

Entering the Holy of Holies Nehemiah 9

By Dave Urbanski

Nehemiah 9 contains what Pastor Scott this Sunday called "the longest prayer in the Bible."

It certainly possesses a high word count. However, every phrase and entreaty and proclamation and praise is full of meaning and depth. It's the kind of prayer you never forget. In fact, it contains the very story — the very theology — of God!

Pastor Scott summed up the 38 verses with three truths about the Lord: He's in control, he's good, he cares. Then, as we got into the narrative of the chapter, God's incomparable love and truly unbelievable patience began flowing like a faucet until it blasted down upon us to overflowing.

We pick up the action on the 24th day of the month, which followed worship and reading and studying of Scripture — and then the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles in the previous chapter of Nehemiah. So the people of Jerusalem at this point are intently focused on the things of God. Which brings us to the lengthy, compelling prayer.

The end of verse 8 is a declaration that God always can be trusted: "And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous." Verse 9 indicates that the Lord can see our pain — and cares about us: "And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea." In verse 12 we find that God led the Israelites — and still leads us today by the same heavenly power: "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." The Lord also gave us "right rules" and "true laws" to guide our lives (v. 13).

At this point the tone of the prayer shifts from God's complete faithfulness to our consistent lack of faithfulness. The truth that despite all that the Lord has given to his beloved, our pattern of throwing away his blessings raises its ugly head. And then we see how God is always willing to forgive, no matter how many times we've forsaken his infinite generosity.

And how many times in this chapter do we see this taking place? Let's take a look.

Initially we see how the Lord is in control, good, and that he cares for us, whether it's making a way from the bondage of Egyptian captivity to sweet freedom or giving us his Ten Commandments. Yet the Israelites "acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments." (v. 16) But still, "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." (vv. 17-19)

Already we're seeing the reinforced truth that God's love and forgiveness for us isn't based on our behavior; and that's the very posture the Lord uses toward us.

We then see through verse 25 God bringing the people of Israel to the Promised Land and defeating their enemies and giving them every single thing they need to survive (including manna, the very bread falling from heaven).

But guess what happens next? You guessed it.

"Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies." (v. 26)

At this point the Lord sees fit to hand his children over to their enemies, YET when they cry out to God in distress ... HE STILL HEARS THEM and saves them.

Guess what happens next? (Are we seeing a pattern here?) Once they've rested, the Israelites "did evil again before you." (v. 28) But whereas most of us — if not all of us — would've permanently written off his children, the Lord keeps coming back for them. And he does so even more in this chapter! It kind of comes across as a rotten deal for God and an endless parade of second chances for us, doesn't it? Certainly no transactional faith going on here. We're incapable of satisfying the Lord's requirements and are alive only by his mercy.

Now check out what's happening by the end of the chapter: "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." However, things end with the Jews promising that "because of all this we make a firm covenant in writing; on the sealed document are the names of..."

Have the people of Jerusalem been kidding themselves? Is not this prayer from Nehemiah 9 sufficient to show us how far we are from the Lord without Christ's sacrifice? It certainly is!

Then what are we to do? Placing our faith in Jesus and repenting of our sin is the first step. But let us not stop there. Let us ask ourselves, "Do we only communicate with the Lord when life is going downhill or tragedy strikes?" Fortunately God's posture toward us — the relational aspect that truly matters — isn't about punishing us for sin. He's not going to "get us" or behave in a retribution-filled manner.

But what if your sins are REALLY BAD? Okay, that's a little bit different. (Just kidding). No, actually it doesn't matter how badly you've sinned or how many times you've sinned; coming to the Lord is always an open door, 24/7.