayer of confession always results in separation from sin. And that is exactly what takes place in this verse. The nation of Israel was chosen by God to be a special people, separated from the pagan nations around them (Leviticus 20:26). "The seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers" means the people did whatever was necessary to distance themselves from the "strangers" or those not of Israelite descent. For some this meant divorcing their pagan wives. For others it meant staying away from relationships and situations that involved "strangers." One of the most obvious sins of God's people at this time in their history had been their intermarrying with foreigners whose pagan religions were corrupting the spiritual life of the people. Some thirteen years before Nehemiah 9:2 was written, Ezra had boldly attacked this issue of intermarrying which resulted in some confession and separation but the problem still existed when Nehemiah wrote these words (Ezra 9-10).

The words "...And stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers" indicates the people are guilty of common transgression. The people of Nehemiah's day were not laying the blame for their sins on "their fathers" but they were aware that their parents had sinned. By confessing "their sins" and "the iniquities of their fathers" they demonstrate a true desire to have all sin and breaking of God's law completely forgiven. This type of confession involves both personal and collective confession. Nehemiah personally prayed this way himself before he returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls (Nehemiah 1:5-11).

Confession of Sin and Adoration (Nehemiah 9:6-7, 9-10)

Verse 6

Thou, even thou, art LORD alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein, and thou preservest them all; and the host of heaven worshippeth thee."

In Nehemiah 9:5, the Levites exhorted the people to "*Stand up and bless the LORD your God for ever and ever: and blessed be thy glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise.*" Praise should not be difficult for those who have confessed their sin and separated themselves unto the Lord. After exhorting the people to bless the Lord prayer is offered unto the Lord. The opening words of this prayer sound similar to the model prayer where Jesus prayed, "*Our Father, which art in heaven, Hallowed by thy name*" (Matthew 6:9).

As to the praise the people were to offer it was to be directed to the true and the living God. "Thou, even thou, art LORD alone" acknowledges that Jehovah is the only God. This was important for the people seeing they had intermarried pagans who served other gods. It is important today as we live in a pluralistic society where one god is just as much god as another. God is not tolerant of other gods (Exodus 20:3). "Thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are therein" ascribes all creative power to Jehovah. The psalmist expressed this same form of worship when he wrote, "...it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves" (Psalm 100:3). The phrase "with all their host" is significant because pagans often worshipped stars as gods. "Host" refers to the stars and stars are not to be worshipped. The Creator of the stars is to be worshipped.

As Ezra and Nehemiah's prayer continues they exalt the Lord for His creation of "the seas, and all that is therein" and for the fact that He "preservest them all." God did not create everything and then abandon it. He "preserveth" or "keeps everything alive." He even has the "host" or "stars" counted and named (Psalm 147:4). When our hearts are free from sin and in a right relationship with the Lord we just naturally adore and exalt Him for His essential greatness as Creator and Preserver of men.

Verse 7

"Thou art the LORD the God, who didst choose Abram, and broughtest him forth out of Ur of the Chaldees, and gavest him the name of Abraham;"

While verse 6 magnifies God's *essential greatness*, verse 7 magnifies God's *distinguishing goodness*. God sovereignly "chose Abram, and broughtest him forth out of Ur of the Chaldees, and gavest him the name of Abraham." This

was the beginning of the Jewish history and without a doubt one of God's mightiest acts. By calling this man out of a pagan land, "Ur of the Chaldees," the power, mercy, and grace of God is seen. None but God alone could have caused Abram to leave his homeland and follow the Lord into a strange land.

Does God's call of Abraham give you any reason to adore and exalt the Lord? What about God's call upon your life? Do you have any reasons today to exalt His glorious name? Ezra and Nehemiah found the Lord worthy to be praised for the changes He made in the life of "Abram" who later was called "Abraham."

Note: God may not have changed your name from Abram to Abraham but He did change your condition from "lost" to "saved." Has He changed anything else for which He should be worshipped?

Verse 9

"And didst see the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, and heardest their cry by the Red sea;"

After adoring God in prayer for His choice and call of Abraham the Levites and the people celebrate the fact that God saw "the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, and heardest their cry by the Red sea." Abraham's descendants had been in Egyptian bondage for four hundred years and suffering "affliction" (Acts 7:6). While enslaved in the misery of Egypt God heard "their cry" and delivered them. They were a weak and helpless people against such a formidable and powerful oppressor as Pharaoh and Egypt. They would have never been able to deliver themselves and had not God intervened they would have died in Egypt.

In their exodus flight from the land of Egypt the children of Israel were pursued by Pharaoh and the Egyptian army. They found themselves surrounded by mountains on each side, the Egyptian army behind them and the Red Sea in front of them (Exodus 14). God performed a miracle and opened up the Red Sea and God's people crossed over on dry ground. Most biblical writers still believe that the exodus of God's people from Egypt across the Red Sea is the most significant even in Old Testament revelation. God revealed His power and love to His people here unlike any other place in the Old Testament.

Verse 10

"And shewedst signs and wonders upon Pharaoh, and on all his servants, and on all the people of his land: for thou knewest that they dealt proudly against them. So didst thou get thee a name, as it is this day."

As this prayer of adoration continues to be lifted up to the Lord the Levites and the people express how God had amazed Pharaoh with His "signs and wonders." Even Pharaoh's "servants" and "all the people" of Egypt were stunned at Jehovah's power (Deuteronomy 6:22). The "signs and wonders" primarily refers to the ten plagues God poured out upon Pharaoh and the land of Egypt. But it also included the miracle of the snake (Exodus 7:8-13) and the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:16-31). At first, Pharaoh's magicians were able to duplicate the miracles and plagues but that was over by the ending of the third plague (Exodus 8:18). By the end of the third plague even the "magicians" of Pharaoh said, "*This is the finger of God*" (Exodus 8:19).

"For thou knewest that they dealt proudly against them" means God was aware of the arrogance of the Egyptians and how they treated God's people. By doing the miraculous "signs and wonders" God made "a name" for Himself that "is this day" or still remembered today.

Confession of Sin and Reflection (Nehemiah 9:30-36)

Nehemiah 9:11-29 are not included in our lesson text. They focus on God's provisions for the Israelites as they journeyed through the wilderness toward Canaan. The closing part of Ezra's prayer sums up all that he has said about their sin and disobedience and God's graciousness to them. The major focus of the prayer however, is on the character of God and an appeal for His help.

Verse 30

"Yet many years didst thou forbear them, and testifiedst against them by thy spirit in thy prophets: yet would they not give ear: therefore gavest thou them into the hand of the people of the lands."

It is certainly remarkable for God to deliver the Israelites from Egyptian bondage and work signs and wonders on their behalf. But Ezra is also overwhelmed at the patience and forbearance of God with His people during their times of disobedience. God's patience and longsuffering with Israel was demonstrated time and time again as God would send His "prophets" to warn them of their sin. In spite of the fact that these messages sent by God through the prophets were also "by thy spirit," the people would "not give ear." Because of the people's

disobedience and failure to listen to the prophets, God gave them "into the hand of the people of the lands." In other words, God turned them over to foreigners for chastisement and correction.

True confession alternates between admission of sin and acknowledgement of God's patience and grace. When we truly confess our sins we will in the same breath acknowledge how good God has been to us even though we have disobeyed and refused His offer of forgiveness. It is always pleasing to God when we tell the whole truth about ourselves and God. Our society and culture minimizes sin. When sin is minimized it devalues and misrepresents God's patience and grace. If sin is not so bad then God's patience with us and mercy on us is not so wonderful. Ezra and God's people did not minimize their sin or the sins of their fathers. As a result they were able to properly reflect on God's goodness and patience with them.

Verse 31

"Nevertheless for thy great mercies' sake thou didst not utterly consume them, nor forsake them; for thou art a gracious and merciful God."

In spite of how the Israelites treated God, He did not "consume them" or "forsake them." God never walked out on them even in their most sinful condition. He stayed with them and worked in them. And He did that for His "great mercies' sake." The fact that anyone returned from Babylonian captivity alive is a tribute to the mercy and grace of God. The fact that any of us are saved by grace and that God continues to work and do His will in us is for His "great mercies' sake."

God is "a gracious and merciful God." Think of the many times and the many different ways God has demonstrated that aspect of His character in your life. Was God not "gracious and merciful" when He saved you (Ephesians 2:4; Titus 3:5). Has God been "gracious and merciful" to you when you walked away from Him? Has God been "gracious and merciful" to you when you struggled with doubt? Has God been "gracious and merciful" when you went to Him in prayer (Hebrews 4:16)? No wonder He is described as "a gracious and merciful God." The next time you pray it may glorify Him to hear you say, "Lord, You are a gracious and merciful God!"

Verse 32

"Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who keepest covenant and mercy, let not all the trouble seem little before thee, that hath come upon us, on our kings, on our princes, and on our priests, and on our prophets, and

on our fathers, and on all thy people, since the time of the kings of Assyria unto this day."

Ezra shows true reverence for God, calling him "the great, the mighty, and the terrible God." However, once again he mentions God's "mercy." Our God's throne is not one of marble and stone but one of "mercy." The word "terrible" means God is to be feared because of Who He is and what He has done. Another tremendous thought is expressed by Ezra when He reflects on the fact that God "keepeth covenant and mercy." That means God keeps His promises and manifests a steadfast love toward his people. Ezra is praying like a man who has truly experienced the love of God.

Ezra also expressed to God that the "trouble" Israel has caused with her disobedience and sin is no "little" matter in the sight of God. This is a most important reflection in the prayer. So many times we think that God views sin the way we do. The things that had come upon Israel's "kings, princes, priests, prophets, fathers, and all the people, since the time of the kings of Assyria" was not "little" matter. In fact, Israel was still dealing with the results of their sin and disobedience even though they were back home. Babylon and Persia continued to rule over God's people with heavy taxation (Nehemiah 1:5). In spite of everything wrong that everyone had done and in spite of all the roles the foreign leaders had played in Israel's chastisement God had faithfully keep His covenant and been faithful to Israel as His people.

Verse 33

"Howbeit thou art just in all that is brought upon us; for thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly:"

God has been fair to Israel and has not punished them above what they justly deserved. This part of the prayer reminds us of King David's prayer in Psalm 51:4 when he prayed, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest." God is a God of love, but his love is a holy love. His moral nature makes it essential that he hate sin and deal with it. People today need to grasp the significance of God's holiness. Our trivial attitude toward sin comes from a shallow understanding of God's nature.

"For thou hast done right" was absolutely true. And don't forget. Forever and always God will do right! But as for us, "we have done wickedly." The attitudes

and actions of God's people can only be truly evaluated in the presence of a holy God. The closer one gets to God the more he becomes aware of his own sinfulness.

Verse 34

"Neither have our kings, our princes, our priests, nor our fathers, kept thy law, nor hearkened unto thy commandments and thy testimonies, wherewith thou didst testify against them."

The humble acknowledgement of sinfulness in verse 33 is followed by a further confession that the "kings, princes, priests, and fathers" have also failed in keeping God's "law" and listening to God's "commandments" and "testimonies." They paid little if any attention to what God commanded and failed to take God's warnings seriously. Because of that, God "testified against them." That statement is a reference to the prophet's warnings mentioned in verse 30.

Verse 35

"For they have not served thee in their kingdom, and in thy great goodness that thou gavest them, and in the large and fat land which thou gavest before them, neither turned they from their wicked works."

The words of this part of the prayer reflect upon the ingratitude of God's people. Although God had been so kind and gracious to His people they responded by not serving Him and failing to turn from their "wicked works." They lived "in their kingdom" and in "the large and fat land" God gave them and yet refused to be faithful to God. Should not God's people be identified by thankfulness and gratitude? And yet, so many times we forget all the miraculous and gracious acts of God on our behalf. When we do it leads to disobedience, hard hearts, and a bad attitude.

When you read the history of the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, especially during the days of the Judges or the record of the kings in the Book of Kings or Chronicles, you will find a pattern displeasing to the Lord. That pattern can be summed up in the words, "they have not served thee." It doesn't mean Israel never served the Lord. It means they failed to faithfully serve the Lord and take advantage of God's goodness.

Verse 36

"Behold, we are servants this day, and for the land that thou gavest unto our fathers to eat the fruit thereof and the good thereof, behold, we are servants in it:"

"Behold, we are servants this day" refers to the fact that although a remnant of Jews had returned home to Jerusalem they were still under Persian rule. The Persians were not as hard on the Israelites as the Babylonians or Assyrians but they did exact a heavy tax burden upon them. The sadness of this reality is echoed in the words "behold, we are servants in it." "It" was their homeland. In spite of the generosity of the Persians to let the people return and live in their homeland, they remained slaves. God had given Israel a wonderful land in which to dwell that was blessed with "fruit" and "good" things and yet they were "servants in it." It is possible to be a slave in your land!

What does the phrase "we are servants in it" say to you? Any man who is in Christ Jesus through the new birth of salvation is free (John 8:36; Romans 6:17-18; 8:2; Galatians 2:4). It is possible to be free from the penalty of sin and yet be in slavery to the world. The Christian life is a wonderful life of joy, victory, peace, and fruitfulness. But if we as God's children fail to confess our sins and separate ourselves from the evil present world, we may find ourselves in the same situation of the Israelites, "servants in it."

Conclusion

Confession of sin is commanded in Scripture (1 John 1:9). Separation from sin is commanded (1 Thessalonians 4:1-4). Both must occur privately and corporately if we are to protect the purity of worship.

The church needs spiritual renewal. Christians have all these wonderful promises and blessings of God available to us and freedom in Christ Jesus but yet we are in bondage. Let us give ourselves to private and corporate confession of sin. Let us recite the words of Ezra, Nehemiah, the Levites and the people that are recorded in our lesson text. Let us give ourselves anew today to prayer, worship, confession, separation from sin, and praise to God. And let us sincerely ask God to keep us from ever becoming "slaves" in our own land!

Amen.