

## 2. The Justice and Mercy of God

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Preacher: Euan Dodds

[ 0 : 0 0 ] So we continue our studies, the second of two studies entitled the Old Testament in under an hour, with another reading a little shorter than last week, only 16 verses today, in Nehemiah chapter 9, verses 22 to 38, and that can be found on page 405 of the Pew Bibles.

Picking up where we left off as the children of Israel enter the promised land. And you gave them kingdoms and peoples and allotted to them every corner.

So they took possession of the land of Sihon, king of Heshbon, and the land of Og, king of Bashan. You multiplied their children as the stars of heaven, and you brought them into the land that you had told their fathers to enter and possess.

So the descendants went in and possessed the land, and you subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gave them into their hand with their kings and the peoples of the land, that they might do with them as they would.

And they captured fortified cities and a rich land, and took possession of houses full of all good things, cisterns already hewn, vineyards, olive orchard, and fruit trees in abundance.

[ 1 : 1 8 ] So they ate and were filled and became fat, and delighted themselves in your great goodness. Nevertheless, they were disobedient, and rebelled against you, and cast your law behind your back, and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies.

Therefore you gave them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer. And in the time of their suffering they cried out to you, and you heard from heaven, and according to your great mercies, you gave them saviors who saved them from the hand of their enemies.

But after they had rest, they did evil again before you, and you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them. Yet when they turned and cried to you, you heard from heaven, and many times you delivered them according to your mercies.

And you warned them in order to turn them back to your law, yet they acted presumptuously, and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your rules, which if a person does them, he shall live by them.

And turned a stubborn shoulder, and stiffened their neck, and would not obey. Many years you bore with them, and warned them by your spirit through your prophets, yet they would not give ear.

[ 2 : 3 3 ] Therefore you gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. Nevertheless, in your great mercies, you did not make an end of them, or forsake them. For you are a gracious and merciful God.

Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love, let not all this hardship seem little to you that has come upon us, upon our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and all your people since the time of the kings of Assyria, until this day.

Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully, and we have acted wickedly. Our kings, our princes, our priests, and our fathers have not kept your law, or paid attention to your commandments, and your warnings that you gave them.

Even in their own kingdom, enjoying your great goodness that you gave them, and in the large and rich land that you set before them, they did not serve you, or turn from their wicked works. Behold, we are slaves this day, in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts.

Behold, we are slaves. And its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress.

[ 3 : 53 ] Because of all this, we made a firm covenant in writing. On the sealed document are the names of our princes, our Levites, and our priests. And we thank God for this chapter of his word.

The Korean national record for failing a driving test stands at 774 times. It was set by a 68-year-old woman last year, who had taken the test almost every working day since 2005.

The problem is not that she can't drive. She can do that. The problem was the written test. The past mark is 60, and her highest score, I'm told, is 50. The problem is that she keeps making the same mistake.

And as we read Nehemiah chapter 9, we realize that the Israelites keep making the same mistake. Time and again, they rebel against God, and they forsake the covenant that he had made with them.

Last week, we looked at Nehemiah chapter 9, and saw that at one level, it was a historical survey of the Old Testament, from Genesis through to Nehemiah himself.

[ 5 : 09 ] But we focused in particularly, and realized that it was a history, not just of the nation, but of the covenant dealings of God with his people. So in Nehemiah 9, verse 8, we're told that God made a covenant with Abraham.

Throughout the prayer, God is referred to as the awesome God who keeps covenant love, and it finishes with the people of Israel making a covenant. So the theme of covenant is very important in this prayer, as indeed it is in the entire book of Nehemiah.

You see, we tend to brand Nehemiah as something of a sort of Near Eastern urban planner. He was the man who built that wonderful wall around Jerusalem, and restored the city.

But actually, Nehemiah's priority was not physical, but spiritual. In chapter 1, when he hears of the destruction of Jerusalem, and the distress of his people, he gets down and prays to God, and says, we have acted very corruptly against you, and have not kept the commandments, statutes, and rules that you commanded your servant Moses.

Remember the words you commanded Moses, saying, if you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples. But if you return to me, and keep my commandments, and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them, and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.

[ 6 : 34 ] Nehemiah's concern was that the people of God had forsaken their covenant, and as such they had been exiled from the promised land. And so he sought to restore the city physically, but only to lay the foundation for a spiritual restoration, where people would repent of their sin, come back to God, and renew the covenant with him.

And last week we considered the title, The Goodness and Grace of God. We saw how in chapter 9, verse 8, God made a promise to Abraham. He promised to give him a land, and a land which would be populated by descendants, and people who would live under the blessing of God.

And we saw how in verse 22, God gave them kingdoms, and peoples, and allotted to them every corner. And in verse 23, how he multiplied their children, and gave them descendants.

And how in verse 25, they enjoyed the good things God had given, and they enjoyed his blessing. God was faithful to the promise he had given Abraham, despite the sin of the people.

He showed them great goodness, and he demonstrated great grace in his dealings with them. And we want to consider the second part of the prayer today, under the heading of the justice of God, and the mercy of God, considering not so much the promise with Abraham, important as that is, but more the promise in the covenant made through Moses, the other person named in this prayer.

[ 8 : 01 ] And we'll focus really on verses 26 to 28 initially, under these two headings, the justice of God, and the mercy of God. Now my brother, who I don't think is here today, I cannot see him, has just returned from Thailand and Cambodia, and we thank you for your prayers, for his safekeeping.

There is in Thailand a law called Les Majestes, and it is not permitted for anyone, regardless of the nationality, to publicly criticise the king.

So you cannot, for example, write an article defaming him, you cannot use an image of him in any way, you cannot even step on a coin, which bears his face on it.

That would be considered an insult to the king. The Thai people are very protective. The constitution says, the king of Thailand shall be enthroned in a position of revered worship, and shall not be violated.

No person shall expose the king to any sort of accusation. And the penalty, in the criminal code, says, whoever defames, insults, or threatens the king, shall be punished with imprisonment for

three to five years.

[ 9 : 14 ] So I am very grateful that Kieran did not talk politics with the people in Bangkok airport. It is a serious thing, isn't it, to criticise the king of a country? But is it not a serious thing to criticise the king of heaven?

To rebel against him? And yet that is precisely what his people did. Verse 26, they were disobedient, they rebelled against you, they cast your law behind their back, and you killed their prophets.

They killed your prophets. Elsewhere we're told they did evil, they acted presumptuously, they sinned against your rules, they turned a stubborn shoulder, and they stiffened their necks. For most of their history, the people of Israel were worshipping cows, committing great blasphemy. And really, there were two consequences of that.

Firstly, they forfeited the blessing of God. You see, because when Moses had gathered the people before they were entering the promised land, he had renewed the covenant.

[ 10 : 13 ] There was a covenant ceremony just before they entered in the plains of Moab. And he had repeated to them that if they obeyed God under the old covenant, material blessing would follow.

He says in Deuteronomy 28, if you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all his commands, then the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth.

And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you. Blessed shall you be in the city, blessed in the field, blessed shall be the fruit of your womb. The Lord will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you.

Obedience under the old covenant led to tremendous blessing in every aspect of life. They rebelled against God. They forfeited the blessing.

But secondly, they refused to heed the warnings of the prophets. They didn't like what they had to say. And so they killed them. But the question is, what were the prophets warning them about?

[ 11 : 15 ] And Moses goes on to say in that covenant ceremony, that if the people disobeyed God, they would know not his blessing, but rather his curse. If you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God, or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you.

Cursed shall you be in the city. Cursed shall you be in the field. Cursed shall be your basket and your needling bow. And that curse, in particular, took the nature of other nations invading Israel. The Lord will bring a nation against you from far away, swooping down like an eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand. It shall eat the offspring of your cattle and the fruit of your ground until you are destroyed.

They would be invaded. And ultimately, they would forfeit the land which God had given to Abraham. The Lord will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other. And there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known. Why did the people rebel against God? They wanted to be like the nations around them.

[ 12 : 27 ] They wanted to behave like the nations around them. They wanted to worship the gods of the nations around them. They refused to listen. They refused to repent. And after quite literally centuries, they experienced the justice of God.

He handed them over to the nations. He gave them into the hands of their enemies. Where previously the enemies had been in their hands, they were now given into the hands of their enemies and oppressed and enslaved and ultimately taken away to a foreign land.

And there's no question about injustice here. You see what they say in verse 33 of the prayer. You, God, have been righteous in all that has come upon us. For you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly.

God made it very plain through Moses that obedience would lead to blessing, disobedience to cursing and exile. The people refused to obey, continued in disobedience and God fulfilled the word that he had given to Moses and they were taken to a foreign land.

They experienced the justice of God. But it's not just the Jewish people, of course, who behaved in that way. And when we turn to Romans chapter 1, we discover that the pagans, the Gentiles, also reject what knowledge of God they have.

[ 13 : 51 ] Although we can see from the world around us and the power of the rain and the storms, the eternal power and divine nature of God, people have turned away. Although they knew God,

we're told, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him.

But they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened. People exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals.

They turned away from God. What did God do? He handed them over to the lust of their hearts, to impurity, to dishonourable passions, to depraved minds.

He hands people over to the very things they chase after themselves that they might see how harmful it is. And God is just in handing people over to the sin in which they have chased after.

But, of course, that's not the end in itself. You see, God is a God of great mercy and we're told in verse 31, in his great mercies he did not make an end of them or forsake them.

[15:01] For God is a gracious and a merciful God. Having seen his justice in justly handing people over to reap what they have sown, we now see his mercy.

And time after time the people of Israel called out to God when they were suffering. Verse 27, In the time of their suffering they cried out to you and you heard from heaven and according to your great mercies you gave them saviors who saved them from the hands of their enemies.

When they were oppressed they cried out and God would raise up for them a Samson or a Gideon or a Jephthah or a David to save them from the hands of their enemies.

So he is a God of mercy though he wounds yet he will heal. And that is therefore the basis of this prayer that is to what that is the the grounds to which the people of Israel appeal.

They say verse 32, Now therefore our God the great the mighty and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love let not all this hardship seem little to you that has come upon us.

[16:08] They appeal to God in view of his mercy in view of the way he has saved their forefathers in days gone by and they say won't you do it again Lord save us again.

And again it's the same in Romans isn't it? That having identified and diagnosed the sin in our hearts and having shown how people of the world are handed over to that sin God then promises them hope.

Chapter 1 diagnoses the sin of the world and in chapter 3 Paul writes but now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe for there is no destruction for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus all have sinned all have turned away from the knowledge of God and have reaped what they have sown and yet all who turn to Christ will be justified and redeemed through faith in him the justice of God handing people over but the mercy of God offering them a new start a new beginning cleansing forgiveness hope and above all a covenant relationship with the living God well that would be very nice if the story had ended there because it takes a turn for the better doesn't it the people confess their sins they repent they make this firm covenant in writing and in chapter 10 they lay out the obligations of the covenant they say we will no longer intermarry with the people around us we will no longer buy and sell on the

Sabbath even as Christmas approaches we will no longer neglect the worship of God or the concern for his priests and if Nehemiah finished at chapter 10 verse 39 we'd all be very happy but of course the Bible is a very realistic book and we're given chapter 11 and then chapter 12 and as we come to chapter 13 Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem after an interval of some years and he finds that the people are making the same mistakes all over again he finds that they are trading on the Sabbath he finds that they are neglecting the portions given to the priest he finds that they are intermarrying with the people of the nations around them and failing to teach their children about the one true God and he gets very frustrated he confronts them he curses them he beats some of them and pulls out their hair not I should recommend good pastoral advice but we can experience something of his frustration can't we and he says to them did not your fathers act in this way and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city they broke the covenant the whole book charts how the people of Israel renew the covenant and it closes showing how the people break the covenant once more and make the same mistakes all over again perhaps for the 774th time so as the Old

Testament that is the story of the Old Covenant closes it becomes clear that something else is needed to solve the problem of the human heart and the prophets before and during the exile had spoken of a new covenant which was to come Ezekiel alluded to it speaking of cleansing of water in the spirit of people giving new hearts and Jeremiah had prophesied about it in the 31st chapter of his prophecy he says the days are coming declares the Lord when I will make a new covenant with

the house of Israel and the house of Judah not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt my covenant that they broke though I was their husband declares the Lord but this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days declares the Lord I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts and I will be their God and they shall be my people and no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother saying know the

[ 20 : 27 ] Lord for they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest declares the Lord for I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more God gave them an old covenant they were unfaithful to it and so at the close of the Old Testament God promises them a new covenant a new testament which will come in which people will know the forgiveness of their sins and the indwelling power of God's spirit teaching them the law in their hearts so as we close our studies on the Old Testament and under an hour I pray that we might understand the nature of God's covenant dealings with people revealing to us his goodness and his grace in making a covenant showing us his justice in dealing with sinners but his mercy in offering them a share in a new covenant offering them a full and complete and free pardon and a place among his people let's pray together father we do thank you that you are such an awesome and merciful

God we thank you lord that though your people broke the covenant with you though they were unfaithful to you lord that you were faithful to them we thank you lord that you promised a new covenant in which we can know the forgiveness of our sins of new life in Christ and we ask and pray lord that we might live lives worthy of that new covenant as we go from this place to our homes to our families to our workplaces that we might reflect something of your goodness and your grace in our dealings with the people around us so we thank you for your great love and your great faithfulness and pray that we might always trust and put our confidence in that all the days of our lives and we ask this in Jesus name Amen