

1. The Goodness and Grace of God

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[0 : 00] Well, for the next two weeks, I want to look at the prayer of Nehemiah chapter 9, under the heading of the Old Testament in under an hour.

It's over two weeks, we will finish by 1.40 today, or thereabouts. And this week we're going to look under the heading of the grace, the goodness, excuse me, and grace of God, reading it in Nehemiah chapter 9.

Quite a long reading from verse 1 to verse 25. That's on page 404, I think, of the Visitor Bible. Certainly of my red one. I see you've got blue Bibles.

So, page 404. The people of Israel confess their sin. Now, on the 24th day of this month, the people of Israel were assembled with fasting, and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads.

And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. And they stood up in their place and read from the book of the law of the Lord their God for a quarter of the day.

[1 : 10] For another quarter of it, they made confession and worshipped the Lord their God. On the stairs of the Levites stood Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Buni, Sherabiah, Bani, and Chenaniah.

And they cried with a loud voice to the Lord their God. Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabaniah, Sherabiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah said, Stand up and bless the Lord your God from everlasting to everlasting.

Blessed be your glorious name which is exalted above all blessing and praise. You are the Lord, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them.

And you preserve all of them. And the host of heaven worships you. You are the Lord, the God who chose Abraham and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham.

You found his heart faithful before you and made with him the covenant to give to his offspring the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite.

[2 : 27] And you have kept your promise for you are righteous. And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea and performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants and all the people of his land.

For you knew they acted arrogantly against our fathers. And you made a name for yourself as it is to this day. And you divided the sea before them so that they went through the midst of the sea on dry land.

And you cast their pursuers into the depths as a stone into mighty waters. By a pillar of cloud you led them in the day and by a pillar of fire in the night to light for them the way in which they should go.

You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments. And you made known to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses your servant.

You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger and brought water for them out of the rock for their thirst. And you told them to go in to possess the land that you had sworn to give them.

[3 : 39] But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments. They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them.

But they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and did not forsake them.

Even when they had made for themselves a golden calf and said, this is your God who brought you up out of Egypt and had committed great blasphemies. You in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness.

The pillar of cloud to lead them in the way did not depart from them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night to light for them the way by which they should go. You gave your good spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst.

Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness and they lacked nothing. Their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell. And you gave them kingdoms and peoples and allotted to them every corner.

[4 : 51] So they took possession of the land of Sihon, king of Hezbon, 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 orchards, and fruit trees in abundance.

So they ate and were filled and became fat and delighted themselves in your great goodness. And we thank God for his word.

A couple of weeks ago I decided to take my wife Helen down to the city where I studied at university. And we got a very cheap deal in a train. And as we were travelling on the train this young man sat down opposite us and pulled out his laptop and began typing away quite quickly.

[6 : 00] And I said, what are you writing? And he said, well I'm writing a play. And I asked him an awful lot of questions about his play. And I think he got fed up of answering questions. So he asked me one.

And he said, what are you reading? And I had a book by my side about the types of the Old Testament. So I said, I'm reading a book that explains how the Old Testament is fulfilled in the New.

And he said, that's amazing. Does anyone still read the Old Testament now? And he assumed because we had a new one that the old one was out of date. It's a very common attitude.

But it's a very ancient attitude. In the second century there was a Greek man called Marcion. And he thought the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob was very different to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And so he pruned his Bible. And he removed from it anything which he felt was too Jewish. He took away the Old Testament. He took away most of the Gospels. He left a bit of Luke.

[6 : 56] And he took away some of the letters, leaving behind some of Paul. I don't know if there are any Marcionites today. But that attitude prevails. And some people think the Old Testament has no place in the Christian life.

But of course Jesus Christ came to fulfill the law and the prophets. And on the Emmaus Road he preached to his disciples. All that was written in the law and prophets and Psalms concerning himself.

So the Old Testament has much to teach us about the Lord and our Christian walk. So over these next two weeks we're going to look at this prayer in Nehemiah under two headings.

This week the goodness and grace of God. Next week the justice and mercy of God. And the first thing to notice as we study this prayer is that it isn't a lecture.

This isn't a meeting of the sort of Jerusalem historical society to reminisce about the history. It is a selective history of God's covenant dealings with his people.

[7 : 57] So in verse 8 we're told how God made a covenant with Abraham. In verse 15 we're reminded that God had sworn to them to give them a land.

In verse 32 God is described as the God who keeps covenant love. And in verse 38 we didn't read it. The people sign a covenant with God.

So the prayer is a prayer of God's covenant dealings with his people. Because in the Bible God deals with people through covenants. He makes promises and he looks for a response to his gracious promises.

That's the first thing to note. The second thing to note is that it's actually a confession. The people of Israel confess their sins. Because sometimes we just have to admit that we've made a big mistake.

I didn't see it but I read on the internet a few weeks ago of the American chat show host David Letterman. And one evening about three weeks ago he was presenting his usual program.

[9 : 01] And he stopped the sort of frivolity. And he turned to the crowd and said I have something to tell you. And publicly in front of millions of viewers he admitted that he had been unfaithful to his wife.

And had committed adultery with a number of members of the television crew. Sometimes we have to admit that we've made a very big mistake. And this is what the Israelites are doing in chapter 9.

They're admitting that they've been unfaithful. Not to their wives. But to their God. They have committed spiritual adultery. By turning away from him.

And Nehemiah knew that himself. You see we often think of Nehemiah as that chap who built the wall. He had that tremendous wall around Jerusalem that he built. And that's what he's remembered for. But Nehemiah's concern were spiritual.

Not physical. He was worried about his wall. But he had deeper worries. And in chapter 1 when we're introduced to him. We see where his priorities lie. He is an exile.

[10 : 06] About the 5th century before Christ. He's been taken off to Persia. To Iran. And he serves the king as a cup bearer. And one day some of his Jewish countrymen come to the royal court.

And in chapter 1 verse 2 he says how are things back home? How's your family? How are the Jewish people? How's the city of Jerusalem? And in chapter 1 verse 3 they give him this report.

The remnant in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down. And its gates are destroyed by fire.

How would you respond if that was said of Glasgow? Well verse 4. Nehemiah says as soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days.

But what was he weeping about? Was it the destruction of all that architecture? Or was it thinking of his countrymen in great distress? Verse 5. Nehemiah begins to pray.

[11 : 07] O Lord God of heaven. The great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments. Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant.

That I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants. Confessing the sins of the people of Israel which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned.

We have acted very corruptly against you. And have not kept the commandments, the statutes and the rules that you commanded Moses. Remember the word that you commanded your servant 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 you are dispersed be under the farthest skies. I will gather them from there and bring them to the place that I have chosen to make my name dwell there.

Of course the wall needed repaired. But Nehemiah realized the real problem was the people of Israel had broken their covenant with God. They had been unfaithful to him.

[12 : 14] And he had been faithful to them in carrying out the judgment he had promised of scattering them. Throughout the kingdoms of the world. So Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem.

And he builds his wall. And he restores the city. And in chapter 9 we see the people being restored to their relationship with God. Admitting they had made a big mistake. Admitting they had been unfaithful.

And seeking to turn back to him. And it is a very concise summary of Old Testament history. We have the history of Genesis covered. Exodus and Numbers. Then the various narrative books through until 2 Chronicles.

And the first thing Nehemiah or the Levites remind the people is of the goodness of God. You alone are God. There is one God.

And he created the heaven of heavens with all their host and all that is in them. And yet this great God who made everything in verse 7 stoops down. And meets this man Abraham.

[13 : 15] Gives him a new name. And makes a covenant with him. Verse 8. He made a promise that he would give Abraham descendants. And that his descendants would occupy a land flowing with milk and honey.

And that these descendants would be blessed and live under God's blessing. And they in turn would be a blessing to the whole world. And that covenant of course brings with it many privileges.

Verse 9. When his descendants were in slavery in Egypt. God saw the affliction. And he saved them with great signs and wonders. Bringing them out from slavery and oppression.

He divided the sea before them. And rescued them from all their enemies. Verse 12. He guided his people. He gave them a pillar of cloud during the day. And a pillar of fire during the night.

Verse 13. He directed his people. He gave them laws and statutes. Good laws. That they might know how to live lives pleasing to him. Verse 15.

[14 : 16] He provided for them. Giving them bread from heaven and water from the rock. He gave them everything they needed. And sustained them. So as his covenant people.

He provided for them. He protected them. He guided them. He rescued and saved them. And he sought to bring them into the land of promise. How very good is the God of the Old Testament.

And the pattern is the same, isn't it? Oh, sorry. But the question is, of course, why did he do this? What was God's reason? What was his motive? For bringing this people out of Egypt?

And Moses told them in Deuteronomy chapter 7. That they were a people holy to the Lord your God. That he had chosen them to be a people for his treasured possession. Not because they were more in number.

They were very small. But in Deuteronomy 7 verse 8 he says, It is because the Lord loves you. And is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers. That the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand.

[15 : 19] And redeemed you from the house of slavery. From the hand of Pharaoh. God set his love upon people. He made a covenant with them. He saved them and brought them to a much better place.

And his motive was love for his people. And the same is true in the New Testament, isn't it? On the night that Christ was betrayed. He was with his disciples.

And he gathered them in that upper room. And he shared with them the bread and wine. Symbolizing the blood of the new covenant. And as they partook of it, he said to his disciples, As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.

Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love. Just as I have kept my Father's commandments. And abide in his love. Christ loved his disciples.

He made a covenant with them. And all he asked was that they walk in obedience to him. As his holy people. His treasured possession of all the earth. The goodness of God.

[16 : 25] And so the application is quite clear, isn't it? The question is, do you know this love of God in your own life? Do you know the power of his salvation to rescue you from the slavery, not of Egypt, but of sin and death?

To bring you in to new life. To walk with him. To know the daily blessing of his guidance and his provision and his protection upon you. And to know the future hope, not of a land flowing with milk and honey, but of a new heavens and a new earth, where every tear will be wiped from our eyes.

The goodness of God. Well, I don't know how you've responded to that. I pray that you might respond in repentance and faith. But the Israelites responded in a very unexpected way.

And people often do respond in very unexpected ways. I saw a documentary, maybe about two months ago, about a South Korean pastor who travels to North Korea to rescue people.

North Korea is, I'm sure you know, a totalitarian, communist state. There is no freedom. The people are starving. They are enslaved. The rulers oppress and torture their own people. And this man, because he's a Christian, seeks to love North Koreans and to rescue them.

[17 : 42] And he saved one girl, who I think became a Christian. And she said to him, I want to save my sister from this country. So at great personal risk and at great expense, he managed somehow to bring her sister out of North Korea, through a variety of other countries, into the freedom of the South.

And the two women were reunited and it was a very happy occasion. But after a few days, the sister said, I want to go back. She couldn't adjust to life in the South.

And her sister was absolutely distraught. You see, it didn't matter to this girl that she loved her so much, that she'd gone to great lengths and great trouble and great personal risk and sacrifice to save her and to bring her to freedom.

It didn't seem to matter that they'd never meet again and that the family would be broken up. The sister said, I just want to go back. And she did.

And that's what the Israelites did. Verse 16. God gave them his commandments. Verse 17.

[18 : 55] But they were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them. They forgot about him. He rescued them from Egypt where they were treated as slaves, treated cruelly by their taskmasters.

Verse 17. They appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. They would rather be slaves to men than servants of God. And God had revealed himself to them.

The God who created the world. Who all the hosts of heaven worships. And what did they do? They made a little golden cow. And they said, this is your God.

And they worshipped that instead. They committed blasphemy. It's funny what people do, isn't it? When gold is involved. So they rejected the God who saved them.

They worshipped a statue instead of worshipping him. They disobeyed his laws. And they wanted to walk away from him. And return to the land of slavery. And again, the pattern is the same in the New Testament, isn't it?

[19 : 59] You recall how Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew said, I have come to the lost sheep of Israel. And he taught the people. And he healed the people. And he fed the people. And he ministered to the people.

And as he drew near to Jerusalem, what did he say? O Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets, how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.

And you would not. And he was betrayed by a disciple into the hands of the Gentiles. And as he was questioned before Pilate in John's Gospel, what does Pilate say to him?

Pilate answered, Am I a Jew? Your own nation and chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?

The people of Israel rejected God who had saved them. And in time they would reject the Christ who came to save them. Maybe that's you.

[21 : 07] Maybe you've known something of the Lord. You've known something of his ways. You've known something of his salvation. But you've said, I'd rather go back. Rather go back to Egypt. Back to being just like everybody else.

Serving men, serving myself, instead of serving the living God. Is there any hope? Verse 17, But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

And you did not forsake them. You see, the people of Israel rejected God, but he did not reject them. The people of Israel forgot their God, but he remembered them.

The people of Israel were unfaithful to their God, and yet he was faithful to their promise. His promise. What does he do? Verse 19, In your great mercies you did not forsake them.

He gave them the pillar of cloud. Verse 20, He gave them his good spirit. He gave them manna to feed them. For forty years he sustained them in the wilderness. They lacked nothing. Their clothes did not wear out, and their feet did not swell.

[22 : 17] He had promised them descendants. Verse 23, You multiplied their children. He promised them a land. Verse 24, The descendants went in and possessed the land, flowing with milk and honey.

They ate and were filled, and became fat, and delighted themselves in your great goodness. God did for his people everything which he had promised.

Though they rejected him, he did not forsake them, and he showed them grace, having revealed his goodness. When they rejected him, he revealed even more, and showed them his grace.

Same is true, isn't it? Just in closing in the New Testament. There was Peter, such a zealous believer, and yet when there was a whiff of persecution, he ran away, didn't he?

A little servant girl said, You know Jesus of Nazareth. And he said, I never knew him. Denied him three times. And after the resurrection, Jesus comes back. And he commissions him.

[23 : 18] And he says, I want you to feed my sheep. And then Peter goes preaching in Pentecost. Who's he preaching to? The very Jewish people, who had rejected Christ. And he says, Forgiveness is on offer.

A couple of chapters later, he's taken to the Sanhedrin, and he preaches forgiveness to the chief priest, who had supervised the execution of Jesus. And as Peter preaches to the Jews, God has a chosen instrument to preach to the Gentiles.

And he calls the apostle Paul, who in his own words, was the chief of sinners, a blasphemer, a persecutor, an insolent opponent.

And he says, this man is my chosen instrument to preach. God is a God of grace, isn't he? A covenant-keeping God, who is faithful to his word, and who is willing to forgive the sinner, and to give him a place in his family, and a ministry in his service.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your amazing grace, that you should firstly seek a relationship with us, and give us all these wonderful things.

[24 : 41] And Lord, that when we stray, or when we are unfaithful, that you should continue pouring your wonderful grace upon us. So we ask as we go, Lord, we might be conscious of your blessing, and that we might be ministers, and witnesses to that grace, in a world which desperately needs to hear about it.

And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.