

Dr. Tiberius Rata, Ezra-Nehemiah

Session 10, Nehemiah 9-10

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This is Dr. Tiberius Rata's teaching on Ezra and Nehemiah. It is session 10, Nehemiah 9-10.

Please open your Bibles to Nehemiah chapter 9. In chapter 9, the central motif is God and what He has done.

Actually, the chapter is probably one of the longest recorded prayers in the Bible, starting in verse 1.

1 Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads. **2** And the Israelites^a separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. **3** And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day; for another quarter of it they made confession and worshiped the LORD their God.

And then in verse 4, we have a group of Levites and five. And the Bible says, they said, Stand up and bless the Lord your God from everlasting to everlasting. Blessed be your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise.

And then you have a switch to the direct language.

6^b "You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you.

Remember, both Ezra and Nehemiah were men and women of prayer. And now the leaders follow their examples. And the day of feasting were followed by days of fasting.

And now you have the people reading the law, confessing their sins, worshipping the Lord. And in this prayer that they begin here in chapter 9, again, everything revolves around God. It's kind of like a theological lesson.

Who is God? First, God is eternal. He is from everlasting to everlasting. He has no beginning, no end.

Again, this is not a new concept. People have known that before. The consistent theme shows that God is the true God and the Creator God.

1 Chronicles 16, Psalm 90, Revelation 1:8. Not only is God eternal, but there is no one true God except God Himself. You are the Lord alone. You are Yahweh alone.

It's an emphatic affirmation of God's uniqueness. Not only that, but God is the Creator God. You have the words heaven, earth, seas.

All these words would have reminded people of Genesis 1, which talks about the creation account. Not only is God eternal, He is the only true God. He is the Creator God.

But He is the one who sustains His creation. And as a result, creation should worship God. And the prayer continues to show that not only is God great and worthy to be praised.

Again, back at the beginning. Blessed be Your glorious name which is exalted above all blessing and praise. You are the Lord.

You alone. You have made heaven and the heaven of heavens. Not only that, but then it continues, God chose and cared for Israel.

Even though some don't like this idea of God choosing, the doctrine of election is ever present in Scripture. And in their prayer, they are reminded of that.

7 You are the LORD, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham. **8** You found his heart faithful before you, and made with him the covenant to give to his offspring the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite. And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous.

So again, in the prayer, they continue to praise God.

In this case, for being the one who chose Abraham. Again, the doctrine of election is very, very important. God didn't choose Abraham because of who he was, but because of who God was.

And He is the God who kept His promise. And He is the God who sees, starting in verse 9,

9“ And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea, **10** and performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants and all the people of his land, for you knew that they acted arrogantly against our fathers. And you made a name for yourself, as it is to this day. **11** And you divided the sea before them,

So now, the prayer moves through history. And now moves from Abraham to the Exodus event, which is again the most important act of God for the Israelites.

Whenever you see in the Old Testament, they talk about God. Ultimately, they will refer to the God who brought them out of Egypt. The Exodus event is very, very important.

You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, and heard their cry at the Red Sea, and performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants and all the people of his land. For you knew, they acted arrogantly against our fathers, and you made a name for yourselves as to this day, and you divided the sea before them.

So they went through the midst of the sea on dry land, and you cast their pursuers into the depth as a stone into mighty waters. Not only did God give them victory in Exodus, by the way, a great historical event, but God led them in the wilderness.

Verse 12, by a pillar of cloud you led them in the day, and by a pillar of fire in the night to light for them the way in which they should go.

Again, God is not just a God who calls them out. God is a God who leads them every single day.

13 You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments, **14** and you made known to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses your servant.

Again, this is kind of a history lesson, but it's in the form of a prayer. And what you see here is a contrast between the God who is faithful and the people who are not.

It says, starting in verse 15,

15 You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger and brought water for them out of the rock for their thirst, and you told them to go in to possess the land that you had sworn to give them.

And you might think, well, now what follows is, and the people obeyed.

But no, God's faithfulness is contrasted with the people's faithlessness. Starting in verse 16,

16 "But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments. **17** They refused to obey and were not mindful of the

wonders that you performed among them, but they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt.⁵ But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them.

See, unlike the false gods of the nations that are blind, deaf, and mute, according to Psalm 115, Yahweh is a God who sees.

God is a God who hears and delivers His people through miraculous signs and wonders. He is a God who leads in the wilderness, gives them manna from heaven, water from the rock. And even though they don't obey, God does not give up on them.

And we know the Exodus story that Moses intercedes for his people, and God relents of destroying them. The prayer of Moses is very, very important there. But we see a God who continues to love and forgive.

A God who is gracious, merciful, patient, and loving. And they see that, and they recognize that in the prayer, they exalt this God who cared and chose Israel. Not only that, but God led Israel, again, in the verses we just read.

During the day, through a pillar of cloud, and by night, in a pillar of fire. And you might say, wow, these guys will now obey God and worship Him. No, actually the prayer reminds us what they did next.

Even when they had made for themselves a golden calf, and said, This is your God who brought us out of Egypt and had committed great blasphemies. You and your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness. Think about how grave the sin was of the golden calf.

After Israel and Yahweh say, I do, I do, we will be faithful to the covenant. The Israelites make the golden calf and worship the golden calf. Where did they get that idea? Well, they got it from the Egyptians.

From the God Apis, which was a God in the form of a bull. And they said, this is the God who took you out of Egypt. Right after they say, I do's, they go after other gods.

How grave was this sin? Some would say, it's like sleeping with a prostitute on your wedding night. You just said, I do's. You just said, I do, and instead of sleeping with my spouse, I'm going to go sleep with a prostitute.

That's how grave the sin was. Because if you read Exodus, right after they say, I do, they actually go after other gods. And yet, God did not give up on them.

The pillar of cloud to lead them in the way did not depart from them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night to light for them the way by which they should go. **20** You gave your good Spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst. **21** Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness, and they lacked nothing. Their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell.

22 “And you gave them kingdoms and peoples and allotted to them every corner. So they took possession of the land of Sihon king of Heshbon and the land of Og king of Bashan.

Again, a contrast between the people's faithlessness and God's faithfulness to lead and provide for His people.

Not only did God provide food, but He gave them victory over their enemies. Chapter 9 is a beautiful reminder of who God is. But because God is loving and merciful, He also is a God who rebukes Israel.

The most loving thing you can do for someone is to tell them the truth. And this is exactly what God does. He rebukes them.

You multiplied, starting in verse 22. Even though they were faithless, the Bible says,

23 You multiplied their children as the stars of heaven, and you brought them into the land that you had told their fathers to enter and possess. **24** So the descendants went in and possessed the land, and you subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gave them into their hand, with their kings and the peoples of the land, that they might do with them as they would. **25** And they captured fortified cities and a rich land, and took possession of houses full of all good things, cisterns already hewn, vineyards, olive orchards and fruit trees in abundance. So they ate and were filled and became fat and delighted themselves in your great goodness.

26 “Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies.

What did God do? God punished them.

27 Therefore you gave them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer. And in the time of their suffering they cried out to you and you heard them from heaven, and according to your great mercies you gave them saviors who saved them from the hand of their enemies. **28** But after they had rest they did evil again before you, and you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them. Yet when they turned and cried to you, you heard from heaven,

and many times you delivered them according to your mercies.

All this history lesson really goes back to the book of Judges, where you have that cycle of apostasy, where people sin, and God sends an oppressor, either the Midianites or a foreign nation, the Philistines sometimes, and then what do the people do? Then the people cry out to God and repent, and God in his mercy sends a judge to deliver. Remember, those judges were not like our judges today, wearing black robes and saying guilty, not guilty. No, these were civil leaders, these were military leaders, and these judges freed them from their oppression.

And what do the people do? Then they return to their sin, and in the book of Judges, you have these seven cycles of apostasy, and that's what this prayer reminds the people of, the cycles of apostasy. But every time they cry out to God, God is loving and merciful and comes back and frees them. And you warn them, starting in verse 29, in order to turn them back to your law.

Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your rules, which if a person does them, he shall live by them, and they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey. **30** Many years you bore with them and warned 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. **31** Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.

So the cycle of apostasy continued, and instead of judges, God now sends prophets and said, Look, you have sinned, turn to me, repent. But they wouldn't do it, so God sent them into exile, their northern kingdom to the Assyrians, the southern kingdom to the Babylonians, but then he brought them back to the land. It's all about God.

A God who punishes sin, who rebukes his people, but ultimately a God who gives grace. Verses 38-31, that's what it talks about. Nevertheless, in your great mercies, you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.

So because God did that in the past, in prayer they now appeal to God, Lord, I know you have done that in the past, do that for us in the present the same. That's why verse 32 says,

32 "Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love, let not all the hardship seem little to you that has come upon us, upon our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and all your people, since the time of the kings of Assyria until this day. **33** Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and

we have acted wickedly. **34** Our kings, our princes, our priests, and our fathers have not kept your law or paid attention to your commandments and your warnings that you gave them. **35** Even in their own kingdom, and amid your great goodness that you gave them, and in the large and rich land that you set before them, they did not serve you or turn from their wicked works. **36** Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves. **37** And its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress.

38^e “Because of all this we make a firm covenant in writing; on the sealed document are the names of our princes, our Levites, and our priests.

So really the prayer ends with this idea that, hey, because of all this, we are ready to make a covenant again. And we are ready to not just make the covenant, but we are ready to sign on the dotted line.

We want to seal, and we want to show this commitment in writing. But if you go back, really the whole chapter is about God. This is a good summary of God's action, of who God is and what He has done.

He's a God, not just a Creator God, but He's a God who makes a covenant with His people. He's a God who hears the prayer of His people. And to bring them out of Egypt, He has to do a lot of signs and wonders.

But not only that, God gives them laws. The Bible says, good laws. He leads them, He gives them manna from heaven, leads them with His Spirit, sustains His people, and ultimately God gives victory.

Because of who God is and what He has done, they said, we want to sign a covenant. We want to go back and we want to write down the promises, and we want to seal the covenant.

So chapter 10 is all about the covenant, the signers, the promises, and the stipulations.

Earlier I showed you a seal of Temah from chapter 7. So, on these seals you have the names of Nehemiah, the son of Hacaliah, Zechariah, and others here. But the list includes 21 priests, 17 Levites, and 44 lay leaders. All these are listed here in chapter 10.

They want to make a covenant with God. And in these promises, they are also making, in this covenant they are making promises. And the promises are, interestingly enough, not brand new.

They made these promises before, verses 28 and 29.

28 “The rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have knowledge and understanding, **29** join with their brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s Law that was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord and his rules and his statutes.

See, they heard the law, and now they said, we want to obey the law, and we want to make a covenant.

And not only do we want to make it in word, but we want to seal it in a document. And the people's oath was reinforced by even a curse. Williamson, in his commentary, says that this was probably the ritual acceptance of some form of judgment, which they knew would justly fall upon them if they transgressed the terms of their undertaking.

They make promises to do what? Well, the stipulations are in verses 30 to 39, and has to do again with intermarriage. We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons. And if the peoples of the land bring in goods or any grain on the Sabbath day, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath day or on a holy day.

See, what happens here, the stipulations have to do with a few things. First of all, with intermarriage. Again, this intermarriage with other nations has been a problem.

And now they say, again, we make a covenant that we will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons. Again, this is not the first time the issue of intermarriage is being addressed, but this is being brought back. But notice, it goes further than that.

When you make a covenant with God, when the transformation appears, how you conduct business changes. And that's what happens here in verse 31.

If the peoples of the land bring in goods or grains on the Sabbath day, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath day.

It is a holy day. See, when there's a change that happens, every aspect of life changes. Personal, business, and not only that, but what they give to God changes.

And what they do with their money changes. That's what you have in verse 32.

We take on ourselves the obligation to give a yearly third, a third part of the shekel for the service of the house of God.

Now, something interesting here. The law said a half of shekel, but these guys say a third of the shekel. Now, this can very easily be explained because of the monetary system.

The money system in Persia would have been different than in the past. So probably it's like the US dollar versus the euro. They are not the same.

So that's why probably the change from a half to a third here. But they said, we want to give money for the service of the house of God, for the shekel, for the grains, for everything that's happening in the temple.

Verse 35, they're saying, we obligate ourselves to bring the first fruits of the ground and first fruits of every tree year by year to the house of the Lord.

This was not new. This was in the law. But now they make a covenant they will go back and take care of what they need to take care of in the house of the Lord.

Not only that, verse 38 says, we will bring up the tithe. Again, the law, they will reinstitute the tithe. See, when you make a covenant to obey God, everything changes in relationships, in business, in what you do with your money.

They said, and the last verse is key, we will not neglect the house of our God. Think about you. What do you do with your money? Do you think it's right before God that you pay more for cable TV than what you give to church? Is it right that you pay more for your phone bill than what you give to missionaries? I don't know.

You need before God to ask yourself. I cannot answer that for you, and you cannot answer it for me. But we see here a commitment, a covenant.

And not only do they want to make the covenant, they're going to seal it, and they're going to sign it. And the people want to do what's right, because when you're confronted with the word of God, the word of God, as the book of Hebrews says, is active and living, cutting. And that's what he's doing here, making some key changes, changes that are seen in relationships, in the way they conduct business, in what they do with what God gives them, and what they do with their money.

Change must be a change that is seen not just inward, but it will be seen outwardly as well.

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