

# THE PEOPLE WORSHIPED

CORE PASSAGE: NEHEMIAH 9:1-3; 12:27-30

## CONTEXT

After hearing the book of the Law read and then praising, repenting, and celebrating, the people observed the Festival of Shelters (Neh. 8). The law stipulated that the people observe the Festival of Shelters from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> day of the month, and it told them to observe a solemn day of assembly and rest on the 22<sup>nd</sup> day of the month (Neh. 8:18; cf. Lev. 23:24-34). As chapter 9 opens, the observance of this festival has just ended. The Israelites then continued their covenant renewal with God.

## KEY CONCEPT

**Reconciliation with God will include confession, worship, and purification.**

As you examine Nehemiah 9:1-3; 12:27-30:

- Recognize that the people understood their need to confess their sin and recommit to the covenant.
- Reflect on the fact that holiness often requires separation from the things that lead us into sin.



## TIMELINE

Ezra the Priest Returns to Judah and Instructs the People in the Law (Ezra 7–10)

Ezra Reads the Book of the Law in Celebration (Nehemiah 8)

Nehemiah Is Zealous for the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13)

Nehemiah Returns and Rebuilds the Wall Around Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1–6)

**SESSION STUDY: The People Confess Their Sin, Vow Faithfulness, and Dedicate the Wall (Nehemiah 9–12)**

### Daily Readings

- Day 1:** Nehemiah 9:1–37
- Day 2:** Nehemiah 9:38–10:39
- Day 3:** Nehemiah 11:1–12:26
- Day 4:** Nehemiah 12:27–47
- Day 5:** Nehemiah 13:1–31
- Day 6:** Psalm 40



Scan this QR code to access this session's Scripture passages.

**CONFESsION AND VALUING GOD'S WORD ARE PART OF RECONCILIATION WITH GOD (NEHEMIAH 9:1-3).**

**Circle the actions of the Israelites that revealed their seriousness about their sins.**

**1** On the twenty-fourth day of this month the Israelites assembled; they were fasting, wearing sackcloth, and had put dust on their heads. **2** Those of Israelite descent separated themselves from all foreigners, and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their ancestors. **3** While they stood in their places, they read from the book of the law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day and spent another fourth of the day in confession and worship of the LORD their God.

Fasting, wearing sackcloth, and putting dust (sometimes translated “earth” or “dirt”) on one’s head were all acts of mourning and repentance in the ancient Near East. Fasting, or foregoing food for a time, is an act of humility and a reminder of our total dependence on the Lord. Wearing sackcloth and putting dust on one’s head weren’t commanded by God’s law, but they were cultural ways of expressing grief.

**How can you incorporate modern expressions of humility into your spiritual life?**

The text says that the Israelites separated themselves from the foreigners among them. By this time, many had returned to the land who weren’t physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel (Jacob), but any resident alien who drew near to worship the Lord would be accepted (Num. 15:13-16; cf. Isa. 56:3-8). Both Rahab, a Canaanite prostitute, and Ruth, a Moabitess, recognized the Lord as their God, and they both were accepted in the community of Israel and became Jesus’s ancestors (Matt. 1:5-6). In the time of Nehemiah, however, the resident aliens living in Jerusalem most likely weren’t worshiping the Lord.

According to Ezra 9-10, many of the Israelites had taken pagan wives for themselves, which was in direct opposition to God’s commands (Deut. 7:1-5). Nehemiah reminded the people in chapter 13 that King Solomon “was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel, yet foreign women drew him into sin” (Neh. 13:26). More than likely these pagan women worshiped their own gods and taught their children to do the same. So in Nehemiah 9, to demonstrate full repentance from their sins, the Jews likely were separating themselves from any foreigner (not just wives) who didn’t exclusively worship God.

**Key Concept:** Reconciliation with God will include confession, worship, and purification.

**LEADER NOTE:** The Israelites lived under the old covenant and meant to separate themselves from surrounding nations so that they would be a chosen nation to God (Ex. 19:5-6). Nehemiah's concern was that intermarrying with women who worshiped false gods would only cause a repeat of the sins that led to the exile in the first place (Deut. 29:26-28). Today, Christians live under the new covenant sealed in Christ's blood. We are cautioned against becoming unequally yoked with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14-7:1), but while we wait for the Lord to return, we should make every effort to reach those outside the faith with the gospel (Matt. 5:16; 2 Tim. 2:24-26). With the help of the Holy Spirit, we seek the salvation of the lost around us without becoming an accomplice to sin (1 Cor. 5:9-13).

Notes

The Israelites confessed both their own sins and those of their ancestors despite God's undeserved goodness (Neh. 9:6-38). They recognized the corporate responsibility of sin and its generational impact. This confession led them naturally to worship as a community.

**GOSPEL CONNECTION**

Before Christ, reconciliation with God was similar but temporary, yet it did include confession, worship, and purification. Now, when we repent and trust in Christ, we are purified by His blood and eternally reconciled with the Father, resulting in our worship of Him.

**LEADER NOTE:** Sometimes walking faithfully with the Lord means recognizing and confessing sins of previous generations. Though we may not have personally carried out those sins, we may bear the natural consequences (Ex. 34:5-7). Part of walking with the Lord includes acknowledging past unfaithfulness. To ignore or attempt to justify past sins, especially those committed against others, is hard-hearted and self-serving and does not reflect the heart of Christ.

**When have confession and repentance led to renewal in your life or the life of your community?**

**WORSHIP AND PURIFICATION ARE ALSO PART OF RECONCILIATION WITH GOD (NEHEMIAH 12:27-30).**

**Highlight the words related to worship and celebration.**

**27** At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, they sent for the Levites wherever they lived and brought them to Jerusalem to celebrate the joyous dedication with thanksgiving and singing accompanied by cymbals, harps, and lyres. **28** The singers gathered from the region around Jerusalem, from the settlements of the Netophathites, **29** from Beth-gilgal, and from the fields of Geba and Azmaveth, for they had built settlements for themselves around Jerusalem. **30** After the priests and Levites had purified themselves, they purified the people, the city gates, and the wall.

Between chapters 9 and 12, the people collectively renew their covenant with God, committing to following the law given to the Israelites by Moses nearly one thousand years prior. In this passage, the now-complete wall around Jerusalem is dedicated by God's people from across Judea (12:28-29). The wall's dedication attributed the work to God because the completed wall was a picture of God's faithfulness to His promises, as it fulfilled prophecies from Isaiah 44:28 and 45:13.

The temple, the wall, the city, and God's people had been restored and reconciled, and so the people celebrated. Calling for the Levites to lead in their joy musically, the people celebrated with thanksgiving and singing. And they gathered singers from all around, a great choir concert for the Lord acknowledging His faithful goodness and work.

**THEOLOGY CONNECTION**

**WORSHIP:** While many reduce worship to an event or singing of worship songs, worship first and foremost emanates from the heart and extends to all areas of life. The focus of worship is God, giving Him the praise and adoration that He deserves. Worship should be carried out not only inwardly but also in joining with other Christians to worship and steward our gifts for God's glory. Corporate worship serves to edify and strengthen Christians, but it also serves as a witness of God's greatness to non-believers.

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**LEADER NOTE:** The rest of chapter 12 describes the celebration and dedication ceremony itself as two choirs walking in procession around different halves of the city to meet at the temple. God had given them great joy (Neh. 12:43), and the reasons were because they were now protected from enemies with their wall rebuilt and because they were able to finish a great task with unity.<sup>1</sup>

Notes

**How can we as individuals and as a church develop a greater attitude of celebration to the Lord?**

In verse 30, by purifying themselves and the people, the Levites kept God's purity laws (Lev. 11–15), which allowed the Israelites to approach God in worship. We often struggle to reconcile these purity laws, which seem legalistic, with what we know to be true about God's grace, but many scholars agree that these laws protected the health of the individual and the community.

**LEADER NOTE:** For God's people, being ritually unclean, or impure, wasn't a permanent condition. Sometimes it was brought about by certain actions (for example, eating certain foods or sexual intercourse) that were not sinful but made a person temporarily unsuitable for public worship of the Lord.

Certain purification laws in Leviticus included washing, isolation, or waiting periods. Others required one to bring a sacrifice to be offered by a priest on their behalf. Christ's sinless life and crucifixion served as the final, permanent sacrifice to atone for our sins and make us pure before God (Heb. 9:11–10:18). We no longer have to follow the purification laws to come before God—all that's required of us is faith in Christ.

**How are you tempted to ground your purity before God apart from faith in Christ?**

#### VOICES FROM CHURCH HISTORY

“Soul-purification is of faith, it is not of baptism: it is not by any outward rite even of God's own ordaining, nor by the will of man, nor by blood, nor by birth, but by the work of the Holy Spirit through the agency of faith and that alone.”<sup>2</sup>

—Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892)

Notes

## ARRIVAL

**ENGAGE:** Write on a board the heading “Movies/TV Shows/Books About Reconciliation.” As adults arrive, give them a marker and direct them to record any movies, TV shows, and/or books in which reconciliation is a major theme (ex., *Coco*; *Remember the Titans*; *Les Misérables*). Review their answers, asking for clarification regarding the plots you may not be familiar with.

**TRANSITION:** The need for reconciliation is a common human experience because we make mistakes and damage our relationships. In today’s study, we will look at the role of reconciliation in our walk with God and how it plays out in our lives.

## CONTEXT

**SUMMARIZE:** Review the previous sessions, recalling that the Babylonians defeated the nation of Judah, carried away the exiles, and assimilated them into Babylonian culture. Highlight the story of the returnees who rebuilt the temple that had been left in ruins when the Babylonian army destroyed the city. Then summarize Nehemiah’s return to the city and his role in rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem. Point out that the Jewish people repented of their sin as they heard Ezra read from the book of the Law, and they turned back to worshiping the Lord.

## RECAP

**ASK:** What verse, question, or concept stood out to you as you prepared this week?

**REVIEW:** In our personal preparation this week, we learned the important role of confession in the Jewish people’s personal and corporate relationship with God. Individuals across the nation fasted and showed repentance by wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads. We also learned how the priests and Levites purified themselves and the people, and we saw them celebrate the work that God has done in their lives and their city.

**TRANSITION:** Now let’s dig a little deeper to explore how the people demonstrated repentance and reconciliation through confession, purification, and worship.



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**Key Concept:** Reconciliation with God will include confession, worship, and purification.

## GROUP ACTIVITY

Notes

**CHART:** Refer adults to page 110 in the Personal Study Guide (PSG), where they will find a chart titled “Reconciliation for Fellowship.” Recreate this chart on a board in your room so you can record the group’s responses as they examine the Scripture. Leave empty the parentheses in the first column; the group will fill those in as part of the activity.

### Reconciliation for Fellowship

Read Nehemiah 9:1-3; 12:27-30 and the verses in James below. Fill in the verses and define each step of reconciliation with God in your own words.

ISRAELITES Nehemiah 9:12	BELIEVERS James	DEFINITION
REPENTANT SORROW (9:1)	(4:9-10)	
PURIFICATION (9:2)	(1:21; 4:1,8)	
CONFESSSION (9:2)	(5:16)	
SCRIPTURE (9:3)	(1:21)	
CELEBRATION (12:27)	(1:2-3)	
THANKSGIVING (12:27)	(1:17)	
SINGING (12:28)	(5:13)	

**READ:** Enlist two volunteers, one to read Nehemiah 9:1-3 and the other to read Nehemiah 12:27-30.

**INSTRUCT:** Direct teams of 2 or 3 to jot down the verse numbers from today’s passages that correspond to how the Israelites reflected the various steps of reconciliation in the chart. (*Note that the verse numbers are given in your leader guide chart but not in the PSG.*) After a moment, encourage the groups to call out their findings, recording these on the chart on the board.

**COMPARE:** As you turn to the book of James, inform the group that the apostle James, the half-brother of Jesus, wrote these words to Jewish Christians to show them how to live out their faith actively and practically. Instruct the teams to look up the verses in James and to use the verses in both Nehemiah and James to define in their own words each step of reconciliation.

**DIRECT:** Point out that believers today are permanently reconciled with God in our standing relationships with Him because of Jesus’s work on the cross. Ask:

## Notes

"Even though we are reconciled with God through Christ's work, why do we need to return to these steps regularly?" (*We still need to confess and repent on a daily basis when we sin, striving to live lives of holiness, to maintain fellowship and intimacy with God.*) Remind the group that though we don't have to do all these steps to be reconciled and they are not necessarily in a certain order, this list shows us how our hearts can be tender to God after sin.

## DEBRIEF

**Which of these steps are easy for you to do, and why? Which are difficult, and why?**

## SUMMARIZE

In the stories of both Ezra and Nehemiah, confession, purification, and worship were all evidence of the people turning away from their sinful actions (repentance) and turning toward God (reconciliation). The need to turn back to God and follow Jesus in faith is a theme running through the entire New Testament. God's desire has always been for His creation to draw near to Him and receive His mercy, grace, and forgiveness.

## HEAD, HEART, HANDS

Walk the group through the Head, Heart, Hands section in the PSG (p. 111). If running short on time, specifically highlight the **Heart** section in this week's study, inviting volunteers to share their responses to the question in this section.



**HEAD:** The Israelites' prayer of confession and praise can be found in Nehemiah 9:6-38. Confession, both to God and to fellow believers, is modeled and commanded throughout Scripture (Lev. 5:5; 2 Sam. 12:13; Jas. 5:16; 1 John 1:9). Genuine confession brings repentance, humility, and praise for the God who holds the power to cleanse us from our sins (Ps. 103:12).

**Why are we called to confess both to God and to trusted fellow believers?**



**HEART:** The Israelites acknowledged their wickedness and that of their fathers. Like us, they may have been uncomfortable voicing these transgressions and tempted to justify themselves in their hearts. But they had seen the faithfulness of God in both His punishments and His blessings, and they trusted that He would draw them back to Himself.

**What has been your attitude toward confession and repentance? How do you respond when others confess their sins to you?**



**HANDS:** Our prayers can sometimes focus on asking God for things and little else. There are many examples of prayer in Scripture (1 Kings 8:23-53; Luke 1:46-55; Matt. 6:9-13), and they generally involve four things: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication—ACTS for short. As the body of

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Christ, we're also told to confess sins to one another (Jas. 5:16). This doesn't mean telling everyone you know all you've ever done but identifying mature believers who can gracefully hold you accountable in your walk with the Lord.

Notes

**What steps will you take to connect with a mature believer for mutual prayer, confession, and accountability?**

### NEXT STEPS

Challenge the group to consider these actions as responses to this week's session.

- Read 1 John 1:9 and reflect on the promise it offers. Ask God to show you any sins you need to confess to Him and thank Him for His faithfulness to forgive your sin and cleanse you from all unrighteousness. Think of things you might need to get rid of to keep yourself pure and holy.
- If you are struggling with habitual sin, consider talking with a trusted friend or pastor about this stronghold.
- Spend time in personal worship, praising God for His character and His steadfast lovingkindness. Think of ways you can celebrate and thank God for all He's done.

Invite volunteers to share prayer needs for this week. Encourage them to record these in the space on page 111 in their PSG so they can pray for others throughout the week.

### PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES

### PRAYING SCRIPTURE

**CLOSE:** Pray through Psalm 40:1-3 with your group, focusing on thanking Christ for hearing our cry and reconciling us to the Father. Then pray through verses 9-10, asking God for opportunities to boldly proclaim God's faithfulness and salvation both in the church and to the world.

#### References

1. F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 257-58.)
2. C. H. Spurgeon, "Faith Purifying the Heart," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 23 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1877), 221.