

God is Glorious and Gracious (Nehemiah 9)

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[0 : 00] So Nehemiah chapter 9. And spent another quarter in confession and in worshipping the Lord their God.

Standing on the stairs of the Levites were Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Buni, Sherabiah, Bani and Kanani.

They cried out with loud voices to the Lord their God. And the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Heshabaniah, Sherabiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah and Pithiah said, Stand up and praise the Lord your God who is from everlasting to everlasting.

Blessed be your glorious name and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. You alone are the Lord. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens and all their starry hosts, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them.

You give life to everything and the multitudes of heaven worship you. You are the Lord God who chose Abraham and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and named him Abraham.

[1 : 43] You found his heart faithful to you and you made a covenant with him to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Jebusites and Girgashites.

You have kept your promise because you are righteous. You saw the suffering of our ancestors in Egypt. You heard their cry at the Red Sea. You sent signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his officials and all the people of his land, for you knew how arrogantly the Egyptians treated them.

You made a name for yourself which remains to this day. You divided the sea before them so that they passed through it on dry ground, but you hurled their pursuers into the depths like a stone into mighty waters.

By day you led them with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire, to give them light on the way they were to take. You came down on Mount Sinai.

You spoke to them from heaven. You gave them regulations and laws that are just and right, and decrees and commands that are good. You made known to them your holy Sabbath and gave them commands, decrees and laws through your servant Moses.

[2 : 56] In their hunger you gave them bread from heaven, and in the thirst you brought them water from the rock. You told them to go in and take possession of the land you had sworn with uplifted hand to give them.

But they, our ancestors, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and they did not obey your commands. They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them.

They became stiff-necked, and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.

Therefore you did not desert them, even when they cast for themselves an image of a calf and said, This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt. Or when they committed awful blasphemies. Because of your great compassion, you did not abandon them in the wilderness. By day the pillar of cloud did not fail to guide them on their path, nor the pillar of fire by night to shine on the way they were to take.

[3 : 59] You gave your good spirit to instruct them. You did not withhold your manner from their mouths, and you gave them water for their thirst. For forty years you sustained them in the wilderness.

They lacked nothing. Their clothes did not wear out, nor did their feet become swollen. You gave them kingdoms and nations, allotting to them even the remotest frontiers.

They took over the country of Sihon, king of Hishbon, and the country of Og, king of Bashan. You made their children as numerous as the stars in the sky, and you brought them into the land that you told their parents to enter and possess.

Their children went in and took possession of the land. You subdued before them the Canaanites who lived in the land. You gave the Canaanites into their hands, along with their kings and the peoples of the land, to deal with them as they pleased.

They captured fortified cities and fertile land. They took possession of houses filled with all kinds of good things, wells already dug, vineyards, olive groves, and fruit trees in abundance.

[5 : 04] They ate to the full and were well nourished. They reveled in your great goodness. But they were disobedient and rebelled against you. They turned their backs on your law.

They killed your prophets who had warned them in order to turn them back to you. They committed awful blasphemies. So you delivered them into the hands of their enemies who oppressed them. But when they were oppressed, they cried out to you. From heaven you heard them. And in your great compassion you gave them deliverers who rescued them from the hand of their enemies. But as soon as they were at rest, they again did what was evil in your sight. Then you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies so that they ruled over them. And when they cried out to you again, you heard from heaven.

And in your compassion you delivered them time after time. You warned them in order to turn them back to your law. But they became arrogant and disobeyed your commands.

[6 : 01] They sinned against your ordinances of which you said. The person who obeys them will live by them. Stubbornly they turned their backs on you, became stiff-necked and refused to listen.

For many years you were patient with them. By your spirit you warned them through your prophets. Yet they paid no attention. So you gave them into the hands of the neighboring peoples. But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them.

For you are a gracious and merciful God. Now therefore, our God, the great God, mighty and awesome, who keeps his covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes. The hardship that has come on us, on our kings and leaders, on our priests and prophets, on our ancestors and all your people from the days of the kings of Assyria until today. In all that has happened to us, you have remained righteous.

You have acted faithfully while we acted wickedly. Our kings, our leaders, our priests, our ancestors did not follow your law. They did not pay attention to your commands or the statues you warned to keep.

[7 : 08] Even while they were in their kingdom, enjoying your great goodness to them in the spacious and fertile land you gave them, they did not serve you or turn from their evil ways.

But see, we are slaves today. Slaves in the land you gave our ancestors so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces. Because of our sins, its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us.

They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress. That is the word of God. We'll invite Pastor Michael Drake up. Thank you.

That looks good. Thank you. I think it's on already. It is good to be with you again.

That's on, is it? Yep, great. Thank you. It is good to be with you again. And I bring greetings from Howard Baptist Church. And also from my beautiful wife, Priscilla, who can't be here today because she's singing at another church.

[8 : 31] But it is really a delight to be back with you again. As we turn to this passage, let's pray. We come to you now, Lord, maker of the heavens, even the highest heavens.

And you made all this starry host. You made the earth and all that is on it. The seas and that all is in them. We bow in worship. We bow in worship with the multitudes of heaven who worship you.

We ask that you who gives life to everything will come to us. Will come to us now with your spirit of life. To open our minds and hearts to your word.

That we might find life for today. And for eternity in Christ. Amen. Amen. Amen. Nehemiah 9.

God is glorious. God is gracious. Whoops. Press.

[9 : 33] Turn it on. Press there. It was working. We checked it before. Got it.

Thank you. Okay. We'll leave it there. We need to go back into chapter 8 to get the sense, the setting of all this.

We read in verse 5 that Ezra opened the book. And all the people could see him because he was standing above them. And as he opened it, the people all stood. And Ezra praised the Lord, the great God. And all the peoples lifted up their hands and responded, Amen. Amen. And they bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Sounds like the introduction to a fairly ordinary worship service. But if you were following, you would have noticed that they stood for three hours while they heard the word read to them and expounded.

[10:44] And then they stood for another three hours, a quarter of a day, a quarter of a 12-hour day, while they praised, while they confessed, while they worshipped God. I suspect that if I was to tell you that we're going to spend the next three hours listening to me preach.

No? And if I was to announce that, and before I got into it, Pastor Williams stood up and said, And when Michael's finished, we're going to stand here, not sit, stand here for another three hours in prayer.

A bit odd? A bit different? Why? Why are they doing this? Well, in chapter 8 we saw the excitement of God's people returning to God after a barren, barren time.

Returning to God and his word, because his word is what reveals his everlasting glory and praise. And as they read the word, they could not stop themselves.

I wonder how hungry you are for the word of God. I wonder how richly it overpowers everything else in your life.

[11:59] Israel's response then to hearing God's word proclaimed was worship. They turned to God and worshipped him.

But notice how they worshipped him. It's not going to do it. I'm defeated. Got it. They began with confession.

They didn't begin with saying how wonderful they felt, although they did. They didn't begin with saying, oh, yeah, we're so excited. Instead, they began with confession.

Verse 1 of chapter 9. On the 24th day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together fasting and wearing sackcloth. Ever worn sackcloth?

Ever worn sacks? Not very comfortable. Irritating. I had to wear once as a child in some dress-up thing. Never again.

[13:03] No. Why? And then they went outside and gathered up a handful of dirt and covered themselves in it. They're humiliating themselves before God.

They're saying, we are of the earth. And they're saying, God, we come before you as humbled because of our sin. And those of Israelite descent separated themselves from all foreigners because they had been called to be a people who were not the same as the world around them, which they had been almost ever since the captivity.

What about you? How do you stand as you come before God today in worship? Are you separate from the world? I'm not sure that it's a good idea to cover ourselves with dust.

Someone's going to have to clean up in here afterwards. But you see the point, don't you? They came before God not boasting in their glory and in their wonder and in their beauty.

They didn't dress up and show to everybody else how great they were. Instead, they came together as a people who were humbled. A people who were before a God of holiness and righteousness, before whom they had no right in themselves to come.

[14:31] And their worship was mixed with praise. In fact, it climaxed with praise. It topped off with praise. And the Levites said, stand up and praise the Lord your God who is from everlasting to everlasting.

Verse 5. And they said, blessed be your glorious name and may I be exalted above all blessing and praise. You alone are the Lord. You made the heavens.

Didn't God know what he'd made? Surely. He knew he'd made the heavens. Why are they saying this? You made the heavens even the highest heavens.

And all their starry host. Once it gets dark tonight. Hopefully a clear sky. Have a look up. He made all the stars. He made them all. Everything. Didn't he know that?

Surely he did. Why are they saying that instead of saying how they feel? You give life to everything.

[15:34] And the multitudes of heaven worship you. And then in verse 9. You made a name for yourself which remains to this day. Why are they saying this? Well in 1 Chronicles 16 and 8 we read this.

Give praise to the Lord. Proclaim his name. Make known among the nations what he has done. Sing to him. Sing praise to him. Tell of all his wonderful acts. Glory in his holy name. Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice. Look to the Lord. And his strength. Seek his face always. Do you see what's happening here? Do you want to know more of Christ? Do you want to know more of him? Do you want the taste of heaven we were singing of at the opening of the service? Then don't look within yourselves. Go to where God has revealed himself in his word and in his works. Do you see that? The works that God has done, they are what we bring to praise him with. Oh yes, it's good to praise him and say, I feel pretty neat. There are times when, like the Israelites in Ezra's day, you could be joyful.

[16:45] In fact, Ezra told them, if you remember the last chapter, to stop being mournful and rejoice because of God's grace. Yes, let's be happy. Let's rejoice before God. But on what basis? Because of who I am or because of what God has done.

Do you see this? And do you see how much time they give to recounting what God has done? Almost the entire chapter that was read to us a moment ago is talking about his works. His works of grace. His works of deliverance. How he took Egypt. He took Egypt into the depths of the sea and judged them. A work of God's grace and magnificence. A work of God's holiness. And he took Israel through that same sea safely and delivered them. Ah, poor old Israel. Forty years in the wilderness. Why? Because they didn't listen to God. They went their own way. And what happens? God is compassionate. God is with them. There are two sections in this chapter of praise for the works of God.

[17:51] The first runs from verse 19 down to 25. Oh, sorry, from verse 7 down to 15. From Abraham to Exodus. And in verse 8 we read, God is gracious.

From Abraham. A promise to Abraham that his descendants would be blessed by God if they walked with him.

A promise that in Abraham there would be a saviour who would come to deliver. A promise in Abraham that through this people, his descendants, the gospel would come to the people of every land and every nation and every tongue.

Even coming to us in New Zealand. Some of you have come to New Zealand just to hear the gospel. This is the promise that was there.

This was the promise they had. And yet in the Exodus, in all that glorious display of God's power, they failed. And then the second passage from 9 through to 25.

[18:58] From the wilderness into the land of Canaan. God is compassionate. You are a forgiving God, we read in verse 17. Gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.

Therefore you did not desert them. Is that familiar? It should be. It's this month's memory verse. Right? This is the God who is displayed in these magnificent accounts.

And because of your great compassion, verse 19, you did not abandon them in the wilderness. By day the pillar of cloud did not fail you. It did not fail to guide them.

It did not fail to lead them on the path. And by night the pillar of fire was there to shine on the way they were to take. God's repeated faithfulness is in contrast to what?

Look at these headings. Israel confessed God's repeated faithfulness from Abraham to Exodus. And then from the wilderness to Canaan. But if you have been with me before, you will know that reading the Old Testament, we look for two things.

[20:14] We look for contrast and we look for repetition. We have seen the repetition. Two complete stories about how God was faithful. But there is also contrast.

Israel confessed God's repeated faithfulness. But it was in contrast to Israel's repeated evil. Look at verse 16 to 18.

They, our ancestors, became arrogant and stiff-necked. You know what stiff-necked is? Children, you're never stiff-necked. You never listen to your parents and think, no.

Yeah, but parents, as you're pointing the fingers at others, you've never been there yourself? I'm only talking to parents now.

Those that are between childhood and parenthood can get away with it. Now seriously, stiff-necked is someone who will not bend to the direction God is directing.

[21 : 16] If you've ever ridden a horse, I remember a horse I was riding once. It was the most stubborn horse imaginable. It was in one of these higher places, you know.

And we got on the horse and it plodded with great reluctance out to where we wanted to go. Stiff-necked, it wouldn't turn to the left. It wouldn't turn to the right. The only thing it did of its own volition was do a quick run under a tree with a low branch, hoping it would wipe me off. But when I turned it back to a stable, it was with great joy and alacrity that it took off. And it was no longer stiff-necked.

It went around every corner and every bend until it got to the... You see, a stiff-necked person knows the word of God, knows the direction of God, but will not turn.

It sticks to its own way. They became a stiff-necked people. And the rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. Can you get that? What brilliance.

[22 : 24] What incredible creative faith. Oh, God, take us back to Egypt where we were happier. Duh. But that's what we do.

Every time we choose sin, we say, I've had enough of the freedom of Christ. I want the slavery of sin and the sense of death afresh.

And they did it. And we do it. And then from 9, 26 to 31. They rebelled and they did evil.

They were disobedient and rebelled against you. They turned their backs on your law. They killed your prophets who had warned them in order to turn back to you. They committed awful blasphemies.

Verse 28. But as soon as they were at rest, you see, God forgave them. Remember? God had compassion on them. Just like he does to us. Right?

[23 : 25] Tomorrow when you get up and you start afresh, God's compassion and love will be there for you. What will you do with it? What did they do with it? As soon as they were at rest, they again did what was evil in your sight.

Oh, God, deliver us. I'm suffering. I'm struggling. God comes. He helps. Ah. And then we do evil again. Just like them. And when they cried out to you again, you heard them from heaven.

And in your compassion, you delivered them time after time after time. Isn't this the God we should be praising?

And how did they praise him? They praised him by recounting his works. And they praised him by confessing their constant sin. And yet, they did not remember.

They did not remember. They rebelled. They turned against God again and again. And after all this confession, what do we get?

[24 : 37] They forgot what they'd confessed. Look at it. Right at the end of the chapter, they say, in the light of all our confession, in the light of all your grace and goodness, Lord, we've got something to ask you.

What do you think they asked for? God, give us the fruit trees of Canaan. Give us the comfort of peace.

Give us houses to live in. Does that sound like us? I wonder what would happen if you went back over your petitions, your prayer of asking God for things over the last year.

How much of it? How much of it would be, Lord, cleanse me? Lord, help me to walk according to your will.

Lord, give me a light hold on the things of this earth. Lord, help me to understand the discipline that you're putting me through.

[25 : 45] Or is it, oh, Father, please give us a little bit more cash. We need some. A little bit more food. A little bit more health.

A little bit more comfort. Now, in fact, there's nothing wrong with asking for God to care for us. In fact, God had promised the Israelites that if they kept the law, they would have these three things.

They would have possession of the land. They would have peace from their enemies. And they would have plenty. He also promised that if they kept the law, God would be with them.

But the law, you see, didn't work, did it? They kept on breaking the law. They could never have the security of what was spoken of.

And, in fact, the law was pushing them to something else. The law was saying you cannot get righteous by what you do. Even if God blesses you with peace and plenty, you need something else.

[26 : 52] You need a saviour. You need cleansing from sin. You need a transformed heart. So they petitioned and asked for earthly glory.

When God was offering them eternity with himself. What about you? What do you aim for? Now, by all means, you've got exams coming up, lots of you.

Let's pray for success. Let's pray that you can acquit yourselves well. But is that your only hope? Isn't it good also to pray that God would give you a knowledge of himself that sweeps you away from dependence upon what you can achieve and a trust in him?

You see, their hope was in the law. They said, we are going to keep the law and then you will bless us. If you haven't understood this chapter, if you haven't seen that all the promises of keeping the law never came to anything because everybody who sets out to keep the law fails, if you haven't seen that, you've missed the whole point of the law.

The law is saying you cannot be righteous by your own deeds. Yes, we have a saviour who stepped in, a faithful saviour, a saviour who did keep the law.

[28 : 14] And he died for us. And what does he say to us? Now you can keep the law. No. Now walk by faith, trusting in the righteousness of Christ.

And then they sealed it all off. They said, not only do we want earthly glory and plenty, not only do we hope that the law will give us reward, they said, we will now covenant, we will now make a promise, we will do it.

Have you ever said to God, I'm going to do it? Pastor William's going to pick this up next week with you and look at it in detail.

But just think about it. Here, after all I had discussed, all I'd seen of the glory of God working with Israel, when Israel failed and failed and failed, when Israel's description or when the Bible's description of their failure goes from they failed to they sinned to they did evil to they were wicked, they turn around and say, yep, we're going to do it.

People, it is good. It is good to say, I am here to do good for God. I'm here to follow Christ. I am here to serve him.

[29 : 43] But how will you do it? You see, no you don't, oh yes, you do see. All of this points to Christ.

If it points to you, you've missed the point. If you've been working through this passage and saying, yeah, I'm with the Israelites, I'm going to vow to do, no, no, you need to trust in Christ.

You need to live for Christ. You need to live in Christ. And you need to live with Christ.

Romans 15, 4. Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us so that through the endurance taught in the scriptures and the encouragement they provide, we might have hope.

And what is that hope? May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind towards each other. This is still Romans 15. That give you the mind towards each other that Christ Jesus had so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[31 : 02] What should you be seeking? Your happiness? The success of your exams? Oh, no, no. The success of this church? Or the glory of God?

Do you see what's at stake here? At stake is us in sackcloth and God in glory. Us covered with the dust of the earth and God resounding in the praise of the angels.

We are here to bring glory to our God. But then secondly, not only are we to live for Christ, we are to live in Christ.

Galatians 3. The law was not based on faith. What's the point of trying to obey? Don't get me wrong. The law instructs us.

The law teaches us. It shows us what God values. It shows us how righteousness is worked out in the situation in which it was applied for Israel in particular. No, the law has a use.

[32 : 15] But it's not based on faith. On the contrary, it says, as we read in Nehemiah 9, Paul is picking up on this, quotes it, the person who does these things will live by them.

If we're trying to trust in the law, we've got to live by it. Can you imagine the policeman stopping you and saying, you were doing 75 in the 50k zone?

And you say, oh, but I've got a licence. Oh, but my car has registered. Oh, but I've signalled when I changed lanes. And the cop's going to say, yeah, fine, all of those things were good, but one thing you did wrong, here's your ticket.

Actually, at 75, I'm taking the keys too. You see, if we're trying to live by the law, we've got to do it all. Well, if you can, go for it.

Only one man ever has, the Lord Jesus Christ. So, he says, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law. You see, the law condemns. The law says you're not perfect.

[33 : 29] It condemned, it redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for it is written, cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree on the cross. He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham, the promise that Israel in Ezra and Nehemiah's day was trying to resolve, that promise might come to the Gentiles, us, through Jesus Christ, so that by faith we might receive the promise.

And then, as we live in Christ, we're also called to live with Christ. So then, Colossians 2, verses 6 and 7, so then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. So as you look at Nehemiah 9, as you see the revival that by God's grace Ezra sparked off, and you see the excitement, and you imagine yourself being caught up in something as exciting as that, where does it lead?

it leads to a dependence upon Christ, it leads to a life in Christ, and it leads to a life with Christ, and everything else, as Paul said, is worthless.

He counts it, but don't, that he might know Christ and be found in him. May that be you. Let's pray. Our Father, we ask you now to come and help us to live in Christ, for the glory of Christ, and with Christ, and we ask that in his name.

[35 : 31] Amen.