

**Nehemiah 9:1-38<sup>1</sup>**  
***Great Is Thy Faithfulness***

**Introduction**

ILLUSTRATION: Just this week, a family tragedy was reported in the newspapers (*The New Paper*, 9 Nov 09, pp 2-3).

A couple was apparently struggling in their marriage because of financial problems. One night, they had a very heated argument. Later that night, it seemed that the man set their flat on fire when the wife was out. Not only that, he jumped to his death after that. Even more tragic than that, the two young children of the couple were left in the house when it was set on fire. When rescuers found the children in the burnt flat, they found them dead but without any visible burn marks. The actual cause of their deaths is still unknown.

When the wife returned home that night, she first found her husband's body at the foot of their apartment block. As she was wailing over his death, she was told that her two young children had died in their burnt flat. She experienced all this devastation in less than 45 minutes.

Indeed, human beings in their fallen nature can bring great devastation upon themselves in just 45 minutes or less.

Today, we come to Neh 9 that is actually one of the longest prayers recorded for us in the Bible. It records all the devastation that Israel had brought upon themselves in their history of unfaithfulness to God. At the same time, it records all the divine grace and deliverance that Israel had been blessed with in the history of God's faithfulness to them.

Last week in Neh 8, we read of God's people who grew hungry to experience the living presence of God. They called out for their spiritual leaders to read and teach them the Scriptures. A great spiritual awakening came about.

The events of Neh 8 took place at the very beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> month of the Jewish calendar. Neh 9 takes place on the 24<sup>th</sup> day of that same month.

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<sup>1</sup> 1984 NIV

What would we expect to happen in Neh 9 after a great spiritual awakening in Neh 8? For many of us, what happens after a mountain-top experience of the presence of God is generally a valley. It is the same for the Jews. After that high-mountain experience in Neh 8, we read of a low-valley experience of confession of sins in Neh 9.

There is always a time of struggle when our sins assert themselves and we have to fight them in order to stay the course. It is like journeying through the valleys in life from time to time.

This is the concern of Neh 9. It records an extended prayer. It's about sin, struggles, God's faithfulness, our faithlessness, and the longing to know how to finish the course.

How can we stay the course when we are going through the low valleys in life? Why do we praise, "Great is thy faithfulness"?

### **I. 9:1-3, 8b**

On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads. Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers. They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshiping the LORD their God ... You have kept your promise because you are righteous.

The tone here is very different from that of Neh 8, which was joyous and spontaneous. Here is a solemn description of mourning. From verses 4ff, the Levites gathered before the people and led them in a long prayer. The prayer is mostly a history of God's faithfulness to His people, and how God's people had been unfaithful to Him.

The key theme in this prayer is found in verse 2: "They confessed not only their own sins but also the wickedness of their fathers. It wasn't just what they had done recently that was the problem. It was the fact that they came from a long line of unfaithfulness to God. The problems they had were a kind of spiritual heritage."

Neh 9 is more than just a prayer that recalls Israel's history. It is also a public statement that the leaders declared on behalf of the people of their desire to turn towards God in hope rather than away from him in shame. It's like saying this to God: "Lord, here we are speaking of the same unfaithfulness in us that seems to overcome us again and again. But we are turning to you again because of your unfailing faithfulness towards us."

The basis of this hope is at the end of verse 8: "You have kept your promise because you are righteous."

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God's righteous character coupled with His faithfulness is the basis of our hope that He can be totally trusted to keep His promises.

In our worship, it's wise to remind ourselves that it is first the faithful God who has promised to seek us. John 4:23 says, "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks."

Today, we have worship services that are seeker sensitive. It means the services are customized to cater to the needs, questions, and quests of people who are not yet Christians but who are seeking God. Indeed, there is much goodness in such an approach to outreach.

But there is also the danger that when we go in this direction, we may forget the ultimate purpose of worshiping God. The centre of attention in our worship is first and foremost God and not seekers or ourselves. The human tendency is to approach God seeking for self-interests, for the gifts rather than the Giver.

But God is the most important seeker in worship. It is not faithless sinners seeking God, but the faithful God seeking lost sinners. In His meeting with the Samaritan woman, it was the Lord who was seeking to bring her to eternal life. It is not unfaithful believers seeking God, but the faithful God seeking straying believers. Indeed, we seek God only because He first seeks us.

God is the defining centre in our worship. We can be faithful to Him because He is first faithful to us. In fact, we can be unfaithful to Him and yet He will still be faithful to us as He has promised.

How can we stay the course when we are going through the low valleys in life? It is to be certain that God is the faithful divine seeker. Why do we praise, "Great is their faithfulness"? It is because God is a seeking God who faithfully comes to us even when we unfaithfully turn away from Him.

## **II. 9:9-31**

The next part of this history lesson (vv. 9-31) is about the exodus and the conquest. It tells another wonderful truth about God. He is not only powerful but also attentive. He listens and cares. We can't fault him for being so high above the human condition that He is uninvolved.

Verse 9: "You saw the suffering of our forefathers in Egypt; you heard their cry at the Red Sea."

Verse 15: “In their hunger you gave them bread from heaven and in their thirst you brought them water from the rock ...”

Verses 19-21: “Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them in the desert. By day the pillar of cloud did not cease to guide them on their path, nor the pillar of fire by night to shine on the way they were to take. You gave your good Spirit to instruct them. You did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and you gave them water for their thirst. For forty years you sustained them in the desert; they lacked nothing, their clothes did not wear out nor did their feet become swollen.”

Verses 26-31 are related to the period of the judges and the monarchy, and the words of the prophets. The frequent description of God here is His patience. Over and over again they experienced the patience of God, the mercy that seemed to have no end to it.

The point is this—sin is not God’s fault. It is not a failure of His power, His attention, or His patience. It is really human rebellion against God. It is the fault of human beings.

How is human rebellion described?

- The first description of it is in verse 17a: “They refused to listen and failed to remember ...”

God’s declaration of His goodness, His involvement, who He is and what He does and what matters to Him, are not hard to understand. What is hard is our refusal to listen and failure to remember. It’s our stubborn choice.

ILLUSTRATION: I usually take some time on Monday morning to talk about the faith life with my mum. I will end our time by asking her what the things she wants me to pray for her are.

And I notice that when I come to asking her for prayer concerns, she will excitedly pour out a long list of complaints about her mind, body, and spirit. I remember one time I was trying to delay asking how I could pray for her. I was actually trying to avoid asking that altogether.

But she became increasingly agitated and finally asked,

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“Why are you still not asking me?”

I pretended to act “blur” and replied, “Ask what?”

She replied impatiently, “Ask me what I want you to pray for me.”

It is obvious that she is always looking forward to this point of our conversation when she is all ready to release all her negative feelings on me. It is the high point for her.

One Monday morning, we were again talking and I ended our time by asking her, “Mum, how can I pray for you today?” As usual, I was bracing myself to hear an earful of complaints and woes.

But to my great and pleasant surprise, she answered, “Pray for our family that Jesus will continue to bless us.”

Usually, I would pray a rather brief prayer and with these parting words to my mum, “You must learn to accept yourself. Otherwise, even Jesus cannot help you.”

But that morning, I closed with one of my longest prayers with her. Both of us felt so good at the end of our time together.

Do we have complaints that compound with other complaints so that we grow increasingly angry and negative with our circumstances?

It’s one choice to dwell on those things. The other choice is to begin to enumerate what we can be thankful for—the kindness that God has shown us, the good news about Jesus having come to us, the presence of the Holy Spirit, the times when we experience God’s grace and goodness.

The problem with the Israelites in this prayer was that they refused to listen and they failed to remember. They were not grateful to God.

- The second description of human rebellion is in the middle of verse 26: “... They put your law behind their backs.”

Defiance. They knew what God wanted. He had made it clear what was good and right. But they deliberately put behind their backs what was good and right.

It is consistent with human experience over and over again to say, “Yes, I know God disapproves of it but I’m going to do it anyway.” And inevitably, what we sow we reap. There will always be consequences to our choices and actions.

What had God done to Israel that made them so hard-hearted and stiff-necked in their response to Him? Here's the scriptural record:

- God promised to multiply His people, and He kept His promise (Gen 22:17).
- God promised to give them a good land, and He kept that promise (Gen 13:14-18; 17:7-8).
- God gave them victory and enabled them to possess cities, houses, lands, and wealth in the land of Canaan under the leadership of Joshua.
- God gave them a fertile land and the people were abundantly nourished and satisfied.

And how did the people respond to God in view of what He had done for them? Deut 32:15 says: “Jeshurun (Israel) grew fat and kicked; filled with food, he became heavy and sleek. He abandoned the God who made him and rejected the Rock his Savior.”

ILLUSTRATION: Leo Tolstoy was a renowned Russian novelist in the 1800s. He once wrote a story about a successful farmer who was not satisfied with his lot. He wanted more of everything.

One day he received a novel offer. For 1000 rubles, he could buy all the land he could walk around in a day. The only catch in the deal was that he had to be back at his starting point by sundown.

Early the next morning he started out walking at a fast pace. By midday he was very tired, but he kept going, covering more and more ground. Well into the afternoon he realized that his greed had taken him far from the starting point. He quickened his pace and as the sun began to set low in the sky, he began to run, knowing that if he did not make it back by sundown the opportunity to become an even bigger landowner would be lost. As the sun began to set below the horizon he came within sight of the finish line. Gasping for breath, his heart pounding, he called upon every bit of strength left in his body and staggered across the line just before the sun disappeared.

He immediately collapsed, blood streaming from his mouth. In a few minutes he was dead. Afterwards, his servants dug a grave. It was not much over six feet long and three feet wide.

The title of Tolstoy's story was: "How Much Land Does a Man Need?"

(*Bits & Pieces*, November, 1991)

Someone once said, "For every one hundred men who can stand adversity, there is only one who can stand prosperity."

Israel delighted themselves in God's great goodness but they did not delight themselves in the Lord. Like the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-24), they wanted the Father's wealth but not the Father's will. And because they had these concerns in reverse priorities, they had to go through all the trouble they had in their history.

How can we stay the course when we are going through the low valleys in life? It is to be certain that God is not to be blamed for our struggles. Why do we praise, "Great is thy faithfulness"? It is because God is a promise-keeper and not a trouble-maker, and we can look to Him even in our struggles.

### **III. 9:32-38**

God was good to His people when His people were not good to Him. He sent them prophets to teach them and to warn them, but the nation refused to listen (2 Chron. 36:14-21). He was merciful to forgive them when they cried out for help, and He was long-suffering with them as they repeatedly rebelled against His Word. He could have destroyed the nation and started over again (see Ex. 32:10 and Num. 14:11-12), but He graciously spared them. In His mercy, God didn't give them what they deserved. In His grace, He gave them what they didn't deserve.

As the Levites prayed, they acknowledged the sins of the nation and God's justice in sending punishment.

Verse 33 tells us: "In all that has happened to us, you have been just; you have acted faithfully, while we did wrong."

Note that the Levites used the pronoun "we" and not "they". As they prayed, they identified with the nation and acknowledged their own guilt. It is easy to be convicted about other people's sins, but not to be conscious of our own.

This prayer is wise regarding the human struggle, about who we are and what we do. It ends on a very interesting note, beginning at verse 36: "But see, we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our forefathers so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it

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produces.”

This is a penetrating observation. Israel's history as a nation began with the exodus and deliverance from slavery in Egypt, and now the Levites who were leading in prayer said, “We’re slaves again in our own land. We are a conquered people living under the rule of Persia.”

Verse 37: “Because of our sins, its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress.”

The prayer ends on a lamenting note: “We are in great distress.” But there is something beautiful about the willingness to go to God with nothing more than our distress. We say, “Lord, this is a discussion we’ve had before. I wish I have something better to say, but I don’t. I’ll say it to you as it is—I’m hurting again.”

God doesn’t just offer help from heaven. He offers help from inside us. It is possible to change. Just because our fathers were wicked doesn’t mean we have to be wicked in the same way, without hope and without power. God has joined us in the process, and that’s the indescribably good news.

Indeed, we can come to the throne of grace with confidence and confess before the Lord. We can be true to God with who and what we are inside us because God is true in His mercy and grace to help us change from inside out.

We need to recover one important spiritual discipline—the discipline of confession. Our sins are forgiven at salvation (positional forgiveness), but our daily fellowship with God needs to stay in good standing (relational forgiveness). Proper fellowship with God cannot happen with unconfessed sin in our lives. Therefore, we need to confess our sins to God as soon as we are aware that we have sinned, in order to maintain close fellowship with Him (1 John 1:9).

ILLUSTRATION: In a crowded carpark and before many people, a man crashed his car into the rear of another car parked there. He came out of his car and asked, “Anyone knows whose car I have knocked into?” Receiving no answer, he took out a piece of paper and began to write a note. Having done that, he tucked it under the windshield wiper of the damaged car before driving off.

When the driver of the damaged car returned, he saw the note. It read like this: “I just smashed into your car. Many people saw that and they are watching me. They think that I am writing down my name and contact number for you to reach me. But I am not. Please don’t be upset and drive carefully. Bye!”



Many people lack courage to confess and be honest with the wrong they have done. So they lie. The discipline of confession is very much a lost art today. People lie because they are fearful, whatever the fear may be—fear of getting caught, fear of having someone look down on us, fear that we are not good enough, fear of getting hurt, fear of commitment, fear that we be punished.

Israel's confession of their sins in Neh 9 is also a commemoration of God's faithfulness and love for His people in spite of their unfaithfulness to Him. It recalls that ...

- God punished them not because they got caught, but because they did something wrong.
- God punished them not because He was emotionally angry or disappointed with them, but because He loved them.
- God punished them not because He wanted to finish them off, but because He wanted them to learn and grow from the consequences of their choices and actions.

How can we stay the course when we are going through the low valleys in life? It is to be certain that God allows us to confess our sins to Him without devaluing our worth in His sight. Why do we praise, "Great is thy faithfulness"? It is because God still has our best interests at heart even when we break His heart.

## **Conclusion**

There are three reasons for us to praise the great faithfulness of God today:

- Because God is a seeking God who faithfully comes to us even when we unfaithfully turn away from Him.
- Because God is a promise-keeper and not a trouble-maker, and we can look to Him even in our struggles.
- Because God still has our best interests at heart even when we break His heart.

Let me close with three things for us to consider:

- God seeks us. So, open the door of our heart and meet Him today.
- God keeps His promise to be with us. So, work with Him the changes we want to make from inside out in our lives.
- God hears and heals a contrite heart. So, confess our disobedience to Him and experience restoration of sweet fellowship with Him.

And as we act on these, may we experience the great faithfulness of God as we live each day in our pilgrimage here on earth.