

Our Forgiving God



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Neh. 9:1–3; Dan. 9:4–19; Neh. 9:4–8; Col. 1:16, 17; Neh. 9:9–38; Rom. 5:6–8.*

Memory Text: “He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy” (*Proverbs 28:13, NKJV*).

After the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot) was finished, the leaders again gathered the people. They had just spent time celebrating; now it was time to return to the unfinished business of confession and repentance before God for their sins.

Yes, earlier, the leaders had told them to stop grieving and being sad over their faults, but that doesn't mean mourning and confession are not important. Thus, now that they had celebrated the festivals, it was time to go through proper confession.

The order of events presented here doesn't necessarily mean that it is the sequence in which rejoicing and confession are always done; nor does it mean that only the reverse order is to be followed. Although we may naturally follow the order of confession first, followed by celebration, perhaps the celebration of God in our lives should come first. After all, Romans 2:4 tells us that it is the “goodness of God” that brings us to repentance. His “goodness,” then, should evoke praise and feasting, while also reminding us that we need God to forgive, cleanse, and re-create us.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 16.

Fasting and Worship

Read Nehemiah 9:1–3. Why were the people separating themselves from all foreigners?

Although Nehemiah was eager to make sure that the people associated this time with joy, he now led the assembly to fasting. They humbled themselves before God and threw dust on their heads, while wearing sackcloth. Because the foreigners didn't have a share in the corporate sin of the people of Israel, the Israelites separated themselves from them, as the Hebrews knew that it was their sins that needed to be forgiven. They acknowledged the sins of their nation, which had led them into exile.

Their corporate prayers and confession demonstrated a deep understanding of the nature of sin. The Israelites could have been angry that their predecessors messed up and led their whole nation into exile. Or they could have spent time complaining about the choices of their leaders and the lack of godliness displayed by the previous generations, which had led them to where they were right now—just a small group of returnees. However, instead of harboring hatred and grievances, they turned to God in humility and confession.

Nehemiah 9:3 reports that the people read from the book of the law for a fourth of the day, and for another fourth they confessed sin and worshiped God. This is the third reading of the Torah. Reading the Torah is central to confession, which must be based on the truth, which comes from God. Through our reading of the Bible, God draws near to us, and the Holy Spirit can speak to us and teach us. The truth of His Word molds our thinking and understanding, encourages and lifts us up. The Israelites also sorrowed and wept, because spending time in God's holy presence makes us aware of His beauty and goodness while impressing upon us how amazing it is that the Creator of the universe chooses to be with us, even despite our unworthiness. Thus, we realize that without God in our lives, we are no different from any of our spiritual ancestors in the faith. Only with God working in us can we be who we should be.

Read Daniel 9:4–19. In what ways is His prayer applicable to ourselves today? What should the reality of this application say to us individually and as a church?

Beginning of the Prayer

The response of the people to the Bible reading was a long prayer that recounted the goodness of God in contrast to the history of Israel’s faithlessness. One can observe that the reply is more like a sermon than a prayer, because almost every verse has a parallel somewhere in the Bible.

Read Nehemiah 9:4–8. What are the main topics the prayer focused on in these beginning verses, and why?

In the first part of the prayer, the people bless God, and specifically His name. In the Hebrew culture, a name was not just what people called someone; it gave a person his/her identity. Thus, the praise of God’s name is significant because it demonstrates to the world that this is a name worthy of praise and honor. This is the name of the Creator of the universe. The prayer begins with worship to God as the Creator and as the One who “preserves” everything (*Neh. 9:6; see also Col. 1:16, 17*). The word “preserves” comes from a Hebrew verb that means to “keep alive.”

The One who created everything is the One who chose Abraham, a human being, who was not in any way special other than that “his heart” was “faithful.” Abraham may seem to have lacked faith on many occasions, but when asked to give up his son, he didn’t falter (*see Genesis 22*). He learned to be faithful—not overnight, but over his long walk with God. In Hebrew thinking, the “heart” refers to the mind. In other words, Abraham developed faithfulness in thought and action and was acknowledged for it by God.

The first few phrases of the prayer focus on God as (1) Creator, (2) Preserver, and (3) Promise Keeper. The people first remind themselves of who God is: He is the faithful One who has created us, preserves us, and always keeps His promises to us. Having that in mind helps us to keep our own lives in perspective and to learn to trust Him even in the most difficult of situations, when it might seem that He is distant from us and unconcerned with our challenges.

Why is the doctrine of God as our Creator so central to our faith? After all, what other teaching is so important compared to this one, in which we are commanded by God to spend one seventh of our lives every week in remembering Him as our Creator?

Lessons From the Past

Read Nehemiah 9:9–22. How does this part of the prayer differ from the first part?

The prayer transitions from praising God for His faithfulness to recounting the contrasting unfaithfulness of the Israelites in their Egypt and wilderness experiences. It outlines all the different things God gave the Israelites; but unfortunately, the response of the “fathers” to those gifts was pride, stubbornness, and disregard of God’s gracious acts among them.

The acknowledgment of human failure and lack of true devotion to God is an important step in confession and repentance. And even though these texts are talking about people long removed from us, no one can deny that every single one of us has a problem with those same issues.

Of course, here is where the gospel comes in for us as well as for them. Confession of our sins does not save us; only Christ’s sacrifice in our behalf does. Confession, along with repentance, is central to our own acknowledgment that we must be justified by Christ alone. “When through repentance and faith we accept Christ as our Saviour, the Lord pardons our sins, and remits the penalty prescribed for the transgression of the law. The sinner then stands before God as a just person; he is taken into favor with Heaven, and through the Spirit has fellowship with the Father and the Son.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 3, p. 191.

At the same time, because His goodness causes us to confess our sins and repent of them, we must be determined by God’s power to forsake them, as well.

The bottom line is that Israel had been stubborn, and God had been loving. Looking back at what God did for the Israelite nation reminded the people that because God had done so much for them in the past, He would continue to take care of them at the present moment and in the future. That was why it was so important for the people always to remember how God had acted in their history. It was when they forgot that they got into trouble.

Think back to times you were certain that God had been working in your life. How can you draw comfort from that for yourself the next time you face struggles? How can you better learn to trust in the goodness of God amid times you feel completely discouraged, let down, and fearful for the future?

The Law and the Prophets

Read Nehemiah 9:23–31. How are the Israelites described in comparison to God’s “great goodness” (*Neh. 9:25*)?

This next section of the prayer/sermon focused on life in Canaan as the Israelites possessed the land that God had given them. They had been handed land, cities, vineyards, and fields ready for use, but they had taken it all for granted. At the end of verse 25, we are told that “they ate and were filled and grew fat” (*NKJV*). Growing fat is an expression that is found only a few times in the Bible (*Deut. 32:15 and Jer. 5:28*), and each time it has a negative connotation.

The people might have “delighted themselves in Your great goodness” (*NKJV*), but theirs was a delight in all they had instead of a delight in God. Apparently, having everything doesn’t produce a close walk with God. Many times we think, *If only I had this or that, then I would be happy*. Unfortunately, we see that the Israelites had everything from God, and yet their “happiness” in those things only made them less devoted to God. It’s too easy for us to focus on the gifts while forgetting about the Giver. This is a fatal deception.

Of course, this doesn’t mean that we cannot be happy for the things that God has given us. He desires that we rejoice in His gifts, but this joy in the things He gives doesn’t guarantee a relationship with God. In fact, if we are not careful, these things can become a stumbling block.

Nevertheless, in this chapter, the leaders now confessed the ways that they had been unfaithful to God. As they looked through their history, they specifically named transgressions they had committed as a nation. A couple of aspects emerge as especially important, because they are repeated: (1) Israel cast God’s law away, and (2) they persecuted the prophets.

In other words, they realized that God’s law and His prophets were essential to their development as a godly nation and as individuals. The prayer emphasizes this conclusion by stating that “if a man does” God’s commandments, “he shall live by them” (*Neh. 9:29, NKJV; direct quote from Lev. 18:5*) and by highlighting that it is the Spirit that spoke through the prophets. God has given us His commandments for an abundant life, and He sent His prophets to guide us in our understanding of His truth. What we do with these gifts is the essential question for us all.

Praise and Petition

Read Nehemiah 9:32–38. What is the focus of the conclusion of the prayer of confession?

Once again the prayer turns to praising God for who He is: great, mighty, and awesome, One who keeps the covenant and has mercy. They seem sincere in their acknowledgment of God’s goodness to them.

They also bring a petition in the form of making a covenant with God, which is described in detail in chapter 10. What is their petition?

“Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and awesome God, who keeps covenant and mercy: do not let all the trouble seem small before You that has come upon us” (*Neh. 9:32, NKJV*).

The community has to pay tribute to the kings who are over them. Oppression from every side is plaguing the small company of Israelites, and they are tired of it. They have had to endure one tyranny after another, and they are hoping for a reprieve.

Interestingly, they call themselves “servants.” After outlining the infidelity of their nation, they end by referring to themselves with that word. Servants, of course, obey those who are over them. The use of this term, then, implies that they realize they need to obey the Lord in ways that those who came before them didn’t. This is an expression of their desire to be faithful to the Lord and His commandments. And, as servants of God, they are asking Him to intervene in their behalf.

The community of Ezra and Nehemiah describe their current experience as being “in great distress” (*Neh. 9:37*), which can be compared to the affliction the Israelites experienced in Egypt (*Neh. 9:9*). Their prayer praises God for seeing their affliction in Egypt and not overlooking it. The community is now asking God to intervene just as He had in the past, even though they don’t deserve it, because no one—kings, princes, priests or prophets, or fathers—was faithful. Thus, they are relying only on God’s grace and mercy to them, and not on themselves or in their ancestors’ works, in hopes that the Lord will intervene in their behalf.

Read Romans 5:6–8. How do these texts reflect what the Israelites were asking of God? What comfort can we draw from what the Israelites were asking and what Paul was saying in Romans?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Confession,” pp. 37–41, in *Steps to Christ*.

In Nehemiah 9:25, the Hebrews talked about how their ancestors “delighted themselves” (*NKJV*) in God’s great goodness. The verbal root is the same as the name Eden, as in the “garden of Eden” (*Gen. 2:15*). Perhaps the best translation would be “they edenized themselves” if only *edenized* were a verb.

The gospel is, after all, restoration, and what better symbol can there be than Eden to represent what we are ultimately to be restored to? God raised up the Hebrew people and brought them to the crossroads of the ancient world in order to create the closest reflection of Eden that could exist on a fallen earth. Even after the captivity and return, the potential was still there. “For the LORD will comfort Zion, He will comfort all her waste places; He will make her wilderness like Eden” (*Isa. 51:3, NKJV*).

Yes, the people enjoyed the material blessings that the Lord had promised them, blessings that, to whatever degree possible in a fallen world, were reminiscent of the abundance of Eden. And that was fine. They were supposed to enjoy them. God created the physical world precisely in a way that humans could enjoy, and ancient Israel—blessed of God—enjoyed it, too. Their sin was not in “edenizing themselves” in God’s great goodness, but in forgetting the Lord (*Ezek. 23:35*), whose goodness they were enjoying. The blessings became an end in and of themselves instead of a means to an end, which was to reveal God to those around them.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Jesus had said, “Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful” (*Matt. 13:22, NKJV*). What does He mean by “the deceitfulness of riches,” and how does this relate to the prayer of confession that we studied this week?
- 2 Dwell again on the doctrine of Creation. Notice in the prayer of Nehemiah 9 that they almost immediately talked about the Lord as Creator and Sustainer. What does that tell us about how foundational this doctrine is to our faith?
- 3 How do we strike the right balance in acknowledging our inherent sinfulness and yet, at the same time, not allow Satan to use our sinfulness in ways that could cause us to be discouraged and to give up our faith entirely?

Present for Uganda's President

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Seventh-day Adventist Church president Ted N. C. Wilson was thinking about religious literature when I arrived in a hotel lobby in Uganda to accompany him and other church leaders to a meeting with the African country's president, Yoweri Museveni. "I have a pen for the president," Pastor Wilson told church leaders, referring to a special pen engraved with the name and logo of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. "But do you have some books for him?"

I spoke up. "I have a nice-looking color *Steps to Christ* up in my room," I said. Glancing at his watch, Pastor Wilson urged me to hurry upstairs for the book.

As I rushed to my room, I marveled that I had packed the book in the first place. Two weeks earlier, I shook my head no when my father asked whether I planned to take any sharing books on the trip. I explained that I had taken five copies of *Steps to Christ* on my previous trip, to Russia, and had struggled to find any takers.

"You should take some books anyway," my father insisted.

Reluctantly, I bought five copies of *Steps to Christ* at the Adventist Book Center in Keene, Texas. But the books hadn't satisfied my father. "Will you take a new Bible, too?" he asked.

I often buy a new Bible before a trip just in case I'm asked to give a sermon, and then I give it away. I prefer to read the Bible on my cell phone, but I don't like to hold my cell phone while preaching. "No need for a Bible," I told my father. "I won't be preaching."

My father had not been deterred. At his insistence, I had bought a black-leather New King James Version Bible. In the Ugandan hotel room, I remembered the Bible and took it and *Steps to Christ* to Pastor Wilson.

A short time later, President Museveni welcomed us to State House Uganda in Entebbe and immediately plied Pastor Wilson with questions about why Adventists keep the Sabbath on Saturday. Pastor Wilson gave a short Bible study and, later, appealed for the country to abolish Saturday exams for Adventist students. To his delight, President Museveni agreed to look into the matter.

Pastor Wilson presented the engraved pen to President Museveni and suggested that he could use it to sign important documents or, more important, to underline verses in the Bible. Then he handed over the Bible and *Steps to Christ* to President Museveni, left, who smilingly raised them for the guests to see.



That evening, I excitedly called my father on Skype. "Thank you for listening to the promptings of the Holy Spirit," I said.

Now in my travels, I always carry a brand-new Bible and copies of *Steps to Christ*.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Nehemiah 9:17*

Study Focus: *Nehemiah 9*

Nehemiah 9 records a prayer of confession by the people of Israel. On the twenty-fourth day of the seventh month, the Israelites again gathered together for a time of confession, prayer, and fasting.

Once again, the day begins with reading from the Book of the Law. The immersion in the Word of God is convicting; corporately the people turn to God in repentance. However, they are not just repenting of their sins of the moment but of the nation's sins throughout their history.

They recount all that the nation has done since the time of Abraham in failing to follow God. It shows a pattern of struggling to walk with God, even abandoning Him. Yet, God comes to them again and again and rescues them. Amazingly, the readings in the Torah lead them to piece together a story of human failure and God's triumph. The prayer begins and ends with praises to God, while also petitioning Him to once again intervene in their behalf.

They were reminded that just as God has been faithful in the past, He will continue to take care of them now. Despite the hardships they endure in their homeland as they rebuild the temple, the walls, and the city, God sees them and will not forsake them. In the end, they commit to signing a covenant with God.

Part II: Commentary

Structure of Nehemiah 9

- I. The people read from the Book of the Law (*Neh. 9:1–3*).
- II. Prayer of confession (*Neh. 9:4–38*)
 1. Praising God (*Neh. 9:4–8*)
 2. God's faithfulness in spite of Israel's unfaithfulness in Egypt and in the wilderness (*Neh. 9:9–22*)
 3. God's goodness in spite of Israel's unfaithfulness in the land of Canaan (*Neh. 9:23–31*)
 4. Praising and petitioning God (*Neh. 9:32–38*)

Reading From the Book of the Law

The occasion was well organized: the Levites read from Scripture for

a fourth of the day and then, for another several hours, the people confessed their sins and wrongs and worshiped God. Imagine the powerful experience of reading the Bible or listening to it for many hours straight, followed by confession and praises to God for several additional hours, which seems almost unbelievable for such a large assembly. Such devotion would require incredible focus and an amazing thirst for God.

Perhaps what drove the people to seek God with perseverance was a desire to see God act. They were worried. Their anxiety is demonstrated by the petition in their prayer, “Do not let all the trouble seem small before You that has come upon us” (*Neh. 9:32, NKJV*). In other words, the people are pleading for God not to overlook all that has been happening to them: they are not welcomed in their own land by the surrounding nations; they have endured persecution; and they are doing hard work, trying to rebuild their beloved city. They ask God to intervene, to act, to see and hear, and respond. At the end of their time together, the leaders invite the whole assembly to rise. Then they begin to cry to the Lord and pray the prayer recorded for us in Nehemiah 9:5–38, which belongs among the best prayers recorded in the Bible.

Prayer of Confession

The corporate public prayers and confession, recorded in Nehemiah 9, demonstrate a deep understanding of the nature of sin, as well as a consciousness of their insufficient love for their neighbor. The people fasted and put dust on their heads, outward signs of humbling oneself before God. The humble approach to the past sins of the nation showed that the returned captives realized how easily they could fall into the same pattern of disobedience and unfaithfulness to God as their forefathers. They did not want the cycle to continue.

The Israelites acknowledged the sins of their nation that had led them into exile. They had pushed God out of their lives, in effect saying, “God, we don’t want You!” Because God respects our wishes and does not force Himself on His subjects, He let His people experience the consequences of their rejection of Him. Perhaps the best description of what happens when we push God out is in the book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel paints the picture of God moving out of Israel after sending warning after warning to the people (*Ezek. 5:11, Ezek. 8:6*). When the people do not want Him, God moves out. His throne moves toward the Mount of Olives, and as His presence leaves Jerusalem, destruction hits (*see also Matt. 23:37 and 38*). When God’s protection is withdrawn, Satan moves in, for he “is prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for anyone he can devour” (*1 Pet. 5:8, CSB*).

Now the people of Israel look back at everything they had done as a nation.

They are horrified at how badly they had followed God. Moreover, every individual was aware of his or her own insufficiency in walking with God.

Yet, they also saw a pattern in God's faithfulness. As in the book of Ezekiel, their story does not end with God moving out of Jerusalem (*Ezek. 43:1–5, Ezek. 48:35*). But when they are exiled to Babylon, God moves with them to Babylon. He would never leave His people. He let them go for a little while in order to awaken them and draw them back to walking with Him, but He never let go of them. At the end of the book of Ezekiel, He promises to take them back to Jerusalem and moves back there with them. The returned captives experienced the movement of God back to the land of Israel. He was with them.

In Nehemiah 9:20, the people point out that God gave His “good Spirit” to them to instruct (*sakhal*) them. The word already appeared in chapter 8; it means “to understand, to be prudent, and wise.” God gives the best gifts. The Holy Spirit is given not only to the believers in the New Testament but also to believers in the Old Testament. The Holy Spirit was given to them to teach them and to make them wise. That is what the Holy Spirit does for us when we allow Him to “instruct” us. God gave the Israelites everything they wanted and “needed” (the Holy Spirit, food, water, kingdoms, land, victory in war, cisterns, vineyards, olive groves, and fruit trees). Yet, the people delighted themselves only in the things that God gave them instead of in God Himself. Amazingly, when hard times hit and the people cried out to God, He heard them again. Why? Because of His great mercy.

The prayer begins with addressing God—“You” (*Neh. 9:5, 6*)—and ends with “we,” as the people cry out to God in their despair and fragility (*Neh. 9:37, 38*). The contrast between God's goodness and faithfulness and human sinfulness cannot be overemphasized. Confession of sins changes the situation. After identifying with the sin of their forefathers, they finally stated: “We acted wickedly” (*Neh. 9:33, NIV*).

Although the theme of repentance for sin is woven throughout the prayer, the theme of God's mercy is emphasized. The word for mercy is *rakhamim*, meaning “compassion, mercy and pity.” It comes from the word *rekhem*, which means a mother's womb. Just as a mother nurtures and has love for her child, so the word *rakhamim* demonstrates that God has love and compassion for His children. The word for mercy is repeated six times in Nehemiah 9 (*Neh. 9:17, 19, 27, 28, twice in 31*). Additionally, the word *khesed* appears twice (*see Neh. 9:17 and 32*). *Khesed* usually is translated as steadfast love but also can be translated as kindness or mercy. The idea of God's mercy and love is contrasted with the people's unfaithfulness. The people attributed all they had to their own achievements, and yet God did not forsake them. They chose

to worship other gods, and yet God did not desert them. As Nehemiah 9:17 states: “But thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness, and forsookest them not.” Our God is always ready to forgive and to transform our lives.

Another phrase the Levites repeat in the prayer is “You heard from heaven” (*Neh. 9:27, 28, NKJV*). Whenever the people cried to God, He always heard them. God waits for us to call on Him. Whenever we do, He hears. He does not ignore our tears or pleas. It may sometimes seem to us that God is silent because we do not have the answers we want; however, He stops every time we call just as He stopped for the blind man Bartimaeus, who kept calling out to Jesus because he wanted to see (*Mark 10*). God came down on Mount Sinai in order to speak with the people, even though they rejected Him afterward and instead chose a golden calf to worship. Why does God pursue us so endlessly? It is because He longs to be close to us. The Israelites claimed the promise that God always hears us. Because He heard their ancestors, they have faith that He now also will hear them and answer. And He does.

Part III: Life Application

Just as the Israelites realized that they could learn from the experiences and failures of their forefathers, so we also can learn from the Israelites today.

- 1. Which of the actions of the Israelites delineated in their prayer stands out to you as something we need to be mindful of today, as well?**

- 2. What has God done in your past? Write it out on a piece of paper or graph a time line of His intervention in your life, following the instructions below:**

- a. Outline your family’s life and their walk with God. Draw the ups and downs and label them. Go as far back as you can remember,**

graphing what happened within the family. Label the points at which different family members accepted Christ. What do you notice from the drawing?

b. Now do the same for your own life on a piece of paper.

(1) Write in at which points you can clearly see God's guidance.

(2) Do you see any patterns? If so, what are they?

Although our failures are real, the hope we have is that Jesus has mercy on us and gives us His righteousness to cover us. Just as the Israelites had the promise of God's great mercy, we have it today, as well. What can you put in God's hands, knowing that God is full of mercy and love for you?