

### NEHEMIAH

#### Lesson 12, Chapter 9

Let's review some things before we get into this rather long chapter 9 of Nehemiah. Chapter 8 was essentially about Ezra teaching the assembled crowd of Jews in Jerusalem the Torah, or more specifically the Law of Moses (which is but part of the Torah). Let me remind you that while the terms Torah and The Law are often spoken of as synonymous, in fact they are not the same things. The Torah is the entirety of the first 5 books of the Bible. The Law refers to that part of the Torah found in Leviticus, Numbers, and part of Deuteronomy, which represent the full body of laws and regulations (Tradition says that there 613 of them) that the Lord gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai. So no doubt Ezra and the Levites were instructing the people on the Law.

It needs to be carefully noticed, first, that Ezra is a priest of sorts, but he is NOT the High Priest. Rather he is some kind of unspecified overseer over the entire Temple system and Priesthood, acting as both reformer and final authority. His authority was given to him by King Artaxerxes; so even if according to the Torah the High Priest should have been the highest of all the Jewish religious authorities, the fact is that it wasn't working that way as long as Ezra was alive. And second, Ezra decided to assemble all the people at the Watergate and not at the Temple. Some of this may have been a simple matter of logistics, in that perhaps there would not have been enough room in the Temple courtyard for everyone to meet. However there is also the matter that before him stood not just men but also women and children, and so that presented issues of ritual cleanness, and therefore of who could be allowed in the Temple courtyard. Meeting at the Watergate, a non-religious location, solved all those problems. And third, Ezra was speaking to all the Jews, not just to the leadership (although that would change on the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of the assembly). But he was especially speaking to the common folks.

This idea of teaching the Law to the common citizens as well as the leadership brings home an

important principle that should not get lost since in our study we have focused primarily on the necessity of good leadership as represented by Nehemiah. That principle is this: even though strong and Godly leadership is the linchpin of any society, and especially so for a society set apart for Yehoveh God of Israel, that is no excuse for the common people to shun their individual responsibilities or involvement. The Torah speaks to the formation of a community of God, and so each piece plays its role as a member of the community. When an individual refuses to do his or her part, it weakens the fabric of the community and means someone else has to pick up the slack or has to assume a role that the Lord did not create them to do.

Each one of you before me today, whether in person or listening in, is a member of the community of God, and also a member of your local community. If you are part of a congregation like Seed of Abraham Fellowship or even Torah Class online (for those who have no formal fellowship to attend), then that is your community even more so than the township or city you reside in. And the Torah teaches (and so does the NT as well) that as a member of this community of God you have obligations to the Lord and to your brethren. And while those obligations allow a measure of flexibility and preference on exactly how to contribute to the community, no one is given the option to abdicate that responsibility. I've stated before that scientific research done by the Barna Group exposes how far the Church in general has fallen down on this issue of personal responsibility because on average only 5% of the people of any given fellowship of Believers volunteer their time and talents; and only 20% of the people supply over 80% of the financial support. While Seed of Abraham is significantly above those averages (and I commend you for that), we are by no means where we ought to be and so much more could be done in God's name. Don't get me wrong; I am grateful and excited for how many people contribute to this community. But just as Ezra showed us in chapter 8, each individual is responsible to the Lord and will be held to account for it. You can't hide, you won't be overlooked, and you won't be given a pass by Yehoveh. So it is to your own enlightened self-interest to help shoulder the load in whatever way you can. And young people, that goes for you, too.

One of the responsibilities that each person had who were listening to Ezra was to begin to observe the Biblical Feasts that had fallen into disuse. And that included building a Sukkah. It also included feasting and the duty to provide for those in their community who were otherwise too poor to join in the celebration.

We finished up last time with my explaining another important matter that has become quite confused and divisive over the past centuries; it is the matter of what our English Bibles call holy convocations, and how this extends to a supposed "day of worship". And this matter has

led to all sorts of disharmony not just within the Church, but between Jews, Messianics and gentile Christians. Briefly: when we see the Biblical call for a holy convocation, it is typically thought to be an instruction to go and gather at an assembly of God's worshippers. This is incorrect. In Hebrew the word for convocation is **miqra**, and it means a reading, or a proclamation, and in some instances it can mean a summons. It has no connotation of traveling to an assembly of people. There are primarily two Hebrew terms that deal with assembling: **chag** and **atseret**. **Chag** we discussed last time and that term is used mostly when referring to the 3 Biblical Feasts that require a journey of Hebrews from wherever they are to the Temple in Jerusalem. The term **atseret** is used in the last verse of Nehemiah chapter 8.

<sup>CJB</sup> ***Nehemiah 8:18 Also they read every day, from the first day until the last day, in the scroll of the Torah of God. They kept the feast for seven days; then on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the rule.***

This is referring to the Feast of Sukkot, which is one of the 3 Festivals that require a journey to the Temple. And where we see the word "assembly" in English in our Bibles in verse 18, indeed the Hebrew word is **atseret** and it means to gather for an assembly. So they were there in Jerusalem because the Feast of Sukkot is a **chag** festival; one that requires a journey to an assembly. Then there is the additional instruction to have an assembly "on the 8<sup>th</sup> day" (following the beginning of Sukkot).

This led us to discuss that while Shabbat is to be observed in perpetuity on the 7<sup>th</sup> day of each week, there is NO Biblical instruction (OT or NT) that everyone should assemble on Shabbat as part of that observance. For a few centuries and up to our day the common term used for a communal gathering of Believers on a designated holy day is "the Day of Worship". Thus since Jews still observe Shabbat on Saturday (which we all should do), when they gather together many people seem to think they are observing something called a day of worship. Incorrect; Shabbat is ONLY the day of rest; it is not the day of worship. Christians on the other hand DO have a day of worship, but it is not a directive of God, it is a custom that was commanded by the Roman Emperor Constantine in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. And this day of worship was to be on another newly designated day (designated by the Church) called the Day of the Lord, which is each Sunday. Again: God has NOT ordained any specific weekly day of worship, nor has He excluded any day from worship. Everyday God should be worshipped, individually or communally.

But let me be clear: in no way I am intending to say that it is somehow wrong or inappropriate for Jews to meet together in worship on Shabbat (Saturday), or for Christians to meet together in worship on Sunday. Nor is it somehow meant only for Jews to worship only on Saturdays or only for Christians to worship only on Sundays. We can meet together in communal worship any day and every day (Shabbat included), with God's complete approval. However this entire "day of worship" concept is a contrived, manmade doctrine created to accomplish one goal: to put a wall of separation between Jews and gentiles. It has worked quite well. Seed of Abraham meets on both Saturdays and Sundays to make a point: both days are appropriate for both Jews and gentiles to come together to worship together. And if we decided to do it on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, it would be just as appropriate.

So Jews, especially Messianics, stop this notion that somehow it is more honoring to God to worship Him on Saturday than Sunday. And gentile Christians, stop this notion that it was God who made Sundays a day of worship for Believers in Jesus, and therefore Saturday is for those who don't believe in Messiah and Sunday is for those who do. One day is NOT superior to another to worship the Lord, in private or in a gathering. But you do have every right to your own preferences in this regard. My admonition to you is to not judge anyone on what day or days they choose to have communal worship, because the Lord doesn't.

Let's move on now to chapter 9.

Before we read it, let me begin by explaining that this chapter is essentially a prayer of confession and repentance. It is hard to classify as any specific kind of literature, but it is closer to poetry than anything else. It also greatly resembles the 106<sup>th</sup> Psalm. But if we will listen to this prayer closely, and open our hearts to the Holy Spirit we're going to be reminded of His faithfulness, His power, His love and His salvation in our own lives; not just for an eternal purpose but also oftentimes for deliverance from impossible troubles and woes here on this earth in this present life.

**READ NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 9 all**

This long chapter can be divided rather neatly into 5 parts and it really helps when we can see it. Those parts are: verse 6, Creation. Verses 7-8 Abraham. Verses 9-11 the Exodus. Verses 12-21 the Wilderness Journey. And verses 22 to the end, the Promised Land. This leaves out a possible 6<sup>th</sup> part, but really it is only a preamble to this extensive prayer and that is verses 1-5.

The first verse tells us the timing; it is the 24<sup>th</sup> day of the same month that everything else was happening back in chapter 8, so this is merely a continuation. It is Tishri, the 7<sup>th</sup> month, and the 3 Fall Feasts of ***Yom Teruah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot*** have just concluded. In fact Sukkot only ended 2 days earlier. There is no God-ordained or appointed day after Sukkot until Passover in the 1<sup>st</sup> month, so this meeting and event was Ezra's idea, and immediately we see that this is no joyous occasion that he is calling the people to gather for. The people were to come dressed in sackcloth, with dirt smeared on them (traditional signs of mourning) and they were to not eat; this was to be a fast day.

Here we have a good example of a follower of God (in this case a leader) deciding to hold a special religious event, for a pious reason, and there's not a thing wrong with it. We are NOT restricted from doing things like this provided we do them in the proper spirit and that we don't mischaracterize them or that we replace God-ordained holy days. For instance, at Seed of Abraham we celebrate Hanukkah as a good time to commemorate the advent of Messiah Yeshua. We do not claim it as a "holy day", or as "Biblically ordained", or even as the day Yeshua was born. In fact, most of the symbolism we use comes from Jewish tradition (such as the 9 branch lampstand called a Chanukiah). However since there is no day set aside in the Bible to celebrate the coming of Christ (nor is there a commandment to do so) yet most of us would like to remember it and thank the Lord for sending His Son to us, we have decided to use the occasion of Hanukkah to do this, understanding that we could have just as easily created something else.

Purim is somewhat the same. Purim is a remembrance of when the Jews were saved from annihilation at the hands of the Persians (interestingly today called Iran). Purim is not called for in Holy Scripture, it is not a holy day. It was just a decision by Jewish leaders to have a big party to remember it and to be happy about the result. Since it is based on the one hand on a real event, told to us in the Bible in the Book of Esther, but on the other hand the observance of Purim to commemorate it is entirely manmade and all customs are born of traditions, then is it OK for us to celebrate Purim along with the Jews? Of course. Let us remember that if the Jews had been destroyed, we'd have no Messiah. But Esther, in God's providence, outmaneuvered the evil Haman, and the Jews survived. That sounds like a pretty good reason to me to have a party. And to show solidarity with our Jewish friends after centuries of Christians

doing the opposite is also a good enough reason in itself for us to join in Purim. Now some of the ways it is celebrated today isn't very good (many Jews take it as a time to get roaring drunk), but we don't have to do those things. However we must also never mischaracterize it as God-ordained or holy because it is not.

So Ezra decided that after the end of the 3 Feasts in Tishri, the Jews needed to come together in an attitude of mourning to confess and repent the cause for their exile to Babylon that required a mighty work of God for a return. I want to take the opportunity here to point out yet another Hebrew word used in verse 1 that also means to assemble: **asaph**. It is less used than the other two words **chag** and **atseret**, but nonetheless they all mean to come together in a public assembly. So after the Jews met in front of Ezra at the Watergate on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of Tishri, they learned from the Law of Moses that they were to celebrate Sukkot by building Sukkahs (huts, booths). On the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of Tishri, all but the Jewish leaders were sent home to build these Sukkahs and then a little less than 2 weeks later to celebrate the Feast of Sukkot for 7 days beginning on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Tishri. Now on the 24<sup>th</sup> of Tishri everyone was to return to Jerusalem, assemble, and follow Ezra's instructions to come in a state of mourning. This was one busy month!

It is quite interesting that at this point the genealogical Israelites were to separate themselves from foreigners. However what it literally says is that they were to separate themselves from the "sons of strangers". That is, this was a purely racial division. Remember that having lived in Babylon and then Persia for going on 2 centuries, there had been many mixed marriages formed; but these marriages were not being dissolved as had happened many years earlier (in Ezra chapter 10) before Nehemiah arrived on the scene. So only actual physical descendants of Jacob were allowed to participate in this special event of the 24<sup>th</sup> of Tishri. On the surface this might seem divisive and even bigoted or hurtful; it is anything but. And this is because the framework of this penitent prayer is the story of Israel's beginning at Creation, then the covenant God made with Abraham, then the bondage of Israel in Egypt and finally their Exodus and possession of the Promised Land. So this was to be a prayer gathering that dealt with the Hebrew's natural identity, and it simply didn't involve gentile converts (at least it didn't from Ezra's viewpoint). Why should a gentile convert feel responsible for something wicked that occurred that neither he nor his ancestors ever participated in?

So of the several meanings of the word "Israel" that we find in the Bible, here it is meaning the natural descendants of Jacob and no one else. And the wickedness that would be confessed in prayer is both their own personal sins as well as those of their ancestors. And the term usually employed in the Scriptures to denote sins of ones' ancestors is "iniquities".

Now, standing, the people listened to the Law being read for about 3 hours. After that preparation, which no doubt revealed to them their many sins, for the next 3 hours they prostrated themselves and confessed before the Lord. Leading this along with Ezra were a list of Levites. Once done, they were all ordered to stand, where upon a certain named group of Levites led everyone in this prayer. No doubt the crowd didn't recite the prayer, but like in a Church service the Pastor prays and everyone agrees at points along the way and/or at the end.

Appropriately the first words of the prayer are praise to Yehoveh their God. And I want you to know that every single time we read Lord or Adonai throughout this prayer, what is actually written in the original Hebrew is God's formal name, YHWH. So the first words are identifying YHWH as the Creator, and not some generic god. And thus we begin the first part of the prayer that credits YHWH as the one who created the heavens and the earth and everything associated with them. The term "heaven of heavens" is probably a Hebraism that denotes greatness, majesty or something without peer. The Hebrew word for heaven is **shamayim**, which can be used as both a singular and a plural. And in the Bible **shamayim** is used to mean Heaven as the place where God lives, and also the **heavens** where the stars hang suspended. This can get a little confusing for us because sometimes it is hard to tell if the meaning of the author or editor is the sky and the universe, or if it means God's spiritual dwelling place. Part of the reason for this confusion is because the concept of Heaven as God's dwelling place versus the heavens as the universe of the stars, planets and moon was not entirely differentiated. In some ways they were considered one in the same; this is why God is often pictured in the Scriptures as sometimes riding on a cloud, or inhabiting a mountaintop, things like that.

Let's face it, the reason that modern books written about Heaven are currently so popular is because the Bible tells us almost nothing about it, and thus people (especially older people) have a great desire to know because the reality of Heaven is likely to impact us sooner than later. So some clever writers decide to tell us, in great detail, about something that has not been revealed in God's Word. If I sound a bit skeptical, it is intended. Those kinds of books may be fun to read, but don't put very much stock in them as they are based almost entirely on the author's speculation or imagination, or blowing a single word or phrase in Scripture out of all proportion (and context) to come up with something sensational or falsely reassuring according to our modern sensibilities.

Thus when the last words of verse 6 are ***tsava ha'shamayim***, host of the heavens, then we're not quite sure whether this is referring to the twinkling stars in the sky or to God's angels. Once again, as with the meaning of the word ***shamayim*** itself, the Hebrews didn't entirely differentiate the twinkling stars from angelic spiritual beings; to their minds they could be more or less the same things. With the invention of telescopes we were able to finally see that these objects in the sky weren't spirit beings at all, and so then the challenge of Theologians and translators become to decide when in the Bible ***shamayim*** meant God's dwelling place or only the sky. It is my contention that most of the time we can NOT tell because in the author's mind stars and angels were generally the same things as was God's dwelling place and the sky generally the same things.

Now in verse 7 the prayer leaps forward in time from Creation to the era of Father Abraham. This makes sense because due to Adam and Eve's fall that brought death and sin to this Universe shortly after its Creation in perfection, it was with Abraham that God took the first concrete step towards remedying this problem. And the remedy began by the division of humankind into a people set apart for God (that would become called Hebrews, then eventually Israelites) and everybody else. This passage also acknowledges that it was Yehoveh who did the dividing, electing and separating; it was God's plan to do so, and He chose Abraham as the first member and founder of the Hebrew community.

Abraham was a resident of Ur of the Chaldees (up in Mesopotamia), and God removed him from there. By leaving his land and his father's household Abraham proved his faithfulness. Next God made a covenant with Abraham that gave to Abraham and his descendants land currently occupied by 6 different people groups, who are generally labeled in the Bible as Canaanites. All 6 of these people groups are found in Genesis 15, however there are more groups named there that this verse excludes. But nonetheless it is clear that the historical memory of the Jews of what was promised to them through Abraham remained real and still mattered even after 1400 years had passed. And most important, history proved that the Lord did what He said He'd do: He took this land from the Canaanites and gave it to the descendants of Abraham, the Israelites.

Verse 9 shoots us forward in time yet again to when Israel was in Egypt. The deliverance of Israel from Egypt is burned into the memory of the Hebrews in Ezra's day as perhaps the single most important salvation event in their history; even greater than their relatively recent release from the Babylonian exile. And what we see develop in this history of deliverance from the oppression of Egypt is God's character. We've seen His power explained and demonstrated in many ways, but now His concern and love for Israel and His faithfulness to



bring about all that He has promised is highlighted. God watched over His people, He saw their distress, and He heard their cry for help. He didn't just listen passively as we listen to a recorded song; He didn't watch passively as we might entertain ourselves observing captive ants in an Ant Farm; instead He acted. The Lord performed signs and wonders against all the Egyptians in order to rescue His people. The Lord deemed Egypt as His enemy because the Hebrews were His people. And so the dynamic that God promised to Abraham so many years earlier changed from theory to reality:

<sup>CJB</sup> **Genesis 12:3** *I will bless those who bless you, but I will curse anyone who curses you; and by you all the families of the earth will be blessed."*

At first Egypt blessed the descendants of Abraham, so using Joseph the Lord enabled Egypt to survive a regional famine and then thrive. But later as Egypt turned against the Hebrews by enslaving them, God turned against the Egyptians and in time smote them terribly. Blessing for blessing, curses for curses. Promise fulfilled.

Embedded in this verse is the phrase, "And you won for yourself a name which is yours to this day". Name, **shem**, means a reputation or a set of recognizable attributes. And the reputation that the Lord gained was as a Savior, a Deliverer. As the verse implies, the salvation of Israel from Egypt was not a one-time event. Salvation of His chosen people (as an inherent characteristic of God) remains to this day.

The recounting of the Red Sea crossing that we find here vividly portrays that there is nothing in existence, not even the mighty sea, which can keep God from rescuing those He elects to call His own. In fact when the waters were parted the Lord even dried the pathway so that their passing would be relatively easy for those 3 million frightened and exhausted refugees and their animals. A big lesson is demonstrated in the Red Sea deliverance: when we try to save ourselves we struggle and struggle; 2 steps forward, 1 back; we try one way and then the other. Frustration is our lot. The pathway is hard, and as it turns out, impossible. But when in faith we turn our salvation over to the Lord, that struggle to achieve salvation by our own efforts ends. He does it for us and just gives it to us if we want it. There is no muddy swamp to trudge through, only dried land. The enemy who constantly pursues us and doesn't want to lose us isn't allowed to prevent our deliverance. We cross over, the sea is closed up behind, the pathway is made impassable for Satan, and now we are safe on the other side provided we

stay there. And that is because going back to Egypt on our own accord is always a possibility as salvation doesn't turn us into mindless robots that have lost free will. This is true physically and spiritually, and remains so even through the Millennium when Christ is reigning on earth.

Verse 12 takes the newly redeemed Israel on their journey to the land of promise. God didn't deliver Israel and depart; He stayed to oversee and to guide the way. Whether in darkness or in daylight, the Lord showed them the way they should go. Professor Williamson is the only commentator I know of who spotted a wonderful pattern in these next few verses. It is this: God goes on to provide 1) guidance on their journey to their new home (the pillar of fire and the cloud). 2) Laws for guidance in every aspect of their lives as redeemed people. 3) Sustenance and material provision for the reality of everyday physical life in the harsh Wilderness. And 4) assurance for the promise of the land when they arrive. But then, despite all this, the people rebelled against the Lord. They didn't care for His laws or His provision and instead wanted to turn back to Egypt and have their evil task masters care for them. But in God's continuing mercy He didn't void the covenants He made with Israel (either with Abraham or with Moses), and when the people repented He once again provided 1) guidance on their journey to their new home (the pillar of fire and the cloud). 2) His Spirit for guidance in every aspect of their lives as redeemed people. And 3) Sustenance and material provision for the reality of everyday life in the Wilderness.

I promise you that those who will give their lives to Our Deliverer, Yeshua, can expect the same because He is faithful and He is God.

We'll pick up with verse 13 and Israel's remembrance of their arrival at Mt. Sinai next time.