

NEHEMIAH

Lesson 14, Chapter 9 Cont 2

We'll continue in chapter 9 of Nehemiah this week and try to connect some dots as well as put the spotlight on some of the deeper things contained within this humble, penitent prayer by the people of Judah. As is our custom, we'll begin by summarizing last week's lesson.

First we notice that this prayer consists of displaying a number of "cycles" whereby Israel is in good standing with God, then sins, then is punished, and then repents, and then is restored according to the Lord's great mercies. And then it starts all over again. I gave it the name "The Cycle of Sin" and we find that this pattern is, unfortunately, more or less representative of the history of Israel in a nutshell. And I would submit to you that this cycle can be more or less representative of the life of Believers in general if we're not faithful and vigilant. While I suppose we could look at this pessimistically and think, "then what hope is there for us to ever break out of this terrible cycle?" it seems to me that we ought to see this from the more positive viewpoint. As long as we continue in allegiance to Yehoveh then God will continue to show us mercy. However, like Israel, discipline for our sinful behaviors will be dealt with, sometimes severely, and not overlooked. The Lord's hope is always that such discipline will cause us to repent and change, and to once again seek Him and His righteousness. And if that happens in a sincere and contrite attitude then the Lord has obligated Himself to forgive us and to restore us. I call that good news and something to be very happy about.

Second we find in verses 13 and 14 a reminder of what occurred after Israel was delivered from Egypt and they stopped at Mt. Sinai to meet God. There the Lord gave Israel the Torah, and also revealed to them the Shabbat. And it is interesting how the Sabbath was separated away from all the other laws and commandments given to Moses and spoken of almost as a separate issue. As we rolled back the clock to Creation and the Book of Genesis we found that essentially Shabbat was the final act of creation, after which no more creating would occur. Beginning at the first Shabbat what had been created was to be allowed to produce and reproduce on its own.

It was when we looked closely at the Sabbath commandment, the 4th of the 10 Commandments of Exodus chapter 20, that we realized that this particular commandment was quite unique in that we are instructed to "remember" the Shabbat. And the word **zakar** that is usually translated to "remember" in our English Bibles more correctly means to recall as opposed to remember. Recall means to bring something up from the past that had already

been established. Thus the idea is that Sabbath was essentially the 7th and final act of Creation, and the law about the Sabbath given to Moses on Mt. Sinai was intended to recall that God had ordained this day in the beginning and that it was to continue to be observed forever; it hadn't been suspended or done away with.

However as we fast forwarded to the Book of Revelation chapters 21 and 22, we read about the re-creation of the world; that which the Bible calls the new heaven and new earth. And that time indeed will be the **end** of days, quite literally. There will be no more alternating periods of light and darkness, the result of which gives us a day. There will be no moon, meaning there will be no lunar cycles, so no more months. Since there are no days, then there are no weeks. Since there are no lunar cycles or sun there is no way to measure seasons; so it seems that there will be no more seasons and of course there will be no more years. There will also be no more death, only life. No more toil, only rest. Thus we find that upon the new heaven and earth we enter what is essentially a permanent Sabbath. The 7th day Sabbath established by God at the beginning of time was divinely designed as a type and a shadow of what was to come at the end of time. Essentially Eternity is the never ending 7th day Shabbat; the permanent day of rest in a manner of speaking.

Let's continue now with verse 15. We'll re-read the remainder of Chapter 9 in sections.

RE-READ NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 9:15 – 21

As this prayer continues to recall Israel's journey through the wilderness, after receiving the Torah at Mt. Sinai, Israel began to receive Manna for food. Thus after receiving the heavenly bread of life (the Torah) at Mt. Sinai to nourish their souls and their intellects so that they **knew** God's will, now they receive the earthly bread of life (Manna) to nourish their bodies so that they could **do** God's will. Of course water was also needed for life, and so that too was provided, even from rocks. Thus the miraculous is on display virtually daily as they trekked through the desert. It is only by supernatural activity that the Israelites, all 3 million of them, could ever hope to survive in such a barren place for so long.

But the last half of verse 15 reminds Israel of WHY God did this. What was the goal of this wilderness journey? It was to fulfill the Abrahamic Covenant; the promise of a land set apart for God's people. However this was an already occupied land and so it had to be taken and it had to be possessed.

Now from Israel learning God's ways and being in harmony with God, verse 16 advances to step 2 of the Cycle of Sin: Israel is said to have stiffened their necks, indicating stubbornness, and refused to obey the Lord any longer. They refused to listen and they refused to pay attention to all the miracles the Lord had done to help them survive. This is where our Hebrew

comes in handy. Where the CJB and most translations say that Israel refused to listen, the word is **shema**. And **shema** means to obey what you hear; it doesn't mean simply to listen. That is why some translations will say "refused to obey" instead of "refused to listen" because obedience to what you've heard is the issue.

The next Hebrew word we want to look at is where the verse says "and paid no attention". Most other English Bibles say "and were not mindful". Here we again encounter the word **zakar**, which is regularly translated in other places (like the 10 Commandments) as "remember". But as we discussed last week it more means to recall. So the indictment against Israel is that they didn't obey what they had heard (at Mt. Sinai) and they didn't recall all the miracles that the Lord had been doing on a virtually daily basis. In other words, they simply took the grace of the Manna, for instance, for granted.

And what was the result of refusing to heed the Lord's commandments, and remembering the miracle of their redemption, and the wonderful things that God had been doing for them? They chose a leader to take those who wanted to go back to Egypt and willfully put themselves back under their former evil taskmaster. That is, they preferred their former subjugation to the redeemed life with God that they were currently living.

Now think about this for a minute. It is a common Christian doctrine today that the evil taskmaster that Believers should not go back to is the Law of Moses, as opposed to going back to the Devil. So the idea is that indeed it is certainly possible to be redeemed in Christ (saved) but then later reject the grace of Christ and instead return to the bondage of the Law. Note how out of context such a thought is. The evil taskmaster is always Egypt, not the Law. My speculation as to why this doctrine arose is that when we take the word of the NT as well as the OT literally and in context it is clear that a Believer can of their own accord give up their salvation and return to their bondage to Satan. But the Church doctrine of eternal security says that this cannot happen. Therefore the only alternative to make both of those doctrines work is that the evil taskmaster of Egypt can not represent the Devil but rather the evil taskmaster can only be the Law of Moses. Let me be clear on what I'm saying: the evil taskmaster throughout the Bible is one thing alone: Egypt. Egypt ALWAYS represents oppression and bondage to the Evil One, Satan. And I'm saying that, yes, a Believer in Yeshua can choose to turn away from their salvation and return to their former state as a slave of Satan. But what is NOT possible is for a Believer to be forced by someone or something to give up our salvation, nor through some accidental action can we lose it, nor can we be tricked out of it. Such a choice is willful and voluntary. And since Believers aren't robots, we retain the free will to choose.

However equally important it is possible to rectify this deadly mistake, repent, and return to the Lord. And in general the Lord will show mercy and accept us back in the fold. The most elegantly simple expression of this principle is found in the Book of James.

James 5:19-20 CJB

¹⁹ *My brothers, if one of you wanders from the truth, and someone causes him to return,*

²⁰ *you should know that whoever turns a sinner from his wandering path will save him from death and cover many sins.*

And notice how this expresses exactly the pattern of what we read in the last half of Nehemiah 9:17:

Nehemiah 9:17 CJB.....*But because you are a God of forgiveness, merciful, full of compassion, slow to grow angry and full of grace, you did not abandon them.*

Even when Israel committed the grossest form of idolatry and cast a metal calf and called it Yehoveh, still the Lord didn't abandon them or destroy them. God didn't stop guiding them by the fire-cloud, day and night.

Verse 20 is one that can be rather unexpected if we take it for what it says. There we're told that "You gave your good Spirit to teach them". And in checking the Hebrew we find that the term "good Spirit" is **tov ruach**, so the English translation is correct. God gave to Israel His divine spirit as their teacher. Wait; I thought that the activity of the Holy Spirit (especially as our teacher of God's truth) only began in the New Testament times and only after Christ came and went? Isn't that one of the objections many Christians have against paying any attention to the Old Testament and to the Torah? That is, we have God's Spirit as our guide, but the people of the Old Testament times, and of the era of the Law, did not. Well, there's another myth that is shot down. Mark this passage down, circle it, and put a big star next to it (and dog ear the page to boot)! There is no denying what spirit is being talked about here (God's Holy Spirit); or who it was given to (Israel) and when (at Mt. Sinai). So the Holy Spirit as being active among the redeemed, even as teacher, was hardly a new phenomenon that began at Pentecost (Shavuot) a few weeks after Messiah's death on the cross.

Don't get me wrong; something wonderful DID happen that was new at that particular Shavuot. The Holy Spirit went from being active among the redeemed, to living within the redeemed. In former times the Holy Spirit taught us to obey the external Torah; the Torah written on stone and scrolls. After Yeshua's death and resurrection the Holy Spirit supernaturally wrote that Torah on our inward parts and taught us to obey what He brought with Him and put inside of us: that same Torah. That enabled us to have a much deeper devotion to God's laws and commandments and to obey them in the spirit they were intended.

But the supernatural actions of God during the Israelites' wilderness journey extended even to something as mundane as their clothing; it didn't wear out. So every aspect of their lives was provided for them by the Father. Let's read some more of chapter 9.

RE-READ NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 9:22 – 28

Verse 22 transitions from the time in the wilderness to entering into the Promised Land. We also transition from Moses' to Joshua's leadership. And we immediately notice the honesty and the theological accuracy of Nehemiah. He notes that the land on the east side of the Jordan River that Israel conquered and occupied was EXTRA land. Now in reality the term "extra" is not there, this is put in there by the translator of the CJB. Yet, clearly that is the idea of what is being expressed. That is, the land of Sihon and Bashan was never part of the Promised Land, but rather this was additional land that the Lord allowed Israel to possess.

The idea of giving Israel "kingdoms and peoples" is referring to the realization of the Abrahamic Covenant. And as part of that same covenant fulfillment this prayer recalls that God made Israel as numerous as the stars, just as He promised He would.

^{CJB} **Genesis 15:1** *Some time later the word of ADONAI came to Avram in a vision: "Don't be afraid, Avram. I am your protector; your reward will be very great."*

² *Avram replied, "ADONAI, God, what good will your gifts be to me if I continue childless; and Eli'ezer from Dammesek inherits my possessions?"*

³ *You haven't given me a child," Avram continued, "so someone born in my house will be my heir."*

⁴ *But the word of ADONAI came to him: "This man will not be your heir. No, your heir will be a child from your own body."*

⁵ *Then he brought him outside and said, "Look up at the sky, and count the stars- if you can count them! Your descendants will be that many!"*

The land was taken from the Canaanites and given to Israel as promised would happen. In fact, the Israelites were essentially given a ready-made place to live in the Promised Land. They were given already built houses and cisterns for water collection that were already dug. They were given mature and productive vineyards and olive groves. So immediately after subduing the people of Canaan (which Israel did in obedience to God) they started living a life

of relative abundance. And they didn't work and toil to create this abundance; they were simply given it.

And, thanks be to God, we see that once again this idea of the redeemed of God inheriting a place built by someone else and merely enjoying its bounty is the establishment of a God pattern that will be repeated and take on even greater meaning later on.

^{CJB} **John 14:1** *"Don't let yourselves be disturbed. Trust in God and trust in me.*

² *In my Father's house are many places to live. If there weren't, I would have told you; because I am going there to prepare a place for you.*

³ *Since I am going and preparing a place for you, I will return to take you with me; so that where I am, you may be also.*

⁴ *Furthermore, you know where I'm going; and you know the way there."*

Isn't this amazing? Yeshua speaks of the ultimate fulfillment of this God pattern that we find in the Hebrew Bible and was just summarized for us in Nehemiah 9:25. Messiah has shown us how to arrive at this perfect place (the divine Promised Land); and when we arrive houses will have been already prepared for us to live in. We don't have to do anything but trust. Like the Israelites entering Canaan, we inherit what someone else has done. From a modern Western viewpoint that might sound unfair. From God's viewpoint it is what He intends for His worshippers.

But then the Cycle of Sin pops up again. In verse 26 we read the ominous words: "Yet they disobeyed and rebelled against You." And what is the gauge, the measuring stick, the standard used to determine disobedience and rebellion? The Torah. God's Word. It seems like Israel simply couldn't enjoy their prosperity. Every time things went well for a time, they veered away from God's clearly written commandments. To put the Torah behind their backs means to turn away from it, and to walk away from it. Let's hear how the Apostle James says it:

James 1:21-25 CJB

²¹ *So rid yourselves of all vulgarity and obvious evil, and receive meekly the Word implanted in you that can save your lives.*

²² *Don't deceive yourselves by only hearing what the Word says, but do it!*

²³ For whoever hears the Word but doesn't do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror, ²⁴ who looks at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

²⁵ But if a person looks closely into the perfect Torah, which gives freedom, and continues, becoming not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work it requires, then he will be blessed in what he does.

One thinks that these verses in Nehemiah must be what James (**Ya'acov**, actually) had in his mind when he spoke this truth. And as we have read throughout the Tanakh (the Old Testament) these Cycles of Sin always involve Hebrews turning away from the Torah after years of looking into it, and instead establishing their own doctrines, customs and ways and invariably assigning a "holy" label to what they have invented (and feeling quite good and safe about it all). Look at both Judaism and Christianity today that is mostly based on customs and traditions. The Bible has become a prop in which a few select verses are extracted, often out of context, and then applied to whatever the Rabbi or Pastor wishes to validate. And yet it is the Bible that tells us who we are in Christ, how we are to live our redeemed lives, and what we can expect in the future. Indeed if we stop looking into the clear and perfect mirror of God's Word and then walk away it doesn't take long at all before we forget what we look like. But what is inevitable is that we'll also next pick up the distorted and foggy mirror of our human intellect, traditions and religious beliefs, look into it, and think that **this** is what we look like.

And what was the result of Israel turning their backs on the Torah; looking into a different and manmade mirror? Verse 26 says God sent prophets to the people to warn them to turn back; the prophets were killed because the people didn't like what they heard. What did they hear that they hated so much as to murder? They heard that they were wrong; that what they believed was false; that what they did was wicked; that they were headed for God's hand of judgment. And what did God do in response to this? Step 3 of the Cycle of Sin....just like always. God punished His rebellious people. He used pagans to oppress them. What, after many years in their terrible self-inflicted troubles, did Israel finally do? They cried out to God. What did God do in response to their pitiful cries of repentance? He sent saviors to deliver them from the pagan oppressors.

But something different happened this time. Israel short-circuited the process. Verse 28 explains that as soon as they got some relief, they went right back to their wickedness. Let me put it this way: as quickly as their circumstances improved to a more tolerable level, they reverted to their rebelliousness and God let them fall right back into the hands of their enemies before they had been completely extracted.

There is little more human than to react in this way. I can't tell you how many people I've counseled who come to me beat up, worn down, sad and depressed. And when we discuss what has gone wrong in their lives, and what part of their behavior has been the biggest

offender and what is necessary to remedy it, it is more common than not for them to get impatient, frustrated or angry and walk away right back into the pit. As I like to phrase it: what people usually want is NOT to change, but rather to have their circumstances made better. They disassociate their circumstances from their morality and their deeds so they see no need for change in their lives, only improvement in their bad circumstances. And **somebody** needs to fix those bad circumstances for them and then everything will be OK!

Well, the Lord did change the circumstances of the exiled Jews. The Babylonians considered the Jews as captives under their control. As such they were not permitted very much freedom of movement and certainly they weren't able to return to their homeland, Judah. However Persia came along, defeated Babylon, took their Empire from them and emancipated the Jews. King Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jews to go home to Judah. But did the Jews change? No. Were their circumstances better? Immeasurably. The result is that instead of God reinstating Judah as an independent Kingdom, with a Jewish King, He allowed the Jews to remain under the power of a foreign king. This process of going back to their wickedness, crying out, having some of the circumstances improved, going right back to their wickedness, repeated over and over.

RE-READ NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 9:29 – 31

God's warnings (always through His prophets) continued. And the Jews continued to pay no attention to God's warnings or His commandments and it brought them nothing but misery. And, as is the theme hammered into us again and again, verse 29 says that "If a person does them (meaning obeying the Torah rulings) he will have life through them". Obeying the Torah is life; disobeying the Torah is death. It can't get much simpler.

God has great patience and so this process continued for many years as he warned them through His Spirit (there's that Holy Spirit appearing again) who worked through God's prophets. No luck.

The second half of verse 30 now presents us with the opposite of what happens when Israel is obedient and in God's will. Look back to verse 22. The Israelites had just been instructed by Moses in the mountains of Moab (the Book of Deuteronomy), and they had all vowed to follow God and His laws. So, they behaved that way and notice the result as they crossed the Jordan River and entered into Canaan;

²² ***"You gave them kingdoms and peoples; you even gave them extra land,***

That is, the Canaanites were handed over to Israel, and even land on the east side of the river,

land that was never part of the bargain was given to Israel. But then in verse 30, due to Israel's gross disobedience, we read this:

³⁰ ***Many years you extended them mercy and warned them by your Spirit through your prophets; yet they would not listen. Therefore you handed them over to the peoples of the lands.***

So the reverse happened: because they didn't walk with God Israel was handed over to foreigners. Even so, as verse 31 says, God's purpose was not to destroy His people, nor even to abandon them, because His compassion for Israel is so great.

So now this long history of Israel, beginning with Creation, has brought us up to the present day (that is, present day for the Jews of Nehemiah's time). They are back in Judah, but under the authority of the Persian King. And now that Israel has confessed their wrong for both themselves and their Hebrew ancestors, they bring their request before the Lord. That begins in verse 32.

RE-READ NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 9:32 – end

The first thing I'd like you to notice is how God is characterized in verse 32; He is the God who "keeps covenant and grace". Some English translations say covenant and loving-kindness; others steadfast love. Some will say covenant and mercy. These are all translating the same Hebrew word **chesed**. And essentially all these different translations of the word **chesed** add up to the Christian concept of grace. That is, when you look in a dictionary for the term grace, you'll find it defined as "unmerited favor, loving-kindness, mercy, and divine assistance". My point is this: the only translation that I can find that uses the word "grace" for **chesed** in this passage is the CJB. All other translations choose only ONE of the many aspects of grace. Why is that? Simple. Christian doctrine says that grace didn't happen until Christ came. Grace can't be associated with the Covenant of Law. So whatever goodness God showed towards Israel in the Old Testament it wasn't grace. And folks, that is just flat intellectually dishonest and deceptive.

We have seen God's grace at every turn; we have an entire chapter in Nehemiah consisting of this prayer that is all about God's grace. I've pointed out numerous times that the Levitical sacrificial system itself is an act of grace, because God designed a system whereby the human sinner didn't pay for his sins, an innocent animal did. The same thing happened with Christ: human sinners don't pay for our sins, the innocent Messiah did. It was pure grace when Israel was delivered from Egypt; they didn't do it themselves, and they certainly didn't merit it. Their deliverance from Pharaoh was a free gift from God.

So here we have a statement in verse 32 that God acts both as one who faithfully keeps the terms of His covenants (the blessings and the curses), but He will also act in grace towards those whom He deems He wants to help. God's grace wasn't kept on the shelf until Yeshua came onto the scene.

Thus the prayerful worshippers in front of Ezra ask this of the Lord: look down upon our suffering and save us. They admit that the suffering they are experiencing is fully just; it is the Israelites who were unfaithful and broke the terms of the covenant, thereby bringing their problems upon their own heads. It is their wickedness that has caused God's judgment to fall on them; and the definition of wickedness is in the next few words: "Our kings, our leaders, our **cohanim** and ancestors did NOT keep your Torah, pay attention to your **mitzvot** or heed the warnings...."

And now, says verse 36, even though they are back in their own land, it is as though they are slaves. Let me be clear; this is hyperbole. The Jews are not slaves, but in their own minds since they are not under a Jewish king, and are not an independent Jewish nation, they are not exactly free, either. Instead of a Davidic King ruling over them, a Persian King who resides far away has that power. The Persian King doesn't use the Torah as the civil law, nor does he even abide by its principles. Rather it is the king's version of morality, fairness, and justice that the Jews live under. The land that was once their own, given to them through Abraham now belongs to the King of Persia. The produce that comes from the good land that was once theirs also belongs to the King of Persia.

All this because the Jews, the Israelites, could not seem to go more than a few years in obedience to the Lord, before they rebelled against Him. Look around you today. And for too many of us, we are also trapped in this Cycle of Sin that leads us from shalom to sin to despair and back again. We have God's Word, even the Holy Spirit, so why does this keep happening? The Apostle Paul, I think, sums it up rather well in the book of Romans.

Romans 7:14-25 CJB

¹⁴ For we know that the Torah is of the Spirit; but as for me, I am bound to the old nature, sold to sin as a slave.

¹⁵ I don't understand my own behavior- I don't do what I want to do; instead, I do the very thing I hate!

¹⁶ Now if I am doing what I don't want to do, I am agreeing that the Torah is good.

¹⁷ But now it is no longer "the real me" doing it, but the sin housed inside me.

18 For I know that there is nothing good housed inside me- that is, inside my old nature. I can want what is good, but I can't do it!

19 For I don't do the good I want; instead, the evil that I don't want is what I do!

20 But if I am doing what "the real me" doesn't want, it is no longer "the real me" doing it but the sin housed inside me.

21 So I find it to be the rule, a kind of perverse "torah," that although I want to do what is good, evil is right there with me!

22 For in my inner self I completely agree with God's Torah;

23 but in my various parts, I see a different "torah," one that battles with the Torah in my mind and makes me a prisoner of sin's "torah," which is operating in my various parts.

24 What a miserable creature I am! Who will rescue me from this body bound for death?

25 Thanks be to God [, he will]!- through Yeshua the Messiah, our Lord! To sum up: with my mind, I am a slave of God's Torah; but with my old nature, I am a slave of sin's "Torah."

We'll start chapter 10 next week.