

Our Forgiving God



SABBATH—NOVEMBER 9

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Nehemiah 9:1–3; Nehemiah 9:9–22; Nehemiah 9:23–31.

MEMORY VERSE: “If you hide your sins, you will not succeed. If you confess and reject [turn from] them, you will receive [get from God] mercy” (Proverbs 28:13, ICB).



We should praise God for His love and the joy it gives us.

THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES ENDS. The Feast of Tabernacles is a Jewish holy day. As we see, this holy day is a time of joy. It helps the Jews remember everything God did for them in Egypt. He freed them from slavery. Then He took care of them in the desert for 40 years. As we saw last week, the Jews celebrate this day with joy. Now the leaders ask the people to meet together again. It is time for the people to confess their sins to God and turn away from evil.

Earlier, we read that the leaders tell the people to stop crying. They tell them to stop being sad about their sins. That does not mean that our feeling sad about our sins is not important. But first, God wants His people to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles with joy. So, the people obey God. Now it is time for the people to confess.

Sometimes we feel joyful in the Lord first. Then we confess our sins. Other times we confess our sins first. Then we feel joyful in the Lord. Romans 2:4, ERV, says, “God is kind to you so that you will decide to change your lives.” God’s love causes us to feel joy. It also causes us to repent or turn from sin. So, we should praise God for His love and the joy it gives us. At the same time, we also must remember that we need God to forgive our sins. We need God to make us clean and make us new too.

**WORSHIP AND FASTING OR NOT EATING ANY FOOD
FOR A SHORT TIME (Nehemiah 9:1–3)**

In Nehemiah 9:1–3, we learn that God’s people separate themselves from all foreigners or non-Jews. Why do God’s people do that?

Nehemiah wants the people to feel that this time is a time of joy. So, he wants the people to feel joyful. Then Nehemiah leads God’s people in a fast. A fast, as we saw, is a time when a person decides to stop eating food for a short while. People often fast for spiritual reasons. So, when they fast, the people ask God to take the pride out of their hearts. They throw dust on their heads. They put on clothes that people wear to funerals. The people also separate themselves from foreigners. Why? Because the Jews know that God needs to forgive them for their sins. The foreigners are not guilty of the sins that God’s people did. God’s people confess the sins they did as a country that caused God to punish them 70 years earlier. That was the time when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem. Then the Babylonians carried the Jews away as prisoners to Babylon.

God’s people pray and confess. Their prayers show that they deeply understand what sin is. They understand that sin is awful. Do God’s people feel angry that their grandfathers and grandmothers sinned and caused God to punish them? Do they spend time complaining about their leaders and the bad decisions they made in the past? Do they blame their leaders for not being holy? Or blame them for the evil they did that caused them to be where they are right now? No, they do not get mad about the sins that happened in the past. They do not hate their own people who caused them to be carried away as slaves. They turn to God. They let go of pride. They confess their sins.

Nehemiah 9:3 says that the people read from the Book of the Law, or Torah, for about four hours. Then for four more hours, they confess sin and worship God. Do you see how important reading the Bible is? When we read the Bible, God comes near to us. The Holy Spirit speaks to us and teaches us. Bible truth changes our thoughts. Truth makes us wise. The Bible encourages us and lifts us up. The Jews also cry. Why? Because when we spend time with God, we see how good and beautiful He is. We feel awe that the One who made us wants to be with us, even if we make mistakes.



**When we read the Bible,
God comes near to us.**

THE BEGINNING OF THE PRAYER (Nehemiah 9:4–8)

The leaders read the Book of the Law, or the Torah, to the people. Then the people pray a long prayer. What do they pray about? They talk about God’s love. They say that God is good to His people, even when His people do not obey Him. Their prayer is more of a sermon than a prayer.

Read the prayer of God’s people in Nehemiah 9:4–8. What are the important ideas that we read about in the opening verses? Why do you think these ideas come first?

In the first part of the prayer, the people bless God and His name. In Bible times, Hebrew names were special. They were more than a word that someone was called. Names showed who a person was or what was in his heart. God’s name shows us who He is. That is why God’s people praise God’s name. His name shows everyone on earth that God is worthy of praise and honor. It is the name of the One who made everything there is in heaven and on earth. So, the prayer starts with worship to God as the One who makes everything. He is the One who “‘give[s] life to everything’ ” (Nehemiah 9:6, ERV; read also Colossians 1:16, 17). The word “gives” comes from a Hebrew verb. It means to “keep something alive.” So, God is the One who keeps everything alive.

This same God chose Abraham. What made Abraham so special? God chose him because Abraham had a heart filled with faith. True, there were many times in Abraham’s past when he did not seem to have much faith. But remember what happened when God asked Abraham to give up his only son, Isaac? Abraham did not disobey God (read Genesis 22). Abraham learned to live by faith. Abraham did not learn this lesson about faith overnight. He learned over a lifetime to have a heart filled with faith. In Hebrew thinking, the “heart” is a word picture for the mind. So, Abraham learned how to have faith in his mind. He lived this faith. God accepted Abraham because of his faith.

The people start their prayer by saying that God is (1) the One who made us. (2) He is the One who keeps us alive. (3) He keeps His promises. We must remember these three things about God too. Then we will learn to trust Him during hard times when He seems far away from us.

Why is it important to remember that God made us?



God is the One who keeps everything alive.

LESSONS FROM THE PAST (Nehemiah 9:9–22)

Read the next part of the prayer in Nehemiah 9:9–22. How is this part of the prayer different from the first part?

The prayer changes. First, the people start out by praising God for His love. Then the people say that the Israelites were very evil after God freed them from Egypt. The people talk about how the Israelites did not obey God in the desert for 40 years. The people name all the wonderful things God gave the Israelites during that time. But what did their fathers do? Their hearts were filled with pride. They were stubborn people. They did not care about the kind and good acts that God did for them.

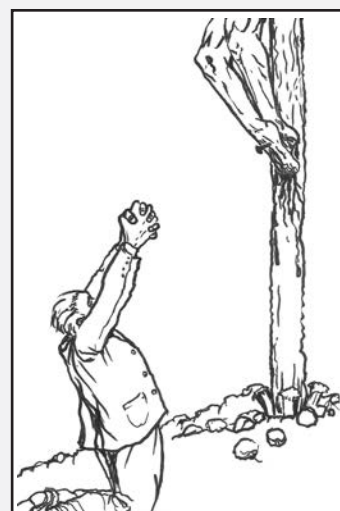
When we come back to God, we must tell Him how we failed Him. We must accept the truth about our sins. We must understand that we were not loyal to Him in the past. These are important things we must do when we confess our sins and turn away from them.

We must confess our sins, yes. But remember, our confessing does not save us. Only our faith in Jesus' death on the cross saves us. What makes us right with God? It is our belief that we are made right with God by our faith in Jesus alone. "We accept Jesus as our Savior. That happens when we say we are sorry for our sins and turn away from them. Then the Lord forgives us. He removes the punishment from us for breaking His law. The sinner then stands in front of God as a person who is clean from sin. This person now finds favor with God. The Holy Spirit joins this person in fellowship with the Father and the Son."—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 3, page 191, adapted.

Yes, God's love causes us to confess our sins. His love also causes us to turn away from them too. So, we must be willing by God's power to give up our sins.

The people's prayer shows that they understood what happened in the past. The Israelites in the past were stubborn. God was loving. The people look back over all that God did for their people in the past. What do they see? They see that He will continue to take care of them now and in the future. So, that is why it is so important for the people always to remember how God acted in the past. When they did not remember, they got into trouble.

Maybe you feel discouraged. Or maybe you feel afraid about the future. But why must you trust in God anyway?



Only our faith in Jesus' death on the cross saves us.

THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS—GOD’S SPECIAL MESSENGERS (Nehemiah 9:23–31)

Read Nehemiah 9:23–31. What do these verses tell us about the Israelites? How are they different from God?

This next part of the prayer looks at the history of the Israelites in Canaan, or the Promised Land. God gave them land, cities, grape gardens, and fields ready to use. But the people did not appreciate God’s gifts. At the end of Nehemiah 9:25, ERV, we read that the Israelites “ ‘ate until they were full and fat.’ ” The words “ ‘full and fat’ ” have a special meaning in the Bible. They are used only a few times (read also Deuteronomy 32:15 and Jeremiah 5:28). Each time this description is used, it shows us something bad about someone.

Yes, the people “ ‘enjoyed all the wonderful things [God] gave them’ ” (Nehemiah 9:25, ERV). But the people cared more about the things God gave them than they cared about God Himself. Our having a lot of stuff does not always bring us closer to God, does it? Many times, we may think, “Oh, if only I had this or that. Then I would be happy.” God gave the old-time Israelites everything they needed. But their “happiness” in those things did not make them love God more. Too often it is easy for us to think about the gifts God gives us. But we do not remember the Giver. That is a mistake.

Of course, God wants us to be happy with the things He gives us. He wants us to be joyful about the gifts He gives us. But our joy in the things He gives us does not mean we will be close to God. If we are not careful, these things can pull us away from Him.

What else do we learn about in Nehemiah 9? We see that the leaders now confess all the ways that they did not follow God in the past. The leaders look back at their country’s history. They see the sins they did as a people. What are two of their biggest sins? Israel (1) threw God’s law away. And (2) they attacked God’s prophets, or special messengers. The leaders confess these sins to God.

The leaders see that God’s law and His prophets are important. These two things help the Jews become a holy people. Their prayer shows this idea when the leaders say, “ ‘If people obey your laws, they will live’ ” (Nehemiah 9:29, ERV). Here, the leaders say again Moses’ words in Leviticus 18:5: God gives us His law to bless our lives.



Our having a lot of stuff does not always bring us closer to God.

PRAISE AND ASKING (Nehemiah 9:32–38)

Read about the end of the prayer in Nehemiah 9:32–38. How does the prayer end? What is the most important idea?

Again, the people praise God for who He is. He is strong and wonderful. He keeps His Covenant, or Special Agreement, with His people. He shows them mercy.

The people also ask God for something in their prayer. What do they want? Let us read about it:

“ ‘Our God, you are the great [powerful] God. You are mighty and wonderful. You keep the covenant [special agreement] you made with us. You show us your love. So don’t [do not] let all our suffering seem like [the same as] a small thing to you’ ” (Nehemiah 9:32, NIV).

The Jewish community in Jerusalem must pay taxes to the Persian kings who rule over them. Plus, their enemies keep attacking them. The Jews are tired of the attacks and the taxes. They ask God to put a stop to their troubles.

How do God’s servants talk about their experience at this time? They say, “ ‘We are in a lot of trouble’ ” (Nehemiah 9:37, ERV). They compare their troubles now to the troubles that the Israelites had in Egypt (Nehemiah 9:9). They say their troubles are the same. God’s people now ask God to help save them as He saved His people in the past. They know they have done nothing good to earn God’s help. No one in the past was loyal to God. The kings, princes, priests or holy leaders, and early fathers are not loyal to God. No one is loyal. So, the Jews ask God to show them mercy. Even if they are not worthy of it.

Read Romans 5:6–8. How do these verses show us what the Jews in Nehemiah’s time wanted God to give them? What comfort and hope do these verses give us?



The Jews ask God to show them mercy. Even if they are not worthy of it.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: Read Ellen G. White, “Confession,” pages 37–41, in *Steps to Christ*.

In Nehemiah 9:25, the Jews talk about how their people enjoyed all the good things God gave them in the past. Another way of writing “enjoyed” is to say the people “took pleasure” in all God’s gifts. The word “enjoyed” or “took pleasure” comes from the same Hebrew word for the name “Eden” (Genesis 2:15). The word “Eden” means pleasure. So, the Garden of Eden was really the Garden of Pleasure.

“Eden” is a wonderful word picture for God’s plan to make all things new. The Hebrew people were part of God’s plan too. God chose the Hebrew people to be His special people. He wanted to help them make a new Eden on this earth. But the people did not obey God. They became slaves in Babylon. Did God give up His dream for His people? No. We see that God continues to want His plan for His people to work. He promises them, “So the Lord will comfort Jerusalem. He will show mercy to those [people] who live in her ruins. He will change her deserts into a garden like [the same as] Eden” (Isaiah 51:3, ICB).

Yes, old-time Israel enjoyed the blessings and gifts God gave them. Many of these blessings and gifts showed them and the people around them a small piece of Eden. God gave these gifts to His people because He wanted them to enjoy them. And old-time Israel did. Their sin was not that they enjoyed God’s gifts. Their sin was that they did not remember God (Ezekiel 23:35). Then God’s blessings ended. God did not give His people gifts only to make them happy. God wanted His people to use His gifts to show His love to the people around them.



“Eden” is a wonderful word picture for God’s plan to make all things new.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① Read Jesus’ words in Matthew 13:22. What does Jesus warn His followers about in these verses? Why is the “love for money” (Matthew 13:22, ERV) so dangerous?
- ② In Nehemiah 9, the people talk about the Lord as the One who made them and keeps everything alive. Why is this truth so important to our faith?
- ③ We know we are sinners. At the same time, we must not let that cause us to lose hope that God can save us. What can we do to keep our faith strong in His power to save us?