Forgiving, Merciful, Compassionate

Purpose

To remember how God has saved God’s people even when they turned away.

Hearing the Word

The background Text for this lesson is Nehemiah 9:1-38 below.

Nehemiah 9:9-17, 32-33 (NIV)

Nehemiah 9:9-17

9 “You saw the suffering of our ancestors in Egypt; you heard their cry at the Red Sea.
10 You sent signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his officials and all the people of his land, for you knew how arrogantly the Egyptians treated them. You made a name for yourself, which remains to this day.
11 You divided the sea before them, so that they passed through it on dry ground, but you hurled their pursuers into the depths, like a stone into mighty waters.
12 By day you led them with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire to give them light on the way they were to take.
13 You came down on Mount Sinai; you spoke to them from heaven. You gave them regulations and laws that are just and right, and decrees and commands that are good.
14 You made known to them your holy Sabbath and gave them commands, decrees and laws through your servant Moses.
15 In their hunger you gave them bread from heaven and in their thirst you brought them water from the rock; you told them to go in and take possession of the land you had sworn with uplifted hand to give them.
16 But they, our ancestors, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and they did not obey your commands.
17 They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them,....”

32-33

32 “Now therefore, our God, the great God, mighty and awesome, who keeps his covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes—the hardship that has come on us, on our kings and leaders, on our priests and prophets, on our ancestors and all your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until today.
33 In all that has happened to us, you have remained righteous; you have acted faithfully, while we acted wickedly.”

Nehemiah 9:9-17, 32-33 (KJV)

Nehemiah 9:9-17

9 And didst see the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, and heardest their cry by the Red sea;
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.
11 And thou didst divide the sea before them, so that they went through the midst of the sea on the dry land; and their persecutors thou threwest into the deeps, as a stone into the mighty waters.
12 Moreover thou ledest them in the day by a cloudy pillar; and in the night by a pillar of fire, to give them light in the way wherein they should go.
13 Thou camest down also upon mount Sinai, and spakest with them from heaven, and gavest them right judgments, and true laws, good statutes and commandments:
14 And madest known unto them thy holy sabbath, and commandest them precepts, statutes, and laws, by the hand of Moses thy servant:
15 And gavest them bread from heaven for their hunger, and broughtest forth water for them out of the rock for their thirst, and promisedst them that they should go in to possess the land which thou hadst sworn to give them.

16 But they and our fathers dealt proudly, and hardened their necks, and hearkened not to thy commandments,

17 And refused to obey, neither were mindful of thy wonders that thou didst among them; but hardened their necks, and in their rebellion appointed a captain to return to their bondage: but thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and forsookest them not.

32-33
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.

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

### DAILY BIBLE STUDY

| July 20   | Psalm 119:129-136 |
| July 21   | Nehemiah 9:1-8   |
| July 22   | Nehemiah 9:9-17  |
| July 23   | Nehemiah 9:18-25 |
| July 24   | Nehemiah 9:26-31 |
| July 25   | Nehemiah 9:32-38 |
| July 26   | Psalm 136:1-2, 10-16, 23-26 |

### Seeing the Need

From time to time, I watch a television documentary called “Modern Marvels,” which looks at the history and mysteries of some of the world’s unique discoveries and historical sites. I believe that an understanding of the past can give us a better perspective on the present. The episodes about Egyptian Pyramids and the invention of the mechanical clock particularly stood out to me. What amazed me was seeing the complex and superior engineering and mathematical ingenuities used to construct these ancient inventions and structures. Even more amazing was how the imagination and skill demonstrated by these ancient entrepreneurs is often still puzzling and even unmatched by engineers today.

How did those primitive Egyptians chisel out and place thousands of interlocking blocks into a mathematically precise pattern? Better still, how did they transport and hoist those stone blocks weighing from two to seventy tons into place? Equally amazing to me is the invention of the mechanical clock. Through an elaborate system of wheels, shafts, pins, and interlocking rods, Yi Xing, a Buddhist monk, devised a clock operated by dripping water that powered a wheel to make one complete revolution every twenty-four hours. The accuracy of this ancient clock compares with the precision of the most modern of clocks today. Scientists today are still trying to understand the
“how” of Yi Xing’s invention.

“Modern Marvels” and similar TV documentaries give me a deeper appreciation of the jewels that lie in our past. Nehemiah’s call to the inhabitants of Jerusalem is a spiritual jewel in our past. Nehemiah challenged the Israelites to remember the LORD’s mighty acts of love toward them in spite of their ancestors’ unfaithfulness.

Israel’s Past

Nehemiah’s concern for Jerusalem went beyond merely rebuilding the broken walls of the city. If the nation was to have complete restoration, the lives of the people would also need to be rebuilt. The effects of war and famine had wreaked physical havoc on the city’s inhabitants. Poverty and dire social conditions were the order of the day. Added to this was the separation and displacement of family members and friends as a result of captivity. Many of these families who had recently returned from captivity would now be faced with the challenges of reuniting and starting their lives over. Perhaps even worse was the spiritual and moral depression brought on by the physical destruction and vandalism of the Temple. Nehemiah had not arrived a day too soon.

After Nehemiah led in rebuilding the city walls, he then registered the families of the community and Temple leaders and made a head count of all the farm animals and other livestock. It was at this point that Ezra the priest (see Nehemiah 8) appeared as the community minister and assembled the people at the city’s Water Gate for a covenant ceremony. Ezra along with the Levites and the people participated in the public reading of the Law, offered prayers of confession and thanksgiving, and openly celebrated the Festival of Booths. This sacred and holy celebration marked the dawn of a new day in the life of this war-torn nation.

The prayer we read from Nehemiah 9 offers a model prayer for us today. Some of the events may be time-bound for that period, but the flow of the prayer offers us insight into human nature and God’s gracious love toward us. The prayer begins with a call first to recognize the sovereignty of God. The people were asked to “Stand up and bless the LORD your God” (verse 5). Recognizing the worthiness of God is the best way to begin our prayers. The awesomeness of God reminds us that in the midst of our most pressing needs, we stand before the Creator and Supreme Ruler of the universe. The question for me has always been not “How big is your problem?” but “How big is your God?”

Ezra’s prayer next acknowledged that regardless of Israel’s tragic and devastating history, nothing had escaped the ever-present and all-seeing eye of God. The Lord “saw the affliction of our ancestors in Egypt and heard their cry at the Reed Sea” (verse 9). Furthermore, God “knew that they [Pharaoh and his cohorts] had acted arrogantly against our ancestors” (verse 10). Knowing that God knows our innermost needs and concerns gives us hope. Reality has a way of challenging our faith, especially in times of grave need and tragedy. However,
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would you do differently?

Israel's Confession

A first step toward healing in overcoming any problem begins when we acknowledge and accept the reality of the problem. We see this played out in twelve-step groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous. The purpose and mission of AA is to help people recover and maintain sobriety from the effects of alcoholism. Through a series of group sessions and shared experiences, individual A.A. group members look deeply within themselves and honestly acknowledge their dependency upon alcohol. A fundamental step towards sobriety is for the person to stand up and openly admit in the group that he or she is an alcoholic. This simple act is a milestone because it brings the person into the reality of his or her failed past and lays the foundation for the next step.

Likewise, confession is a first step toward spiritual health. It was here that the people of Israel took ownership of their spiritual and moral downfall. We have to admire their openness in admitting before God that “our ancestors acted arrogantly. They were stubborn and wouldn’t obey your commandments” (Nehemiah 9:16). Ezra did not try and hide the sins of the people or pretend that they did not know the seriousness of the problem. In truth, Israel knew that disobeying and rejecting God was not in their best interest. They did not blindly fall into the sins that led them into a life of ruin and public shame. Recognizing and accepting the truth of their spiritual condition before God and their violations

How have your past experiences affected and changed your life? What
to covenant living would eventually help them to see the merciful and forgiving hand of God.

Part of Israel’s spiritual problem was not so much that they were arrogant and stubborn, but that they simply “didn’t remember the wonders that [God] accomplished in their midst” (verse 17). This was not as much a heart problem as it was a head problem. We might call it an honest mistake, though it carried with it dire consequences. Somewhere along the way, the people had forgotten the magnificent things God had done in their lives. Experience has taught me that the farther away we get from an occurrence, the more it begins to fade in our memory. On the other hand, these Israelites may have just used selective memory in remembering God’s love towards them. Whatever the case, the passing of time had caused them to alienate and separate themselves from God.

Verse 17 acknowledges, “You are a God ready to forgive.” This should have been a point of joy and jubilation. We must never minimize the gift of forgiveness. God’s forgiveness grows out of God’s love towards us. It is God’s free gift to us. We humans can neither earn nor manufacture it. Romans 5:8 says that “God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” The tragedy is that when people choose to reject this gift of forgiveness, they make void the death of Christ in their lives.

The last sentence in verse 17 gives us a clear and powerful picture of God’s enduring and everlasting love. It simply says, “You didn’t forsake them.” Don’t overlook this profound insight! Ezra wanted the people to understand that Israel’s beginning and very existence did not depend upon their efforts but on God’s grace and provision. In spite of all that Israel did (or did not do), the Lord’s love prevailed. Even in captivity, God sent prophets to speak comfort and hope into their bleak conditions. Realizing God’s constant presence in all of life’s experiences empowers us to withstand the worst of life’s circumstances.

**How do confessional prayers draw you closer to God?**

**Israel’s Commitment**

This covenant prayer made a powerful impact on both leader and people. It was not just the reading of a litany but a serious and holy call to action. The message was clear. God had been good to Israel and the people needed to return to God. God’s great and mighty acts toward them served as evidence of how much God loved them. When we carefully study this prayer in its entirety (verses 5-38), we see a candid account of God’s goodness to Israel over against the stubborn and arrogant ways of their ancestors. God was forever giving and blessing while Israel was forever receiving and rebelling. It was an unbalanced and lopsided relationship, yet through it all God was forever good and faithful. God still is.

In verse 32, the people acknowledge God as “our God, great and mighty and awesome.” The word “our” signifies a real sense of personal ownership. God is not just another of many deities, but our
God who is great, mighty, and awesome. These adjectives suggest a level of reverence and adoration. Long years of captivity and Babylonian exile had convicted them of the knowledge that the only hope for a brighter day would be found in God. It was a marvelous insight that promised to restore the nation back into wholeness and covenant fellowship.

When God becomes “our” God and not merely a casual centerpiece of weekly worship, radical changes begin to occur in us. When I joined my local church at age 13, I felt an obligation as a new church member to start acting “church-like” in my thinking and behavior. Church people regularly attend church, read the Bible, and participate in church activities. I felt the need to do this because, after all, this is what church people do. Right? In retrospect I recall spending long periods of time agonizingly trying to play out the role of these traditional expectations. Thankfully, years of nurture and support by a loving congregation brought me into a personal relationship with God in which God became “my” Lord and Savior. This spiritual connection moved me from casual fellowship to desired fellowship and communion with a living Savior.

Conviction leads to commitment. This was the case with Israel. The word “convict” in its biblical context essentially means to reprove or convince. A convicted person is someone who is convinced about the truth or error of a particular matter. This conviction can be based on internal or external evidence. A person just knows that they know. Jesus told his disciples, “And He [the Holy Spirit], when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:8, NASB). Israel was convinced that sin had brought them into social and spiritual captivity and that God was their deliverer in spite of past wrongs. The knowledge and evidence of things hoped for but not seen had led the officials and people to make a public declaration of their faith (verse 38).

Take time this week to reflect on your past life journey. Look at those times in which God’s hand was active whether you realized it at the time or not. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you and then convict you. An honest look in the rearview mirror will show you how far you have come in light of where you are going.

What encourages you to become more committed in your walk with God?

Mighty God, we acknowledge and remember your wonderful deeds of love towards us. Convict us and forgive us of our past wrongs so that we might become the body of Christ in the world today; in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.