



Nehemiah - Chapter Nine

IV Nehemiah 7:73b-10:39 - The Reading of the Law, and Covenant Renewal (continues)

Summary of Chapter Nine

The next phase in the great act of covenant renewal is a prayer of praise, confession and petition.

IV.c Nehemiah 9:1-37 - National Confession

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads.

Nehemiah 9:1

Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month. It is still the seventh month, after the seven days of the Festival of Booths and an eighth day of solemn assembly; refer to Nehemiah 8:18.

The people of Israel were assembled. After the wall was completed, after the wall was providing the physical and psychological security for the people of Jerusalem, after the people had heard and obeyed God's Word, after the Holy Spirit had done a significant work in the lives of people - now there is a scene of dramatic, humble repentance - the ongoing work of the Spirit, of course.

Assembled with fasting. Fasting showed their lowly, humble state. They considered themselves so poor before God that they ate no food. They also wanted to say, "we are so troubled by our sin, food seems unimportant to us."

In sackcloth. This was wearing a very coarse, rough fabric woven from flax or hemp. Again, this was to show their complete poverty of spirit before God. They

also wanted to say, “we are so troubled by our sin, the normal comforts of life are unimportant.”

With dust on their heads. This meant they took little handfuls of dirt and cast them on their heads. This was also to show their lowly state before God, and to say “we are so troubled by our sin, the normal comforts of life are unimportant to us.”

All of this reflects a humble attitude of heart - humble not only towards God, but also humble towards man. They did this publicly and others would see them in this public state. There may have been those among them who said, “I will not humiliate myself and join in.” Others might have said, “I’ll do it, just so others can see that I’m spiritual too.” But there were many, if not most, who came to God with truly humble, repentant hearts.

² Then those of Israelite descent separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their ancestors.

Nehemiah 9:2

Then those of Israelite descent separated themselves from all foreigners. This is in line with the measures described in Ezra Chapters 9 and 10. Here it refers not just to marriage but also to the integrity of the community in general.

Stood and confessed. It should not seem strange that after such great victories, both with the building projects and in spiritually in their lives before God, that there was such humble repentance. This shows that repentance is not something that finishes after coming to Jesus. It is something that grows as a Christian grows closer to Jesus.

Charles Spurgeon commented, “Repentance grows as faith grows. Do not make any mistake about it; repentance is not a thing of days and weeks, a temporary penance to be got over as fast as possible! No it is the grace of a lifetime, like faith itself. Repentance is the inseparable companion of faith.”

Confessed their sins. This is always a good starting point when coming before God. The confession of sin opens the heart to correction from the Lord and makes true repentance more likely to occur.

The English word sin comes from the idea ‘to miss the mark.’ In an archery tournament, if one did not hit the target in the right place, they would say they ‘sinned.’ A sin might miss the target by an inch, or it might miss it by ten feet - but it was still a sin either way. People sin when they do what God has told people not to do, either in his Word, in human conscience, or through legitimate authority, or when people do not do what God has told them to do,

again through his Word, the human conscience, or by someone in authority. Not all sin is the same, but all sin is sin.

The iniquities of their ancestors, that is, of all previous generations, as in the prayer that follows in vv.6-37. This was also important because they had to admit that not only were they sinners but they came from sinful ancestors. This was especially important in Israel, where there was a tradition of glorifying their forefathers and living as much by the traditions as by the Scriptures.

This does not mean there was some type of ‘generational curse’ that had to be broken. God does not punish the children for their father’s sin and it is evil to claim that he does; refer to Ezekiel Chapter 18. It is, however, recognised that those raised in an environment of sin may very well repeat those same sins, not because they must but because their environment made it an easy choice for them to make. Learned behaviour is often more prevalent than the real character of the individual.

This great, humble gathering of God’s people took place only two days after the end of the joyful celebration of the Festival of Booths or Tabernacles. They had drawn close to God and now he is drawing them even closer!

³ They stood up in their place and read from the book of the law of the Lord their God for a fourth part of the day, and for another fourth they made confession and worshipped the Lord their God.

Nehemiah 9:3

They stood up in their place and read from the book of the law. The humble repentance and confession of sin would have been an incomplete work if it were not for hearing the Word and worship. God does not show reveal a person’s sin to them just so they will humbly confess it, but so that the repentant sinner can walk on in what is right before him.

The book of the law of the Lord. The phrase presumably refers here to all or most of what is known as the Pentateuch, although in Deuteronomy similar expressions apparently refer to that book in particular; refer to Deuteronomy 28:58, 28:61 and 31:9; as well as 2 Kings 22:8 and the associated comments.

They made confession and worshipped the Lord their God. This brokenness of heart has led them to humbly come before God and hear his Word. A sure first step of revival is this brokenness of heart.

⁴ Then Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, and Chenani stood on the stairs of the Levites and cried out with a loud voice to the Lord their God. ⁵ Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani,

Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, 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.’

Nehemiah 9:4-5

Some of these leading Levites were among those who interpreted the law while Ezra read it; refer to Nehemiah 8:7-8. These leaders gathered to lead the people in their humble confession. It should be no great surprise, or make a believer feel like a failure, if they must be led into confession and repentance. The leaders now lead in prayer. Ezra himself seems to have fallen into the background. Yet some translations, including the NRSVA here, have <<**And Ezra said**>> at the beginning of v.6, following the ancient Greek text, not the Hebrew.

Stood on the stairs of the Levites and cried out with a loud voice to the Lord their God. Obviously, all eight of these men did not pray the following prayer at the same time. Perhaps it was written out and they took turns, perhaps it was spontaneously prayed in succession or perhaps, according to tradition, it was Ezra who prayed this prayer.

Introduction to Nehemiah 9:6-37

The following prayer is thought to be the longest prayer in the Bible and yet takes only a few minutes to say. Prayer does not need to be long to be glorious and effective: <<**Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few**>> (Ecclesiastes 5:2).

The prayer resembles in part Ezra’s prayer of confession upon his discovery of the problem of mixed marriages in Ezra 9:6-15. It has even more in common with certain psalms of confession such as Psalms 78 and 105-106, which interweave confession with memories of God’s grace and notes of petition. The prayer follows the biblical story as told from Genesis to Kings, i.e. creation to exile.

⁶ And Ezra said: ‘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. To all of them you give life, and the host of heaven worships you. ⁷ You are the Lord, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham; ⁸ and you found his heart faithful before you, and made with him a covenant to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and

the Gergashite; and you have fulfilled your promise, for you are righteous.

Nehemiah 9:6-8

And Ezra said. Refer to the comment made on vv.4-5 above.

The Levites' prayer begins with Genesis: the universal God of creation chose Abram and brought his descendants into the land he promised to them.

You are the Lord, you alone. The uniqueness of Israel's God was proclaimed in the story of creation. It forms the basis of the *shema* that serves as a centrepiece of the morning and evening Jewish prayer services: <<*Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might*>> (Deuteronomy 6:4-5).

The Lord alone is Israel's God, 'the only one.' It is a statement of exclusivity, not of the internal unity of God. This point arises from the argument of Deuteronomy Chapter 4 and the first commandment. While Deuteronomy does not argue theoretically for monotheism, it requires Israel to observe a practical monotheism: <<*To you it was shown so that you would acknowledge that the Lord is God; there is no other besides him*>> (Deuteronomy 4:35). This stood in sharp contrast to the polytheistic Canaanites.

You have made heaven, the earth and all that is on it. Together these sum up the whole creation: <<*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth*>> (Genesis 1:1), and: <<*For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it*>> (Exodus 20:11). After the encouragement to praise, the leaders gave a reason to praise - because this is the great God who made it all. Looking at the glory of God's creation provides every reason to praise him, to be humble before him and to trust in him alone.

All their host could refer to either angels: <<*And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'*>> (Luke 2:13-14), or stars: <<*And when you look up to the heavens and see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, do not be led astray and bow down to them and serve them, things that the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples everywhere under heaven*>> (Deuteronomy 4:19).

The host of heaven worships you. God wants people to praise him, to humble themselves before him, and to trust him - but he gives everyone good reason to. People sometimes want their own reasons, but God gives them plenty of his own reasons and that should always suffice.

Ur of the Chaldeans was in southern Mesopotamia: <<*Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife, and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there*>> (Genesis 11:31).

Gave him the name Abraham: <<*No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations*>> (Genesis 17:5). The transformation of Abram's name (father of many) to Abraham (father of many nations) encapsulates the purpose of the covenant.

Made with him a covenant to give to his descendants. God promised Abraham both descendants and land when he made a covenant with him. This was essentially a covenant of promise; refer to Genesis 15:18-21 and 17:4-8. The promise to drive out other nations had particular overtones in this period of restoration to the land.

You have fulfilled your promise. This says to God, "Lord, you promised this land to Abraham and his descendants, and now here we are! Your promise is indeed true." History teaches that because God has kept his promises to his people in the past there is no reason to think that he will not continue to do so in the future.

You are righteous. This is one of God's essential characteristics: <<*The Rock, his work is perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God, without deceit, just and upright is he*>> (Deuteronomy 32:4), and: <<*You are righteous, O Lord, and your judgements are right*>> (Psalm 119:137), shown here in his faithfulness to his promises.

⁹ 'And you saw the distress of our ancestors in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea. ¹⁰ You performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants and all the people of his land, for you knew that they acted insolently against our ancestors. You made a name for yourself, which remains to this day. ¹¹ And you divided the sea before them, so that they passed through the sea on dry land, but you threw their pursuers into the depths, like a stone into mighty waters. ¹² Moreover, you led them by day with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire, to give them light on the way in which they should go. ¹³ You came down also upon Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven, and gave them right ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments, ¹⁴ and you made known your holy sabbath to them and gave them commandments and statutes and a law through your servant Moses. ¹⁵ For their hunger you gave them bread from heaven, and for their thirst you brought water for them out of

the rock, and you told them to go in to possess the land that you swore to give them.

Nehemiah 9:9-15

The prayer now recalls God's deliverance of Israel in the exodus from Egypt, as told in the Book of Exodus.

And you saw the distress of our ancestors in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea. This telescopes the whole story from Exodus Chapters 2-15; refer especially to Exodus 2:23-25 and 14:1-15:27. A second sure sign of revival, following brokenness of heart, is reflection on the goodness of God. When human pride is cast down and hearts are humble before God, people can begin to see him for who he is - and when they see that, they see how good God is.

You performed signs and wonders, and divided the sea. This phrase refers to the miracles done against Pharaoh to compel him to release the Israelites; refer to Exodus Chapters 7-15.

The pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire provided God's guidance: <<*The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people*>> (Exodus 13:21-22).

Mount Sinai is the place of the Mosaic covenant, where God gave the Ten Commandments and other rules, ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments, i.e. detailed instructions applying the force of the Ten Commandments to many cases in life. Law codes are found in Exodus 20:22-23:19, throughout the entire Book of Leviticus and in Deuteronomy Chapters 12-26.



Mount Sinai

For their hunger you gave them bread from heaven, and for their thirst you brought water for them out of the rock. Throughout the wilderness years God provided manna each and every day, with a double ration on Fridays so that the people did not have to collect it on the Sabbath: <<*When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, 'What is it?' For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, 'It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat'*>> (Exodus 16:14-15). When the people were thirsty God provided them with water: <<*I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so*

that the people may drink.’ Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel>> (Exodus 17:6).

Although the people at the time were in need of such sustenance for their very lives and subsequent generations would hear of the miracle and give thanks, it is only in the Christian era that true understanding can be found: *<<I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh>> (John 6:51), <<On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.”’ Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified>> (John 7:37-39), and: <<I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ>> (1 Corinthians 10:1-4).*

¹⁶ ‘But they and our ancestors acted presumptuously and stiffened their necks and did not obey your commandments; ¹⁷ they refused to obey, and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them; but they stiffened their necks and determined 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 you did not forsake them. ¹⁸ Even when they had cast an image of a calf for themselves and said, “This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt”, and had committed great blasphemies, ¹⁹ you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness; the pillar of cloud that led them in the way did not leave them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night that gave them light on the way by which they should go. ²⁰ You gave your good spirit to instruct them, and did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and gave them water for their thirst. ²¹ For forty years you sustained them in the wilderness so that they lacked nothing; their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell.

[Nehemiah 9:16-21](#)

[But they and our ancestors acted presumptuously and stiffened their necks and did not obey your commandments.](#) Israel has often rebelled against God and must rely on his grace: *<<When the Lord your God thrusts them out before you, do*

not say to yourself, 'It is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in to occupy this land'; it is rather because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is dispossessing them before you. It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you are going in to occupy their land; but because of the wickedness of those nations that the Lord your God is dispossessing them before you, in order to fulfil the promise that the Lord made on oath to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. Know, then, that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to occupy because of your righteousness; for you are a stubborn people>> (Deuteronomy 9:4-6). This was a terrible response to the great and good works of God on behalf of Israel. God had been so good to Israel but they continuously rebelled generation after generation. Sin is bad enough; but to consider that sin is against a God who has only ever treated his people, indeed all people, well, is far, far, worse.

Stiffened their necks, refused to obey, were not mindful of the wonders. This is a third sure sign of revival - recognition of one's own sinfulness. When people humbly seek God and see his goodness, they cannot help but notice their own sinfulness - the blackness of sin stands out against the brightness of God's purity and goodness.

Determined to return to their slavery in Egypt: <<*So they said to one another, 'Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt'*>> (Numbers 14:4). The people must have gone ahead and chosen a different leader from Moses, although Numbers Chapter 14 contains no record of the actual appointment.

Choosing a new leader in a democratic society is something that has become commonplace. However, for the people to choose their own leader to replace the one who was so clearly chosen by God almost defies belief.

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. God's gracious answer to the rebellion of Israel was glorious. God's readiness to pardon the Israelites is especially wonderful for it indicates that there is nothing keeping God from pardoning people today except for their refusal to come to him through Jesus. He is ready to pardon them, if they are ready to receive it.

Even when they had cast an image of a calf for themselves refers to the apostasy committed while the covenant was still being made at Sinai when the people demanded that Aaron make for them a Golden Calf to worship; refer to Exodus Chapter 32 and Deuteronomy 9:7-21. Yet God was ready to forgive, gracious and merciful: <<*The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the*

guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation'>> (Exodus 34:6-7). God immediately made a new covenant and promised his continued presence, despite Israel's sin.

For forty years you sustained them in the wilderness. The Levites' confession continues to recount God's goodness in the wilderness: <<*Surely the Lord your God has blessed you in all your undertakings; he knows your going through this great wilderness. These forty years the Lord your God has been with you; you have lacked nothing*>> (Deuteronomy 2:7). Christians are often impressed at just how patient God is with the sinner; how he somehow holds back his terrible judgement against those people who deserve it so badly. Yet it seems that his patience toward believers is even greater, those who have received so much more from him, but still act in the way that Israel did.

Their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell is taken from Deuteronomy 8:4, recounting God's extraordinary preservation.

²² And you gave them kingdoms and peoples, and allotted to them every corner, so they took possession of the land of King Sihon of Heshbon and the land of King Og of Bashan. ²³ You multiplied their descendants like the stars of heaven, and brought them into the land that you had told their ancestors to enter and possess. ²⁴ 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 hands, with their kings and the peoples of the land, to do with them as they pleased. ²⁵ And they captured fortress cities and a rich land, and took possession of houses filled with all sorts of goods, hewn cisterns, vineyards, olive orchards, and fruit trees in abundance; so they ate, and were filled and became fat, and delighted in your great goodness.

Nehemiah 9:22-25

And you gave them kingdoms and peoples. At this point the prayer retells in brief the story of the occupation of the land. It covers the events of the Book of Joshua, using the language of Deuteronomy.

The land of King Sihon of Heshbon and the land of King Og of Bashan. The Israelites wanted to cross into the Promised Land from Transjordan and Moses requested peaceful passage through the land, even offering to pay for any resources such as water. However, each king in turn tried to oppose Israel and so

the Lord gave them and their land into the Israelites' hands. Refer to Deuteronomy 2:26-3:11 for the full account.

You multiplied their descendants like the stars of heaven. God had first promised this would be the case to Abraham before he had any descendants at all: <<*He brought him outside and said, 'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be'>> (Genesis 15:5). This was fulfilled even before the people came into the possession of the Promised Land: <<*The Lord your God has multiplied you, so that today you are as numerous as the stars of heaven>> (Deuteronomy 1:10).**

A rich land. The prospect of a plentiful land: <<*For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you>> (Deuteronomy 8:7-10), was accompanied in Deuteronomy by warnings that wealth could lead to abandonment of God: <<*take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear. Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are all around you, because the Lord your God, who is present with you, is a jealous God. The anger of the Lord your God would be kindled against you and he would destroy you from the face of the earth>> (Deuteronomy 6:12-15). Although they were not destroyed as the people of God, they did lose the sole rights to their land and were much diminished in number when they returned.**

Although the modern state of Israel is still clearly blessed by God it is only a remnant of this once great nation. God will always have a place for his people Israel for they are the root of the promise that is Christ and Christians need to heed this: <<*But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not vaunt yourselves over the branches. If you do vaunt yourselves, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. You will say, 'Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in'>> (Romans 11:17-19). This is just one of the passages that negate the unfounded beliefs of replacement theology, i.e. that Christians have replaced the Jews as God's chosen people. This remnant still possess the full promises of God: <<*Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls>> (Joel 2:32), <<*The sea coast shall become the possession of the remnant of the house of Judah, on which they shall pasture, and in the houses of Ashkelon***

they shall lie down at evening. For the Lord their God will be mindful of them and restore their fortunes>> (Zephaniah 2:7), and: <<So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace>> (Romans 11:5).

So they ate, and were filled and became fat, and delighted in your great goodness. The cycle began with God showing his goodness to his people, i.e. **you gave them kingdoms and peoples,** and with God's people being blessed.

²⁶ 'Nevertheless they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their backs and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies. ²⁷ Therefore you gave them into the hands of their enemies, who made them suffer. Then in the time of their suffering they cried out to you and you heard them from heaven, and according to your great mercies you gave them saviours who saved them from the hands of their enemies. ²⁸ But after they had rest, they again did evil before you, and you abandoned them to the hands 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 rescued them according to your mercies.

Nehemiah 9:26-28

Nevertheless they were disobedient and rebelled against you. Then, in the time of comfort and abundance, Gods' people turned from him. This pattern of sin, judgement, repentance, and deliverance is typical of the Book of Judges.

Killed your prophets. God sent his prophets to warn the people and particularly their leaders of the need to repent or face the consequences. Many found it hard to listen to the truth of these brave men and women of God. Some were ridiculed, some imprisoned and some even killed for their faithful service: ***<<Has it not been told my lord what I did when Jezebel killed the prophets of the Lord, how I hid a hundred of the Lord's prophets fifty to a cave, and provided them with bread and water?>> (1 Kings 18:13), <<Thus you testify against yourselves that you are descendants of those who murdered the prophets>> (Matthew 23:31), <<Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers>> (Acts 7:52), and: <<For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judæa, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they have constantly been filling up***

the measure of their sins; but God's wrath has overtaken them at last>>
(1 Thessalonians 2:14-16).

Therefore you gave them into the hands of their enemies. Then, God brings correction - a 'wake-up call' to his people. They were oppressed and their treasures taken. On occasions their king was little more than a tax collector for a foreign king. They were still in the land but beholden to foreign nations.

Then in the time of their suffering they cried out to you and you heard them from heaven. As a result, God's people then turn back to him, although it is always in response to the action that he takes on their behalf rather than a realisation that it is what they should be doing anyway as his chosen people.

But after they had rest, they again did evil before you. Then, blessed and satisfied, God's people again turn away from him and the cycle continues.

²⁹ 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 ordinances, by the observance of which a person shall live. They turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey. ³⁰ For many years you were patient with them, and warned them by your spirit through your prophets; yet they would not listen. Therefore you handed them over to the peoples of the lands. ³¹ Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.

Nehemiah 9:29-31

And you warned them in order to turn them back to your law gives the idea of God's long patience with the Israelites' sin, calling them back by the prophets but ending finally in judgement, is the story of 1-2 Kings.

Therefore you handed them over to the peoples of the lands. For the northern kingdom this meant exile, scattered throughout the empire of Assyria (2 Kings Chapter 17), while for Judah it meant Babylonian exile (2 Kings Chapters 24-25).

Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God. As the cycle continues, the motions of each cycle get deeper and deeper but God does not change. Second Chronicles 36:22-23 and the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah demonstrate that God had kept his promise to bring back a remnant to the land he had given them.

³² 'Now therefore, our God – the great and mighty and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love – do not treat lightly all the hardship that has come upon us, upon our kings, our officials, our

priests, our prophets, our ancestors, and all your people, since the time of the kings of Assyria until today. ³³ You have been just in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly; ³⁴ our kings, our officials, our priests, and our ancestors have not kept your law or heeded the commandments and the warnings that you gave them. ³⁵ Even in their own kingdom, and in the great goodness you bestowed on them, and in the large and rich land that you set before them, they did not serve you and did not turn from their wicked works.

Nehemiah 9:32-35

The great and mighty and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love. Because of who God is, and because of who they are, i.e. rebellious, idolatrous and wicked, they needed God to do the work of saving them from their enemies.

All the hardship refers to the sufferings of both exiles - Assyrian and Babylonian. The people have suffered greatly, yet God has been righteous and just in his judgement of them. This was recognised by one of the first to be taken away to Babylon: <<*Open shame, O Lord, falls on us, our kings, our officials, and our ancestors, because we have sinned against you*>> (Daniel 9:8).

You have been just in all that has come upon us. This gives a good description of what real confession is all about. It recognises that God is right and people are wrong. Confession is agreeing with God about both things.

We have acted wickedly. The prayer acknowledges again that the people sinned amid God's blessing. The Levites and probably Ezra as well included themselves in this for it is never good for the leaders of God's people to separate themselves from the corporate responsibility, as the statement by Daniel above shows.

³⁶ Here we are, slaves to this day – slaves in the land that you gave to our ancestors to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts. ³⁷ Its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins; they have power also over our bodies and over our livestock at their pleasure, and we are in great distress.'

Nehemiah 9:36-37

Here we are, slaves to this day. This sinfulness explains why the people are not yet entirely free and why the blessings of the land are not yet fully enjoyed under Persian rule, even though that rule is somewhat gentler than was the rule of Assyria and Babylon.

Israel, at this time, was not an independent nation - they were a province of the Empire of Persia, and were under heavy Persian taxes and obligations. They ask God to deliver them once again from this oppression!

The mindset of God's people is interesting as seen in the conversation some of them had with Jesus: <<*Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.'* They answered him, 'We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, "You will be made free"?'>> (John 8:31-33). At the time they lived under Roman oppression and their history told them of Egyptian slavery, the oppression of many nations in the early settlement, the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles and life under the Greeks. And yet they had the mindset that, as God's people, they are always free. The same mindset should be held by Christians, as Paul wrote: <<*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect*>> (Romans 12:2).

Verse 38 is v.1 of Chapter 10 in the Hebrew and is part of a new section. It will therefore be commented on in the next chapter.