

# 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 (Nehemiah 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 (Nehemiah 8:18; cf. Leviticus 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.

## PERSONAL PREPARATION

NEHEMIAH 9:1-3

### CONFESSION AND VALUING GOD'S WORD ARE PART OF RECONCILIATION WITH GOD.

*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.

#### 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.

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 (Numbers 15:13-16; cf. Isaiah 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 (Matthew 1:5-6). In the time of Nehemiah, however, the resident aliens living in Jerusalem most likely weren’t worshipping 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 (Deuteronomy 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” (Nehemiah 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.

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

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



## PERSONAL PREPARATION

NEHEMIAH 12:27-30

### WORSHIP AND PURIFICATION ARE ALSO PART OF RECONCILIATION WITH GOD.

*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.

#### 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.

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

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.

**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 (Leviticus 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.

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 (Hebrews 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>1</sup>

—Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892)

## 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
<b>REPENTANT SORROW</b> (      )	(4:9-10)	
<b>PURIFICATION</b> (      )	(1:21; 4:1,8)	
<b>CONFESSION</b> (      )	(5:16)	
<b>SCRIPTURE</b> (      )	(1:21)	
<b>CELEBRATION</b> (      )	(1:2-3)	
<b>THANKSGIVING</b> (      )	(1:17)	
<b>SINGING</b> (      )	(5:13)	

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

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



## HEAD

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

### PRAYING SCRIPTURE

Psalm 40:3 says God put a new song in David's mouth. Read Psalm 40 and list what you would mention if you sang a new song of thankfulness to the Lord. Make your list your own prayer to God this week.

### PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES



## HEART

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



## HANDS

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

