

CAPITOL STUDIES

MARCH 9, 2022 • WEEK 11



NEHEMIAH: THE CIVIL SERVANT FROM SUSANNA

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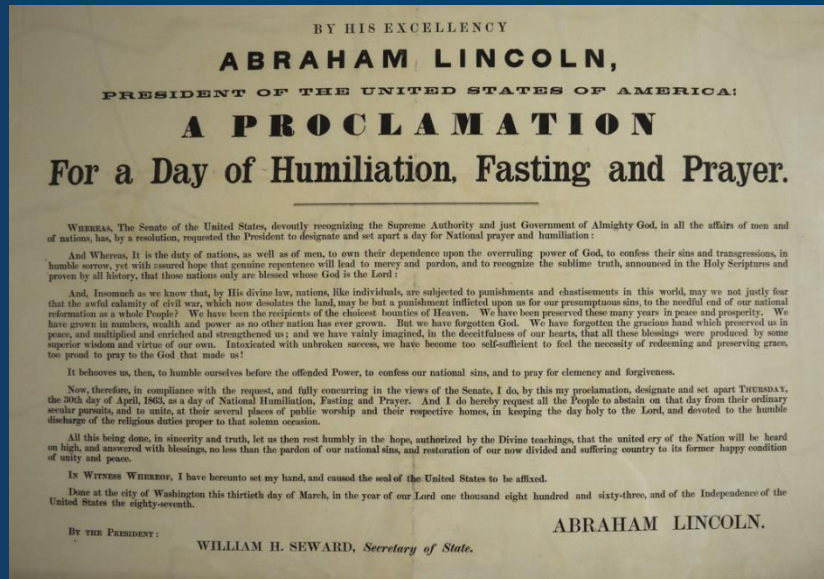
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Verse of the Week

Nehemiah 9:17b
But You are a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in loving-kindness; and You did not forsake them.

Nehemiah's Covenant God



IN 1863 AT THE HEIGHT OF THE CIVIL WAR, President Abarham Lincoln issued this proclamation for a day of “humiliation, fasting, and prayer,” in order for citizens to focus their minds on God and ask for His forgiveness of their sins and request His divine guidance: “Whereas, the Senate of the United States, devoutly recognizing the Supreme Authority and just Government of Almighty God, in all the affairs of men and of nations, has, by a resolution, requested the President to designate and set apart a day for National prayer and humiliation.

“And whereas it is the duty of nations as well as of men, to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions, in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord....

Pastor Arin Hess
Chaplain, Capitol Studies



“...And, insomuch as we know that, by His divine law, nations like individuals are subjected to punishments and chastisements in this world, may we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war, which now desolates the land, may be but a punishment, inflicted upon us, for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end of our national reformation as a whole People? We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us!

“It behooves us then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.”¹

INTRODUCTION

As Abraham Lincoln demonstrated, honest remembrance and humble return are the appropriate steps to restoring covenant relationship with the Lord. In today’s study, Nehemiah will lead Israel in doing the same.

I. PREPARING FOR WORSHIP, PRACTICING WORSHIP

Nehemiah 9:1-4

Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt upon them. ²The descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. ³While they stood in their place, they read from the book of the law of the Lord their God for a fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the Lord their God. ⁴Now on the Levites’ platform stood Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani and Chenani, and they cried with a loud voice to the Lord their God.²

A. Time

It was the 24th day of the month, just two days after finishing the Feast of Booths. The sinfulness of the people had been clearly affirmed through the Day of Atonement. The Feast of Booths then demonstrated the people’s utter dependence on God for their day-to-day existence. Now, a vivid consciousness of past failures and a renewed awareness of Almighty God prompted them to take this moment seriously. Sorrow for their sins and the sins of their forefathers replaced celebration and festivity.



B. Fasting

Fasting is denying oneself food to focus undivided attention on real needs. The Israelites' feasting turned into fasting. This self-discipline led to clearer thinking and allowed them to give full attention to their spiritual needs. Their souls yearned to draw closer to God. The pressing conviction of their sin turned their hearts toward Him in confession. "Fasting without prayer is a body without a soul, a worthless carcass."³ "He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion" (Proverbs 28:13).

C. Clothing

Sackcloth is the clothing of mourning. The Israelites wore sackcloth as a symbol that real sorrow was being expressed inwardly, but also outwardly and visibly, so others would know.

D. Separation

The Jews had previously joined in the idolatrous worship of their pagan neighbors, so God judged them by sending them into captivity. God heard their prayers for release, and now they were back in Jerusalem. However, they had allowed worshippers of false gods to be a part of their city. These "foreigners" were pulling the Jews away from pure and singular devotion to the one true God. God's people had ignored the corruption that was beginning to seep into their city and their own personal lives. They had not recognized the iniquity and idolatry which contaminated their world. Now, they knew they needed to separate from these idolaters and their idols. This was proof of genuine repentance. In our world, we also see Christians who are only half-hearted in their devotion to the Lord. They want heaven and their "idols" of this present world, too. "Separation without devotion to the Lord becomes isolation, but devotion without separation is hypocrisy."⁴

E. Standing

The Israelites stood because they wanted to show reverence to God and give full attention to the reading of His Word. Now they were ready to worship. They knew they owed God everything, and they recognized His authority in their lives. "They read in the book of the law, which is very proper on fasting days, that, in the glass of the law, we may see our deformities and defilements, and know what to acknowledge and what to amend."⁵ For three hours they listened to the Scriptures. This kindled spontaneous prayer of genuine repentance and confession that continued for another three hours. "Little time in the Word means little consciousness of one's sin. Much time in the Word brings much consciousness of sin in one's life which promotes repentance as it did in our text."⁶ When a heart truly desires to be right with God, there is humble worship in Scripture reading and prayer.





II. FAILURES OF ISRAEL, FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

The history of Israel detailed in this chapter reiterates the stubborn arrogance of the people despite the lovingkindness and tender mercies of their God. Though the people vacillated between good and evil, throughout this record we can clearly see numerous truths about God that did not, and will not, change.⁷

Nehemiah 9:5-31

Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah and Pethahiah, said, "Arise, bless the Lord your God forever and ever! O may Your glorious name be blessed and exalted above all blessing and praise!"

His Name: When Moses asked about His name in Exodus 3:14, the LORD declared Himself to be the "I Am Who I Am." This means He is Sovereign, Self-Existent, Eternal, Immutable, Omnipotent, Omniscient, Omnipresent, and Unequaled.

^{6a} *You alone are the Lord.*

His Uniqueness: This truth was emphasized daily when the Israelite said, "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4). This is the first part of the Shema, a confession of the Jewish faith. According to rabbinical law, it was to be recited morning and evening.

^{6b} *You have made the heavens, the heaven of heavens with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to all of them and the heavenly host bows down before You.*

His Power as Creator: God alone has power to create from nothing. He alone gives life. "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Genesis 1:27).

⁷ *You are the Lord God, Who chose Abram and brought him out from Ur of the Chaldees, and gave him the name Abraham.* ⁸ *You found his heart faithful before You, and made a covenant with him to give him the land of the Canaanite, of the Hittite and the Amorite, of the Perizzite, the Jebusite and the Girgashite—to give it to his descendants.*

His Grace: This began with the choice of Abraham and his descendants and continued throughout God's relationship with His chosen people. God's grace is seen in many of His other attributes as well. "For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace" (John 1:16).

^{8b} *And You have fulfilled Your promise,*

His Faithfulness: God is faithful to keep His promises. "The LORD's lovingkindness indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22-23).



^{8c}for You are righteous

His Holiness: God’s holiness demands perfection. Our “perfection” is only possible when we are covered in the righteousness of Jesus. “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

⁹You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry by the Red Sea.... ²⁶But they became disobedient and rebelled against You, and cast Your law behind their backs and killed Your prophets who had admonished them so that they might return to You, and they committed great blasphemies. ²⁷Therefore You delivered them into the hand of their oppressors who oppressed them, but when they cried to You in the time of their distress, You heard from heaven, and according to Your great compassion You gave them deliverers who delivered them from the hand of their oppressors.... ³¹Nevertheless, in Your great compassion You did not make an end of them or forsake them, for You are a gracious and compassionate God.

His Compassion: It is a great comfort to know that God cares about us personally. “Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows” (Matthew 10:29-31).

¹⁰Then You performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his servants and all the people of his land; for You knew that they acted arrogantly toward them and made a name for Yourself as it is this day. ¹¹You divided the sea before them, so they passed through the midst of the sea on dry ground; and their pursuers You hurled into the depths, like a stone into raging waters.

His Power as Conqueror: When there is no way, God can make a way. “But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us” (Romans 8:37).

¹²And with a pillar of cloud You led them by day, and with a pillar of fire by night to light for them the way in which they were to go.

His Guidance: Our problems begin when we do not walk in God’s way. “All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way” (Isaiah 53:6). “In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight” (Proverbs 3:6).

¹³Then You came down on Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven; You gave them just ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments. ¹⁴So You made known to them Your holy sabbath, and laid down for them commandments, statutes and law, through Your servant Moses.

His Word: We often fail to recognize what a treasure God’s Word is. “Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I might not sin against You” (Psalm 119:11). “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105).





¹⁵You provided bread from heaven for them for their hunger, You brought forth water from a rock for them for their thirst, and You told them to enter in order to possess the land which You swore to give them.... ^{20b}Your manna You did not withhold from their mouth, and You gave them water for their thirst. ²¹Indeed, forty years You provided for them in the wilderness and they were not in want; their clothes did not wear out, nor did their feet swell.

His Provision: The nineteenth-century missionary to China J. Hudson Taylor is often quoted as saying something to this effect: “God’s work done in God’s way will never lack God’s supply.”⁸ “And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19).

¹⁶But they, our fathers, acted arrogantly; they became stubborn and would not listen to Your commandments. ¹⁷They refused to listen, and did not remember Your wondrous deeds which You had performed among them; so they became stubborn and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. But You are a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness; and You did not forsake them. ¹⁸Even when they made for themselves a calf of molten metal and said, ‘This is your God Who brought you up from Egypt,’ and committed great blasphemies,

His Forgiveness: “Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the LORD, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon” (Isaiah 55:7). The LORD willingly released them of their debt and pardoned their iniquities.

¹⁹You, in Your great compassion, did not forsake them in the wilderness; the pillar of cloud did not leave them by day, to guide them on their way, nor the pillar of fire by night, to light for them the way in which they were to go. ²⁰You gave Your good Spirit to instruct them,

His Presence: “I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5b). The Holy Spirit takes up residence in the life of the believer when one becomes a child of God (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). The shekinah (dwelling) glory is the divine presence of the Lord, which is with us even today.

²²You also gave them kingdoms and peoples, and allotted them to them as a boundary. They took possession of the land of Sihon the king of Heshbon and the land of Og the king of Bashan. ²³You made their sons numerous as the stars of heaven, and You brought them into the land which You had told their fathers to enter and possess. ²⁴So their sons entered and possessed the land. And You subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and You gave them into their hand, with their kings and the peoples of the land, to do with them as they desired. ²⁵They captured fortified cities and a fertile land. They took possession of houses full of every good thing, hewn cisterns, vineyards, olive groves, fruit trees in abundance. So they ate, were filled and grew fat, and reveled in Your great goodness.



His Blessing: “It is the blessing of the LORD that makes rich, and He adds no sorrow to it” (Proverbs 10: 22). Do not forget that obedience brings blessing.

²⁸But as soon as they had rest, they did evil again before You; therefore You abandoned them to the hand of their enemies, so that they ruled over them. When they cried again to You, You heard from heaven, and many times You rescued them according to Your compassion, ²⁹And admonished them in order to turn them back to Your law. Yet they acted arrogantly and did not listen to Your commandments but sinned against Your ordinances, by which if a man observes them he shall live. And they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck, and would not listen. ³⁰However, You bore with them for many years, and admonished them by Your Spirit through Your prophets, yet they would not give ear. Therefore You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands.

His Justice: “Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?” (Genesis 18:25b). Because God is holy, His justice is perfect justice.

III. ADMISSION OF THE PEOPLE, AGREEMENT OF THE PEOPLE

Nehemiah 9:32-38

“Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and lovingkindness, do not let all the hardship seem insignificant before You, which has come upon us, our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers and on all Your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria to this day.

³³However, You are just in all that has come upon us; for You have dealt faithfully, but we have acted wickedly. ³⁴For our kings, our leaders, our priests and our fathers have not kept Your law or paid attention to Your commandments and Your admonitions with which You have admonished them. ³⁵But they, in their own kingdom, with Your great goodness which You gave them, with the broad and rich land which You set before them, did not serve You or turn from their evil deeds. ³⁶Behold, we are slaves today, and as to the land which You gave to our fathers to eat of its fruit and its bounty, behold, we are slaves in it. ³⁷Its abundant produce is for the kings whom You have set over us because of our sins; they also rule over our bodies and over our cattle as they please, so we are in great distress. ³⁸“Now because of all this we are making an agreement in writing; and on the sealed document are the names of our leaders, our Levites and our priests.”

The Jewish remnant wanted to renew their relationship with YAHWEH God. He had demonstrated His covenant loyalty and His faithfulness to His intrinsic nature down through their history. Before they could go forward in this relationship, God wanted them to agree that He had acted fairly regarding their sin. To confess means to say the same thing that God says about our sin, to agree with Him. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).





We are much like the children of Israel. We often “want to try to twist God’s promises to realize all the benefits of His Faithfulness and Goodness without first embracing His Justice. [We] treat God as a rabbit’s foot [we] can rub for good luck; or as a box of fortune cookies where [we] pluck one out each morning and name and claim some sweet promise. God will not allow Himself to be played in that way.”⁹

It is only because of God’s mercies that we are not totally consumed, that we have hope at all. The one petition that Nehemiah and the people made to God was “Do not let all the hardship seem insignificant before You.” They knew they deserved the “hardship,” yet they appealed to God’s mercy and compassion. They willingly agreed to keep their part of the covenant by obeying God and serving Him in truth. They confirmed this promise with their written signature and seal.

God cares about our troubles. He puts a limit on the severity and length of necessary discipline. Does God really understand what I am going through? Does He see? Has He forgotten me? Does He care? Go to the Gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) and see the compassion of Jesus in action. Look at how His heart goes out to those in need. His heart goes out to you, too.

CONCLUSION

God never changes. He will always act in a manner consistent with His character. He is never going to stop being Who He is. “Our God is a glorious God (Neh. 9:5). He is powerful (v. 6), faithful (v. 8), and concerned about the needs of His people (v. 9). He is a pardoning God (vv. 17–19, 31), who is long-suffering when we sin (vv. 21, 30) but who chastens if we rebel (vv. 26ff). He is a generous God (vv. 24–25, 35), who gives us far more than we deserve. He is a God who keeps His promises even if we are unfaithful. Surely this God deserves our loving obedience! Perhaps the time has come for a new beginning.”¹⁰

I challenge you to set aside an afternoon, find a place where you can be alone, and compose a prayer using the model in chapter 9 of Nehemiah. Write it out, taking each of these four dimensions in order: Looking up, Looking back, Looking in, and Looking forward!

Look up in worship to Jesus. Look back on your past life—the good and the bad. Give thanks for the blessings. Now look into your heart and determine what you need to humbly confess to God and ask His forgiveness. Then look forward. Pray for God’s wisdom, direction, and grace to obey His will for your life.

Pastor Arin Hess

FOOTNOTES

1. <https://wallbuilders.com/proclamation-humiliation-fasting-prayer-1863/>
2. All Scripture quotations, unless noted, are taken from the *New American Standard Bible, 1995 Update*.
3. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, Hendrickson, 1994, pg. 636.
4. Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Determined*, Victor Books, 1996, pg. 118.
5. *Ibid.*
6. John G. Butler, *Nehemiah: The Wall Builder*, LBC Publications, 1998, pg. 231.
7. *Ibid.*, pg. 231-242.
8. Though this quote is widely shared, it is hard to find any record that J. Hudson Taylor actually said it in these words. However, J. Hudson Taylor did say something very similar: "If the Word taught me anything, it taught me to have no connection with debt. I could not think that God was poor, that He was short of resources, or unwilling to supply any want of whatever work was really His. It seemed to me that if there were lack of funds to carry on work, then to that degree, in that special development, or at that time, it could not be the work of God" (J. Hudson Taylor, *A Retrospect: Third Edition*, China Inland Mission, Chapter XV, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/26744/26744-h/26744-h.htm>).
9. Paul Apple, *BibleOutlines.com*, pg. 133.
10. Wiersbe, *Be Determined*, pg. 118.

Personal Study Notes

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Verse of The Week

Nehemiah 9:17b
But You are a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in loving-kindness; and You did not forsake them.



WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

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