

# STIFF NECKS AND A GRACIOUS GOD

SERIES: PRAYERS FOR THE MOMENT



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Nehemiah 9  
Second Message  
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*Nehemiah 9*

Good morning. My name is Ray Kaestner. I am one of the elders here at PBC, and I am happy to be with you this morning.

Last week Scott Grant began our summer series, “Prayers for the Moment,” where we are looking at prayers that have occurred in the Bible. Scott spoke about the prayer in Exodus in which God saved the people of Israel by parting the Red Sea while they were fleeing from the Egyptians, what that meant to them, and things that we can apply to us.

Today we move ahead in the Biblical narrative to the book of Nehemiah, specifically chapter 9. This is the longest prayer in the Bible, outside the Psalms.

Long after the people of Israel had settled in the promised land, they were carried off in exile to Babylon. In the book of Nehemiah, the people of Israel are returning to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem.

Are there parallels to what Israel was experiencing in the exile and what we are going through in 2020? We live in uncertain times, and we have been sheltering in place for the last four months. Even though we long to be together worshipping, we are still separate.

These are times of stress. Some of us have been sick with COVID-19, and most of us have family or people we know that have suffered with it. Some of us have lost their jobs, and these are times of economic uncertainty. People are experiencing stress and loneliness. When shelter-in-place began, we expected this to be a relatively short time, but that time keeps stretching out longer and longer.

Nehemiah brought the Israelites back to Jerusalem. They faced opposition from their neighbors, but they were able to finish rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem. As we end chapter 8, the people have been celebrating together the feast of booths for seven days, for the first time since the days of Joshua.

## The beginning of the prayer

Chapter 9 begins at the end of the same month as the people gather together again, but this chapter has a very different feel to it.

### **Nehemiah 9:1-3:**

**Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads. 2 And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. 3 And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the Lord their God for a quarter of the day; for another quarter of it they made confession and worshiped the Lord their God.**

All the people gathered together and offered up this communal prayer in the large group. There is great power when the people of God gather together in prayer. But there is also a place for personal prayers, just between you and God, just the two of you. And there are places for both kinds of prayer in our lives. If our relationship with God only relies on large gatherings, we are missing out on so much power and joy in our own personal lives.

The Israelites spent a quarter of the day reading the Scriptures and a quarter of the day making confessions and worshiping the Lord. By today’s standards, that is considered a long time. But if we try to rush through things, we tend to miss so much. Sometimes important work like this one takes time and you cannot rush it.

Let’s look at the beginning of the prayer in the next several verses.

### **Nehemiah 9:5-6:**

**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. 6 “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; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you.”**

The prayer starts with worship, and that is always a great place to start. It sets our focus not on us, not on our circumstances, but on God. Even though we go through rough patches in our lives, we need to begin and end with worship.

From here on, the prayer goes through the history of the nation of Israel, and it begins by focusing on God's grace to the people. It starts with how God calls Abram and sets up a covenant relationship with him. Then it quickly moves to the people of Israel in Egypt.

#### **Nehemiah 9:9-15:**

**“And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea, 10 and performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants and all the people of his land, for you knew that they acted arrogantly against our fathers. And you made a name for yourself, as it is to this day. 11 And you divided the sea before them, so that they went through the midst of the sea on dry land, and you cast their pursuers into the depths, as a stone into mighty waters. 12 By a pillar of cloud you led them in the day, and by a pillar of fire in the night to light for them the way in which they should go. 13 You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments, 14 and you made known to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses your servant. 15 You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger and brought water for them out of the rock for their thirst, and you told them to go in to possess the land that you had sworn to give them.**

You can see God's provision for his people in these verses. He rescued them from the Egyptians with signs and wonders. Not only did he take care of their physical needs, providing for their hunger and thirst, but he also

provided rules to live by to keep order and also rules that would call them to follow him.

#### **What about us?**

In the same way that the people of Israel had a story testifying to them of God's faithfulness, if you know God, you also have a story. This is a continuing theme that we had last week and again this week. What's your testimony? How has God called you into a relationship with himself? If you have a relationship with God, I'm sure you can recount times that God has been gracious with you and faithful to you. How did we first meet God? How did he draw us to himself? What has happened since then? How has he graciously provided for us? When times have gotten tough, how has He comforted us, strengthened us, or encouraged us?

I love working with middle school and high school students. Many of the students we have here at PBC have grown up in the church; they have attended Sunday School here. So many of them know the Bible. They know the stories, and they know the Scriptures. That is great. But this is a time in their lives where they are beginning to think about things for themselves. They are taking the faith and the beliefs that they have inherited from their parents and personalizing them and making them into their own beliefs. They are experiencing God in new ways for themselves and learning that not only does God care about them as part of a family and a church, but also for them personally. It is a marvelous thing to watch.

One of the reasons I love to work with middle schoolers is because that is of my own story, too. I grew up in a Christian family, in a church much like this one. I knew the stories from growing up in the church, but during high school, with the help and encouragement of youth leaders, I began to see God personally reaching out to me.

What's your story? Take a couple of moments right now to remember some of these things.

Is there a danger to looking too much to the past? Do we sugarcoat the past and forget the hard times or the mistakes that we have made? We always want to look back to a time that was better than the present.

Does looking back to the past serve to discourage us about the present? If we cling to the past, we avoid looking to the future. We can stop listening to the things God may be saying to us.

## The response of the people

As we study this prayer, we see that the people in Nehemiah are not falling into this trap. They call out their own failures.

### Nehemiah 9:16-17:

**“But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck 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 neck and appointed a leader 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 did not forsake them.”**

How did this happen? Did they suddenly forget all that God had just done for them? Why did they not have the faith to believe that he would finish what he started? Why were they so quick to turn to another leader instead of trusting in God? Why did they think that going back to slavery was a good thing?

God's response is amazing. Even after the Israelites turned away, he was ready to forgive. He was gracious and merciful, slow to anger after the outright rebellion. That's not how we would react if we were in God's position. But he stuck with them.

We don't have time to read this prayer in its entirety, but the pattern keeps repeating. God would show his people grace and mercy, then the people would rebel, and God would send trouble their way. They would cry out for mercy, and God would hear them, restore them, and give them rest. Then they would start all over again. In the NIV it says that God delivered them “time after time”.

It might be helpful to look at the description words throughout this prayer. Here are the descriptions used about God: Righteous, Forgiving, Gracious, Merciful, Slow to anger, Abounding in steadfast love, Generous, Faithful, Good.

Here are the descriptions used for the people of Israel: Disobedient, rebellious, presumptuous, stubborn, wicked, and my favorite: stiff-necked. That is a very visual description and implies so much.

That is quite a contrast between the descriptions. What is the common thread for the description of the

people of Israel? There is a focus on themselves and their circumstances. They take their eyes off of God and put it on themselves.

This prayer is a love story. After reading it, I was reminded of the book of Hosea. God told Hosea to marry a prostitute. Hosea learned to love his wife, and they had children together. But she was unfaithful and went to be with other men. Hosea pursued her to bring her back, and he continued to love her. This was symbolic of God's relationship to Israel. They strayed and worshiped other gods, and he kept pursuing them to bring them back.

### What about us?

Do you see the pattern in your own life? What part of the pattern do you find yourself?

Why do we forget God's Grace? What takes our focus? Are we too busy? Do we get too complacent when things are not going well? What about when trouble comes? Do we worry and fret? Do we panic? Do we try to rely on our own strength and intelligence?

How have we responded in 2020? Do we get discouraged? Sad? Lonely? Depressed? Do we react with anger? When we are angry, we can take it out on those around us. We can even be angry at God. Do we question God? Is that wrong? God likes it when we are honest with him. If we are listening to him, even when we are angry, he will answer. But sometimes we are just expressing anger without listening for a response.

One of the toughest times for our students is when they head off to college for the first time. Studies have shown that an alarming number of those students fall away from their faith at this time. They are leaving a safe and comfortable environment of their homes and churches and going to a completely new environment. They have doubts and questions. Students make new relationships and have new freedoms, and they face a lot of pressure to succeed. This year is even stranger. As colleges struggle with trying to figure out what to do in light of the pandemic, incoming freshman face even greater uncertainties. Any expectations they previously had about what college was going to look like are completely wrong.

One of the goals of youth ministry is to provide the students with a foundation of teachings and discipleship and relationships with their peers, their leaders, and most importantly with God that they can draw on when they face doubts and uncertainty and trouble. They can

look back on these times and remember the grace of God and know that he is worthy of our trust. For those of us who are beyond college, it is also good to have a foundation of knowing God to be able to draw upon when times get tough.

Where are we now? Are we experiencing good times in our relationship with God? Are we experiencing a tough time? Do you feel helpless? Are you questioning God? Rebellious?

## How to unstiffen

How do we unstiffen our neck? The simple answer is to put your focus on God and not on yourself or your circumstances. But though it sounds simple, it is not an easy road, or else we would do better at following it.

### Nehemiah 9:32-34:

**“Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love, let not all the hardship seem little to you that has come upon us, upon our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and all your people, since the time of the kings of Assyria until this day. 33 Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly. 34 Our kings, our princes, our priests, and our fathers have not kept your law or paid attention to your commandments and your warnings that you gave them.”**

The people in Nehemiah started by confessing their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. Note the change in the pronoun. For the earlier parts of the prayer, it referred to people in the third person as “they” and “them.” But now it is talking about them in the first person; this is all about “us.” The people personally owned up to their unfaithfulness and repented from their wickedness. True repentance leads to change. They made a covenant and signed it. The details of the covenant are in Chapter 10. The summary is that they resolved to obey God in some specific ways.

Remember that there is fake repentance and real repentance. Are you truly sorry for doing wrong or just sorry for getting caught or for the consequences? Most people have heard apologies like the following: “I am sorry you were offended by what I said.” Is there true repentance there, or is it your fault for being offended? We need to take ownership of our failures and resolve not to do it again.

How do we break the cycle in our lives? This is not just like a new years resolution that we make and then forget about in a week or two. We have the Holy Spirit who gives us the power to object and who keeps calling us back to the Father when we are drawn away. This is an ongoing transformational process to pull us out of the cycle.

Philippians 4:13 says, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” In 2 Corinthians 3:18: And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

The transformational process starts with prayer. The 2 Corinthians passage refers to Moses. When he prayed to God, his face glowed with the glory of God. As he spent more time with God, he became more like him, so much so that his appearance changed. The reference to the veil is that the people of Israel could not look at Moses because his face glowed so brightly. The important point is that as Moses spent time with God, he was changed to be more like him, and that is also true of us. Moses was transformed into the same image as God, and we can also be transformed to be more like God. That’s how we break the power of sin and how we break out of the sinful pattern. Let God turn you from a stiff neck to a faithful follower.