

# Community of Confession

Bible Background • NEHEMIAH 9:1–37

Printed Text • NEHEMIAH 9:2, 6–7, 9–10, 30–36 | Devotional Reading • LUKE 15:1–10

## Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: UNDERSTAND that confession and repentance are acts of worship; FEEL the need to confess and repent; and CONFESS and repent our shortcomings.

## In Focus

“Happy Birthday!” Michelle and other volunteers yelled at the group of new believers as they blew celebration horns. The church hosted a Happy Birthday Celebration once a month to celebrate new believers who were reborn into the Kingdom of God. Invitations were sent out to family and friends, through the new believers. There were decorations, cone-shaped hats, games, cake and ice cream, and even gifts. However, Michelle’s favorite part of the celebration was listening to the new believers share their testimonies on how God kept them and loved them even before they realized it and their journey to salvation.

The testimonies often encouraged family and friends to give their lives to Christ at the birthday event or at least visit the church for Sunday services. After one of the volunteers closed the meeting in prayer, Michelle encouraged the guests of the new believers by saying, “I look forward to celebrating your ‘reborn day’ with you real soon!” Today’s lesson reminds us that as Christians, we can have joy and celebrate life while acknowledging God as the source of every good and perfect gift.

## Keep In Mind

“And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers, and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers” (Nehemiah 9:2, KJV).

## Words You Should Know

**A. Confessed** (Nehemiah 9:2) yadah (Heb.) – Made confession; cast out.

**B. Iniquities** (v. 2) `avon (Heb.) – Depravities, guilt.

## Say It Correctly

**Chaldees.** KAL-dees, KAHL-

## KJV

**Nehemiah 9:2** And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers, and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers.

**6** Thou, even thou, art Lord alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein, and thou preservest them all; and the host of heaven worshippeth thee.

**7** Thou art the Lord the God, who didst choose Abram, and broughtest him forth out of Ur of the Chaldees, and gavest him the name of Abraham;

**9** And didst see the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, and heardest their cry by the Red sea;

10 And shewedst signs and wonders upon Pharaoh, and on all his servants, and on all the people of his land: for thou knewest that they dealt proudly against them. So didst thou get thee a name, as it is this day.

30 Yet many years didst thou forbear them, and testifiedst against them by thy spirit in thy prophets: yet would they not give ear: therefore gavest thou them into the hand of the people of the lands.

31 Nevertheless for thy great mercies' sake thou didst not utterly consume them, nor forsake them; for thou art a gracious and merciful God.

32 Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who keepest covenant and mercy, let not all the trouble seem little before thee, that hath come upon us, on our kings, on our princes, and on our priests, and on our prophets, and on our fathers, and on all thy people, since the time of the kings of Assyria unto this day.

33 Howbeit thou art just in all that is brought upon us; for thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly:

34 Neither have our kings, our princes, our priests, nor our fathers, kept thy law, nor hearkened unto thy commandments and thy testimonies, wherewith thou didst testify against them.

35 For they have not served thee in their kingdom, and in thy great goodness that thou gavest them, and in the large and fat land which thou gavest before them, neither turned they from their wicked works.

36 Behold, we are servants this day, and for the land that thou gavest unto our fathers to eat the fruit thereof and the good thereof, behold, we are servants in it:

## NLT

**Nehemiah 9:2** Those of Israelite descent separated themselves from all foreigners as they confessed their own sins and the sins of their ancestors.

6 "You alone are the Lord. You made the skies and the heavens and all the stars. You made the earth and the seas and everything in them. You preserve them all, and the angels of heaven worship you.

7 "You are the Lord God, who chose Abram and brought him from Ur of the Chaldeans and renamed him Abraham.

9 "You saw the misery of our ancestors in Egypt, and you heard their cries from beside the Red Sea.<sup>[a]</sup>

10 You displayed miraculous signs and wonders against Pharaoh, his officials, and all his people, for you knew how arrogantly they were treating our ancestors. You have a glorious reputation that has never been forgotten.

30 In your love, you were patient with them for many years. You sent your Spirit, who warned them through the prophets. But still they wouldn't listen! So once again you allowed the peoples of the land to conquer them. 31 But in your great mercy, you did not destroy them completely or abandon them forever. What a gracious and merciful God you are!

32 "And now, our God, the great and mighty and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of unfailing love, do not let all the hardships we have suffered seem insignificant to you. Great trouble has come upon us and upon our kings and leaders and priests and prophets and ancestors—all of your people—from the days when the kings of Assyria first triumphed over us until now. 33 Every time you punished us you were being just. We have sinned greatly, and you gave us only what we deserved. 34 Our kings, leaders, priests, and ancestors did not obey your Law or listen to the warnings in your commands and laws. 35 Even while they had their own kingdom, they did not serve you, though you showered your goodness on them. You gave them a large, fertile land, but they refused to turn from their wickedness.

36 "So now today we are slaves in the land of plenty that you gave our ancestors for their enjoyment! We are slaves here in this good land.

## The People, Places, and Times

**Post-exilic.** The period of time when the southern tribes returned from their exile in Babylon, returned to Jerusalem, and rebuilt the Temple.

**Prayer.** Dialogue or conversation between God and humankind. Prayer consists of petition, complaint, praise, thanksgiving, and confession.

## Background

Led by Ezra, the people of the southern tribes returned to Jerusalem (Ezra 8:32). After offering “burnt offerings” to God for their safe travel, Ezra was told, “The people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations... For they have taken of their daughters for themselves, and for their sons: so that the holy seed have mingled themselves with the people of those lands” (9:1–2).

As Ezra prayed and confessed to God on behalf of the people their transgression, Shechaniah the son of Jehiel replied to Ezra, “We have trespassed against our God, and have taken strange wives of the people of the land: yet now there is hope in Israel concerning this thing” (10:2). The “thing” Shechaniah spoke of was to divorce the foreign women the men had married.

After the men divorced their foreign wives, the Bible records the return of Nehemiah, who is immediately seen praying to God (Nehemiah 1). In his prayer to God, Nehemiah requests that God hear his confession of his sins and his confession of the sins of the people. Nehemiah asks God to remember the promise God made to the people of Israel and identifies by name the people of Israel who are to be the recipients of God’s promise. Nehemiah petitions God to answer, and then asks God for the success of the rebuilding of the Temple.

After the completion of the Temple, the Bible records Ezra reading the Law of Moses to the people. This reading was in response to their sins and the sins of their ancestors. In response to the reading of the Law, Nehemiah prepared the people to repent with a prayer of confession. This prayer included God’s continued care for the people, God’s covenant with Abraham, the people’s exodus from Egypt, and God’s continued grace and mercy.

### At-A-Glance

1. The People Confess Their Sins (Nehemiah 9:2)
2. The People Numerate Their Sins in Their Confession (vv. 6–7, 9–10, 30–36)

## In Depth

### 1. The People Confess Their Sins (Nehemiah 9:2)

The link between confession of one’s sin and the reading and hearing of Scripture is the beginning of one’s journey of faith. With the hearing and reading of Scripture, the act of forgiveness emerges as the vehicle to accept that only God can and does change. Throughout the Old Testament, the Bible records the disobedience of the people of Israel. The hearing of Scripture often preceded their admission of their sin. “And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses ... before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding” (Nehemiah 8:1–2). Unlike the people of Israel, we are under God’s grace and mercy. With confession of our sins, our confession becomes the vehicle toward our freedom. In Romans 10, Paul explained that the people of Israel were under the law. Our confession of our sins includes our repentance and our belief in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Paul explained that our confession represents what should be in our hearts and mouths: “If you confess with your mouth that

Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead ... it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by confessing with your mouth that you are saved” (Romans 10:9–10, NLT). The songwriter captured the importance of confession of one’s sin with the hearing and reading of the Word when he wrote, “healed by the power of His Word,” for the Word of God delivers, heals, empowers, and transforms.

## **2. The People Numerate Their Sins in Their Confession (vv. 6–7, 9–10, 30–36)**

Both Ezra and the Israelites knew that they had suffered much from the consequences of their own sin. It was not God’s fault that they went into captivity for 70 years into Babylon. They were a stiff-necked, hard-headed, ungrateful people who would not follow God’s edicts, even though they promised to do so time and time again. Therefore, Ezra acknowledged before the people and God that God had been just in His punishment of them for their transgressions. “For our sins are piled higher than our heads, and our guilt has reached to the heavens” (Ezra 9:6, NLT). In other words, they did not try to excuse their transgressions or blame them on someone else. Therefore, they reviewed their past mistakes. We, too, need to do so, so we will not repeat our sins—and improve our behavior. The Israelites had been devastated by past rebellion (they had gone into bondage); but a merciful God heard their cries and delivered them.

### **Search the Scriptures**

1. How did the people of Israel praise God (Nehemiah 9:6–7)?
2. What did the people of Israel recount to God (vv. 9–10)?

### **Discuss the Meaning**

1. Again, the link between confession of one’s sin and the reading and hearing of Scripture is the beginning of one’s journey of faith. With the hearing and reading of Scripture, the act of forgiveness emerges as the vehicle to accept that only God can and does change or transform us.

### **Liberating Lesson**

Confession of one’s sins is empowering because it is the introduction of faith. With faith, one accepts the plans God has for each of us. With faith, one will engage into an intimate relationship with God. With faith, one desires to please God. With faith, one will allow the Holy Spirit that dwells within each of us to lead us. With faith, nothing is impossible. With faith, one is empowered by the reading and hearing of Scripture. With faith, one will love. With faith, one will forgive.

### **Application For Activation**

If the confession of one’s sin and the reading and hearing of Scripture is the beginning of one’s journey of faith, then one should begin with forgiving oneself. Many of us have something in our past or even present that needs to be forgiven. Once we learn to live in the generosity of God’s forgiveness and also forgive ourselves, then the work of forgiving others may begin so the deliverance of past hurts may occur. With forgiveness of others, then learning to love — especially the way God loves—will be achieved. Then, as the songwriter wrote, they will know them by their love—the love of God.

### **Follow the Spirit**

What God wants me to do:

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## Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

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## More Light on the Text

### Nehemiah 9:2, 6–7, 9–10, 30–36

**2 And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers, and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers.**

The occasion for the prayer of community found in chapter 9—the longest prayer in the Bible—is the rediscovery of the Book of God’s Law by Ezra the scribe. Nehemiah 8 tells us that the people gathered to hear Ezra read the Book of the Law. We can only begin to imagine the power of the scene: This was the Law of Moses, and the community had not gathered to hear it read since before the exile to Babylon. Even then, was the Law rarely read in the later, faithless years of Israel’s kingdom history. The Law calls for the Feast of Tabernacles to be observed. After the feast, the people gathered once more. The people were not clothed in the happy raiment of feasting but in the penitential rags of sackcloth with ashes.

Why is it significant that “the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers” (9:2)? The answer goes all the way back to Leviticus 20:26, at the time when Israel was formed: “And ye shall be holy unto me: for I the LORD am holy, and have severed you from other people, that ye should be mine.” This is the heart of Israel’s identity as a people. They were God’s chosen people drawn out from among all others to worship His name (see also Exodus 19:1–20; Deuteronomy 7:6–11). God commanded separateness from other peoples not because Israel was superior to those other peoples—quite the opposite! He knew Israel’s weakness, and how quickly they would fall into idolatry if they with the nations around them. And this is exactly what happened. The worship of other gods became a recurring theme in the history of Israel as a people. This led to its exile into Assyria and Babylon. And yet, despite this dismal history, we learn that many had already begun to intermarry and turn away from Israel’s God (Nehemiah 6:17–19; 13:23–27)! The community was learning the necessity of regular repentance. This chapter is a glorious testimony to their obedience unto repentance. But before they confessed their sins, it was necessary to separate themselves from all that hinted at idolatry, including association with the peoples around them.

Finally, we must observe that Israel does something here the modern mind might find surprising. The people confess not only their own sins but also “the iniquities of their fathers” (Nehemiah 9:2). If anyone wonders why the Jews felt they must apologize for their forefathers, the grim history of their people (explained in the above paragraphs) should be enough to explain it. But the answer also lies in the very nature of God’s people.

Briefly put, God elected for Himself not a group of worshiping individuals, but an entire covenant community. His promises were made to the people as one, and when some of the people broke the promises they had made in return, the whole community suffered (as shown in the destruction of Jerusalem and exile to Babylon, which faithful Israelites like Jeremiah had to share in with the rest). Nor is this understanding of God’s people unique to the Old Testament. It is renewed in the new

covenant through Christ (see Acts 2:38–39). C.S. Lewis paints a helpful picture of this reality for us: “If you could see humanity spread out in time, as God sees it, it would not look like a lot of separate things dotted about. It would look like one single growing thing—rather like a very complicated tree. Every individual would appear connected with every other” (Mere Christianity, 154).

**9:6 Thou, even thou, art LORD alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein, and thou preservest them all; and the host of heaven worshippeth thee.**

True, vital confession springs first not from a knowledge of who we are, but from a knowledge of who God is. As one observer puts it, “The prayer is... an example of confession in both senses of the word: i.e., a confessing of God’s glory and grace as well as man’s ingratitude” (Ezra & Nehemiah, 111). The first sentence, perhaps confusing in the King James, is probably better translated, “You are the LORD, you alone” (Nehemiah 9:6, ESV). In the midst of many nations and many gods, the speaker of this prayer—probably Ezra, but we don’t know for sure—acknowledges that there is no God but one.

One remarkable aspect of this prayer, and a way in which it serves as a model for the prayers of God’s community even today, is the way it tells a story. In this verse, the story begins at creation, with God making the skies. “Heavens” here probably means skies and not heaven as in God’s abode. “Their host” probably refers to the stars and the earth, along with all good things that fill both the earth and sky. Then, from the time He creates, He preserves all things that He has made, even (it might be implied) through cataclysms like the Flood. The prayer also reminds all who hear that the earthly creation worships God by its very existence: “the host of heaven worshippeth thee.”

**7 Thou art the LORD the God, who didst choose Abram, and broughtest him forth out of Ur of the Chaldees, and gavest him the name of Abraham;**

“Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee” (Genesis 17:5). The prayer in Nehemiah 9 remembers Abraham, the father of the nation of Israel. His former name, Abram, meant “exalted father.” But the name God gives him means “father of many.” The people are reminded of their roots in that ancient place of Ur among the Chaldean people, where God made a covenant with a young man and transformed him into the covenantal father of promise. If the theme of verse 6 was “God creates and preserves,” the theme of verse 7 is “God chooses and promises.”

**9:9 And didst see the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, and heardest their cry by the Red sea;  
10 And shewedst signs and wonders upon Pharaoh, and on all his servants, and on all the people of his land: for thou knewest that they dealt proudly against them. So didst thou get thee a name, as it is this day.**

Israel’s exodus through the Red Sea gave an enduring shape to its community. The people remembered it every year on Passover this was when they commemorated their harrowing escape out of slavery, across the sea. The sea should have swallowed them but instead it swallowed the Egyptians. The Israelites escaped to freedom and nationhood in the land promised to Abraham and Jews still celebrate the Passover to remember the Exodus to this day — so powerful is the resonance of an event that took place more than 3,000 years ago. And lest having such a glorious history become a source of pride in Israel, the prayer acknowledges that the Egyptians were swallowed up because “thou knewest that they dealt proudly against” Israel (Nehemiah 9:10). The pattern is clear: The one true God will humble those who seek to raise their fame to a godlike level. God alone is worthy to be remembered for His great deeds: “So didst thou get thee a name, as it to this day.” So Israel’s LORD, Yahweh, is not only Creator and Preserver, the One who calls and promises.

**9:30 Yet many years didst thou forbear them, and testifiedst against them by thy spirit in thy prophets: yet would they not give ear: therefore gavest thou them into the hand of the people of the lands.**

**31 Nevertheless for thy great mercies' sake thou didst not utterly consume them, nor forsake them; for thou art a gracious and merciful God.**

The prayer now summarizes these events with a reminder of why Israel went into exile. The exile would have been a fresh wound on the consciousness of each one present, and a powerfully painful reminder of the discipline of God. The prayer acknowledges that God did right in all things, being not only perfectly just but abundantly merciful, and that the blame for the exile lies solely at the feet of the people themselves. But as has always been true for God's children, the acknowledgment of sin and rebellion is the beginning of hope for a better future. "For thy great mercies' sake thou didst not utterly consume them, nor forsake them" (v. 31); the people gathered in Jerusalem this very day were proof of that! Despite the despair of the exile, hope was returning through God's mercy and the repentance He was granting Israel.

**32 Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who keepest covenant and mercy, let not all the trouble seem little before thee, that hath come upon us, on our kings, on our princes, and on our priests, and on our prophets, and on our fathers, and on all thy people, since the time of the kings of Assyria unto this day.**

The prayer's moving and significant climax brings two ideas to the forefront: first, that God is the Head of His people who disciplines them for their sin, and second, that the human powers—those responsible for Israel's worship and protection—have played a central role in the aggrieving sin that led to this discipline. The people confess that God is utterly powerful, beyond them in every way, and even "terrible" (in the sense of awe-inspiring and holy, not cruel or capricious). And here is the mystery of biblical religion from first to last—the God so mighty beyond comprehension, so other and set apart, is also the God "who keepest covenant and mercy." God makes promises and keeps them even when the promises made back to Him are broken. The people can beseech Him that their history of trouble not "seem little before thee," in the hope that the recognition of their suffering and repentance will prompt Him to mercy. The people confess their hope that their King will never fall short of His promise. Since the first exile, the guilt lies not only on the leaders but also "on our fathers, and on all thy people."

**33 Howbeit thou art just in all that is brought upon us; for thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly:**

**34 Neither have our kings, our princes, our priests, nor our fathers, kept thy law, nor hearkened unto thy commandments and thy testimonies, wherewith thou didst testify against them.**

Near the end of the book of Deuteronomy, the people hold a ceremony (Deuteronomy 27:11–14). Half of Israel's tribes stand on Mount Gerizim, to represent the blessing of God for obedience. The other half stood on Mount Ebal, to represent His curse for disobedience. The Levites declared God's curses and blessings before the people. The Lord has established a godly lifestyle. The people have agreed and bound themselves to the covenant. No one can claim to be unfairly punished. The prayer of confession acknowledges that the people have chosen Mount Ebal: they have chosen the curse. As a result, God was just to carry out what He promised. God was also merciful in allowing a return for this faithful remnant of the people.

**35 For they have not served thee in their kingdom, and in thy great goodness that thou gavest them, and in the large and fat land which thou gavest before them, neither turned they from their wicked works.**

The community's prayer now brings to light another reason God is justified in disciplining the people. Not only did they break their covenantal promises to Him, but they also misused the generosity with which He lavished good things upon them. The "fat land" of their home is the kingdom He gave them when they begged for a king to rule them (see 1 Samuel 8). However, "they have not served thee in their kingdom... neither turned they from their wicked works" (Nehemiah 9:35). This contrast presents a picture of God's righteousness and Israel's guilt.

**36 Behold, we are servants this day, and for the land that thou gavest unto our fathers to eat the fruit thereof and the good thereof, behold, we are servants in it:**

The prayer closes with acknowledgment of a painful irony: the Israelites have now returned to their land as servants rather than masters. They are now, small rather than prosperous. Though this return to Israel was hopeful, the nation never gained its former glory, known under the reigns of David and Solomon. One empire replaced another in ruling over Israel; these included Persia, Greece, and Rome. Israel will look for a greater King, to lead them into the true fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise. He came as a suffering servant rather than a victorious warrior. Because of this, many missed Him when He came—and still overlook Him to this day.



# Daily Bible Readings

## **MONDAY**

Repent and Turn to God  
(Acts 3:17–26)

## **TUESDAY**

A Changed Mind  
(Matthew 21:28–32)

## **WEDNESDAY**

I Repent in Dust and Ashes  
(Job 42:1–6)

## **THURSDAY**

First Be Reconciled  
(Matthew 5:21–26)

## **FRIDAY**

God, Be Merciful to Me  
(Luke 18:9–14)

## **SATURDAY**

Joy in Heaven  
(Luke 15:1–10)

## **SUNDAY**

The Community Confesses Together  
(Nehemiah 9:2, 6–7, 9–10, 30–36)