

NEHEMIAH

Lesson 13, Chapter 9 Continued

We are in the midst of examining Nehemiah chapter 9 and the long, penitent prayer that forms it. And we're going to be camped here for awhile, at least another week, because these passages bring up so many opportunities for application and as a spiritual measuring stick for our lives. So we're going to look not at just what they say, but what effect this message has upon us as individuals and as members of a community, even of a nation. Open your Bibles to Nehemiah Chapter 9 so that you can follow along with me as we review.

This prayer meeting event of chapter 9 has been commanded, at his own discretion, by Ezra the current spiritual leader of Judah. It is happening in the 7th month of the year, Tishri, on the 24th day of the month, only a couple of days after the end of the Biblical Feast of Sukkot. The wall around the city of Jerusalem has been completed only weeks earlier. Thus since Ezra had called for an assembly of the people of Judah on the 1st day of the month, and then because Sukkot (that begins on the 15th of the month) demands a pilgrimage to the Temple, with the addition of this special assembly on the 24th of the same month the Jews have had a very busy few weeks of doing little more than learning God's Torah (mainly the Law), traveling back and forth to the Temple in Jerusalem from their villages, and feasting. There has been little if any time for them to tend to their fields, orchards, vineyards, herds and flocks. So there is a great deal of personal and collective sacrifice involved here in order to observe God's commandments and for the people to be obedient to Ezra.

There are a few important characteristics about this special assembly to keep in mind. First, this was not a God-ordained event. It was Ezra's idea. That is not to be taken as a negative because we have always had the freedom to come together and worship the Lord, or simply to offer up prayers and pleas to Him, at anytime. We don't need a special authorization from God or a Biblically ordained occasion. Second, this prayer assembly was to be one of mourning and repentance. The people were to fast, and they were to wear sackcloth and smear dirt on themselves as customary Jewish signs of grief. Third, all the people were to attend. However only natural hereditary Hebrews were to participate; those who could identify their genealogy back to Jacob. That is, those with a gentile heritage, and thus are converts or made Jews by marriage, were to be excluded from participating. The reason for this is that these natural-born Jews were going to stand before God and accept responsibility for not only their own sins but also for the iniquities of their Hebrew ancestors for the several rebellions against the Lord that had occurred time and again over the centuries. Those with gentile heritage had no ancestral guilt to claim. Fourth, it was the Levite priests along with Ezra who led this prayer assembly; it

was they who recited this long, carefully structured prayer before the crowd. Probably the Levites took turns reading sections of the prayer, as opposed to reading it in unison. This prayer had to have been carefully crafted and written down in advance; it was not spontaneous. And further, the crowd would only have listened, and then agreed by means of an “amen”.

After a preamble that acknowledges who God is (He is YHWH), and that it is He who created the heavens (meaning the Universe) and the earth, verse 7 recounts that it was the Mesopotamian Abraham that God separated away from all other humans on earth to begin a chosen race set apart for Himself. God made a covenant with Abraham and the main thrust of it was to give Abraham and his descendants (the Hebrews) a land of their own. But this land was to be more than merely another nation, as the world was already full of nations. Rather this land was to be the location of the Kingdom of God on earth; and it would represent the Kingdom of God in Heaven. Of course since this land was already populated with what are broadly labeled as Canaanites, 6 named people groups (along with some others) would have to be defeated and expelled. It happened as God promised and the Hebrews, starting with Jacob, were now known as Israelites (Israel being the new name God gave to the patriarch Jacob).

Next in verse 9 the history of the Hebrews continues with their long stint in Egypt; first as welcomed guests, but later as slave labor. Then came the divine rescue; by means of terrible signs and wonders performed against the Pharaoh and all his people, Israel was delivered. They began their journey to the land promised to Abraham, but found themselves trapped against the deep waters of the Red Sea in front, and the vengeful Pharaoh and his army from behind. The Lord opened the sea, allowing His people to pass to safety on the other side, and then closed up the waters blocking the path of the Egyptian pursuers and drowning most of them.

With their escape complete, now Israel could go and meet God at Mt. Sinai (which was located on the Arabian Peninsula). They were guided there by God Himself as He appeared as the Shekinah and led them with a column of fire by night and a cloud by day.

Because the entire Book of Nehemiah revolves around the need for strong, effective, Godly leadership, recall that what happened in Egypt was all because of bad leadership. It was the government of Egypt that enslaved the Israelites; it was not the doing of the common people of Egypt. It was the head of the government of Egypt and his team of yes-men who personally heard and who refused to heed God's warnings to them through Moses that had turned themselves against Israel; it was not the common people of Egypt. It was the supreme leader of Egypt, Pharaoh, whose heart God hardened; the hearts of the common people of Egypt were not hardened. But when God's wrath fell upon Egypt, it fell upon the common people just as it fell upon the leadership. The leadership in some ways actually fared better than the common people, because leaders like these always find a way to protect themselves first and

foremost above the people they govern. But even the Pharaoh's household could not escape the deaths of all firstborn.

All this destructive wrath was not because at some point God decided to get angry with Egypt and harm them. Rather God was but fulfilling a promise that He gave to Abraham that was meant to be an incentive for those who are Godly, and a threat to those who aren't.

^{CJB} **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.***"

America, and all others countries of this planet, this promise made to Abraham and this warning that accompanies it remains intact and it remains active. That you personally bless Israel and comfort them is full of merit, and you ought to do it because it is being obedient to the Lord. But if you have leadership in your nation that is cursing Israel, then I'm sorry to tell you that you will suffer collateral damage at the moment (or moments) that the Lord finally decides to punish your national leadership as He did with Egypt's. I can't tell you how many papers and books I've read that has asked everyone to separate the evil leadership of WWII Germany from actions of the common people. And from an earthly standpoint, this is reasonable. But from a Heavenly viewpoint, the Lord doesn't make that distinction when national judgment arrives. Yes, Hitler suffered defeat and killed himself. Most of Germany's Nazi leaders were caught and imprisoned or executed. But the country, and the common people, were devastated and took a couple of generations to return to anything we could call normality. The principle is that the common people will suffer the same earthly fate as their leadership.

If you are fortunate enough to live in a democracy and have a say in your leadership, your enlightened self-interest ought to be to select leaders that stand for and with Israel, regardless of whatever else they might value. God is not going to judge your nation over taxation. He is not going to punish dependent upon whether you adopt Socialism or Capitalism as your governing and economic philosophy. He is not going to favor nations based on whether or not they have national healthcare, free public schools, use greener energy, or have little unemployment. While idolatry will certainly play a role in His national judgment, in our era especially (since Israel has returned as a national entity) God is going to judge nations based almost entirely on how that nation treats Israel and His chosen people. So when you elect a President or Prime Minister or any government official, understand; if you are going to be a single-issue voter, Israel must be the issue, because it is to God. If you can't do this out of obedience, then I urge you to do it out of self-preservation.

Let's re-read part of this awesome prayer.

RE-READ NEHEMIAH 9:13 – end

I hope you noticed an overall pattern that we've seen before. And that pattern is what I called in a lesson on the Book of Judges, The Cycle of Sin. It goes like this in 5 steps:

- 1) Israel is obedient and serves God
- 2) Israel rebels against God and sins.
- 3) As a consequence God punishes Israel by allowing national calamity whereby they are oppressed, enslaved, or exiled to, a foreign power.
- 4) Israel realizes their wrong, confesses and repents, and cries out to God.
- 5) God hears them, shows mercy, and delivers His people from the consequences of their well-deserved punishment.

From the broad viewpoint of the Book of Nehemiah, Step 5 of the Cycle of Sin has already happened, as the Lord has delivered the Jews from their Babylonian exile and brought them home. However they are still under the rulership (albeit reasonable and decent) of a Persian King. So Step 1 in which Israel has returned to obedience and service to God is what we are witnessing. What this prayer of penitence that we are reading is doing is taking Israel on a stroll down Memory Lane and reminding them how this cycle of sin has been repeated over and over again in their past, and it does not vary. Israel doesn't skip any steps and either does Yehoveh. And these cycles tend to take a long time from start to finish; a couple of centuries at a minimum. As of the time of this prayer Israel is progressing back to harmony with God nicely, but is not out of the woods. They have a degree of freedom that they have not had in 175 years, but even though they are back in their former homeland of Judah they still bow their knee to a foreign power, which restricts their ability to fully live out a God-commanded Torah lifestyle.

Verse 13 is dealing with that part of the cycle (or pattern) of sin in which AFTER being delivered from their oppressors (in this case from Egypt), God gives Israel His laws and regulations for living the lifestyle of a redeemed people. This reminds the Jews of their ancestors' experience at Mt. Sinai when Moses was leading, and God gave to him true teachings, meaning justice from the divine viewpoint. By calling these laws right, true and good this explains that the character of the Torah reflects the character of the Torah-giver: Yehoveh. In Hebrew the word "right" is **yashar**, and here it more literally means "straight" in the sense of correct or upright. The word translated as "true" is in Hebrew **emeth**, and it means "true" but in the sense of something being firm, solid and immovable (as in the term "true north"). The word translated as "good" is the familiar Hebrew word **tov**. And **tov** means good in the sense of pleasant or of well-being. This sentence represents the classical Biblical description of the

Torah in general and of the Law that is contained in a section of the Torah.

Now, as an aside, since we are regularly given this sort of description of the Torah throughout the Old Testament, and invariably (and frequently) reminded that to choose the path of Torah is life, and to choose any other way is death, are we to conclude that upon the advent of Christ and the New Testament that what at one time was truth, good and life is suddenly corrupt, faulty and deadly? And that the Lord thereby abolished His giant mistake and replaced it with something new? Do you understand that if we take some of the most foundational, traditional Christian doctrine born from the Roman Church at face value that is precisely what it asks us to accept? I am regretful to say that I, perhaps like most of you, first came to Christ believing this because that's what I was taught and I saw little reason to challenge it. But I tell you without reservation that this fundamental Christian doctrine of a faulty and abolished Old Testament is an error of gargantuan proportions that has corrupted and weakened our beloved Church terribly. And it is long overdue that God's people, Jew and gentile, acknowledge it, confess it, repent, and leave those Christian institutions that insist upon continuing to follow such apostasy.

Revelation 18:4-5 CJB

⁴ Then I heard another voice out of heaven say: "My people, come out of her! so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not be infected by her plagues,

⁵ for her sins are a sticky mass piled up to heaven, and God has remembered her crimes.

Folks, just as there is national punishment because of its leadership that curses Israel (regardless of how the common people think of Israel), there is also communal consequence for stubbornly insisting on identifying with a group that you KNOW has gone deeply astray and has rebelled against God's commandments and character. The Lord pleads with His people to "come out of her" because that is their only hope. Once again, if you can't do that because God commands you to, then do it out of enlightened self-preservation. Do you know why a significant number of Believers won't run for the exits of an apostate Church and never look back? Because they have friends and memories there. They have built close relationships over the years that they don't want to lose (and it is nearly certain that they will). And even when in their heart of hearts they have learned the truth, and see the rebellion against God and the wrong theology being taught in their congregation, they weigh whether it is better to turn away and follow the truth, or to stay and retain the friendships and rest upon the memories. You will not find Holy Scripture giving us that kind of choice; rather we are invariably told to "come out of her my people"; to get out of Dodge fast and don't be like Lot's wife who reluctantly escaped the judgment of Sodom but then looked back longingly only to be turned into a pillar of salt. You will make new relationships, I promise you. But regardless, as valuable as these earthly relationships can be, as wonderful and warm as many of the memories may be, they

are brief as compared to eternity.

Verse 14 then speaks of something that I think means so much more to God than we might imagine; it speaks of Shabbat. Obviously since this passage is looking back to Mt. Sinai, the context is God writing the 10 Commandments (or more accurately the 10 Words) on 2 stone tablets with His own finger. And of course to observe the Sabbath is traditionally the 4th commandment. Something I have learned over the past 15 years as a Bible and Torah Teacher and now as a Pastor is this: Shabbat is the portal into living the redeemed life. I did NOT say observing Shabbat is the portal into salvation; for that is Christ and Christ alone. But once saved, how shall we live? The answer is: the ways we're taught in the Torah.

I have found through personal experience, and through observation of other Believers, that until a person finally realizes that Sabbath is the holy 7th day, and it is the day of rest, and it is not any day we choose; and especially that Shabbat has not been abolished right along with the rest of the Law, a critical doorway to spiritual maturity and into a fuller harmony with God remains closed. But once we accept God's Sabbath, it is like opening the door of a small dimly lit room that we thought was normal and all there is, and what we should expect as a Believer; and then stepping into an enormous gloriously lit, seemingly endless garden of color and life and goodness. I don't mean this as hyperbole.

Many years ago it struck me that God didn't ordain the Sabbath at Mt. Sinai, but rather Shabbat was essentially the final act of Creation. It's almost as though the entire point of God's 6 days of Creation was to arrive at the 7th day, Sabbath: rest.

^{CJB} **Genesis 2:1** *Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, along with everything in them.* ² *On the seventh day God was finished with his work which he had made, so he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made.*

³ *God blessed the seventh day and separated it as holy; because on that day God rested from all his work which he had created, so that it itself could produce.*

So Sabbath was not originally created as a law, it was created as a day of rest from creating. No more creating would occur after that day. But upon Mt. Sinai, it became a law. And here is exactly what the law of the Shabbat is:

^{CJB} **Exodus 20:8** *"Remember the day, Shabbat, to set it apart for God.*

The commandment is to remember; and the Hebrew word translated here and in every English version I checked as “remember” is **zakar**. **Zakar** means to call to mind; to recall. We tend to think of this commandment as an admonishment like “remember to take out the trash”; “remember to pick up a loaf of bread”. In other words we perceive this as meaning that there is a thing coming up that you are to do and you shouldn’t forget to do it. That is not what **zakar** means. **Zakar** means to take something that has been established and to observe it. A better translation, as awkward as it might sound to our ears, would be “Recall the day, Shabbat, to set it apart for God”. To recall is to pull up something from the past. So I wouldn’t say, “Recall to pick up a loaf of bread at the market”. Do you see the difference?

Look at it this way; God made a series of 10 laws (principles, really) and only as regards **Shabbat** are we told to “remember”. So if it meant that we “aren’t to forget to observe Sabbath”, then why aren’t we told not to forget to honor our parents? Not to forget to not murder? Why isn’t every one of the 10 Commandment beginning with “remember”? That is because the meaning is to recall something established from the past and to take it up again and to keep doing it. And indeed Sabbath was established at Creation, not at Mt. Sinai.

So when the Roman Church in the 4th Century A.D. declared the Sabbath abolished, and said that St. Paul told us to do so, this doctrine didn’t abolish a law of God it abolished the entire point of Creation. The Protestant Reformation brought 95% of the Roman Church doctrines with it, including the supposed abolishment of the Sabbath, and I am here to tell you that this doctrine that is not quite universal within the Church is in error, and therefore an offense to God of the highest order.

In fact, the 7th day Shabbat established at the beginning is a pattern and shadow of what is going to happen at the end. The purpose of Creation was to eventually arrive at Shabbat: rest.

Judaism especially says that this present earth will only last for 6,000 years. And then all will change as we enter the 7th Millennium. While I would debate with the 6,000 years part, it is my opinion that as Believers we are to see the era of the Reign of Christ as the 6th Millennium and not the 7th as it is often portrayed. We do not enter into our final rest, our Shabbat, when Yeshua returns and reigns for 1000 years. Rather Our Lord will indeed be on earth, but it is the same old earth that we’ve had since Creation. In fact it will for some time bear the terrible scars of the War of Armageddon and the world-altering wrath that God poured out in His 21 judgments. During the Millennium of Christ we must still work and toil and death will still be part of the picture. In fact, the Book of Ezekiel shows us that sacrificing will begin again at the new Temple. It is only AFTER those 1000 years, after that 6th Millennium, that the page is turned to the 7th, a new, permanent, eternal era of complete rest that is the fulfillment of Shabbat.

I want us read together the entire 21st chapter of Revelation and the first 5 verses of chapter 22. I submit that what we are reading is a description of the everlasting Shabbat. It was always

God's plan to arrive at this point, and it was vividly reflected in the pattern of Creation.

READ REVELATION 21 all and 22:1 – 5

Here we have a new creation or better a re-creation. A new creation implies something from nothing, which indeed is the nature of the creation of Genesis. However in the case of Revelation, the heavens and earth have been reformed, re-created: the new Heaven and Earth with the old having completely passed away. It is permanent, and there is no more death, nor more toil and work. There is no more Torah. There is no more barrier of separation between Heaven and earth, because sin is gone never to return. God is with us, and we are with God; not symbolically, but actually. Our universe of opposites has come to a close; there will only be day and never night. There will only be life and never death. There will only be good and never evil. There will only be Shabbat, rest, and never toil because there are no days of the week to count, as there are no more days and there are no more weeks.

And that is why our acceptance and understanding and observance of Shabbat are so critical for our understanding and experience with God. And it also why He ordered a man executed for daring to defile the perfection of this day and its meaning by gathering sticks for a fire (doing normal everyday work).

Nehemiah 9 verse 13 and 14 is the briefest summation of what happened at Mt. Sinai and it is broken into two parts: receiving all of God's laws and commandments, and separately, revealing God's Holy Shabbat. Clearly the Shabbat is something set apart, unique, special; and that is because it is to be everlasting, even after the old order has passed away forever.

We'll continue with Nehemiah 9 next time.