

One Nation Under God

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[0:00] If you're keeping track though, you'll notice that this lesson title is different from what last week's handout said it would be.

That's because in Nehemiah chapter 9, the Israelites show us what it means to be one nation under God. Because of their past sins, Israel was no longer an independent nation as we typically think of the word.

But another definition for nation can also be a people who share common customs, origins, history, and frequently a language or nationality. So in that sense, even though Israel was no longer an independent nation, they're still very much a nation.

Let's go ahead and set the scene for what we'll see in chapter 9. Verse 1 will tell us that the events occurred on the 24th day of the 7th month. That's roughly three and a half weeks after the Jews gathered at the water gate in Jerusalem to hear Ezra and his team read the law to them.

We studied that reading in chapter 8, each of the last two lessons. If you remember, during that reading, God's spirit descended on them and a sense of sin and failure came upon those listening.

[1:17] Nehemiah answered by reminding them that the joy of the Lord is your strength. Of course, that's part of Nehemiah 8.10. As the men gathered again the following day to hear further instruction, it became apparent that there was much in the law that they were neglecting, including keeping the Feast of Booths, also known as the Feast of Tabernacles.

Their repentance was immediate, and for the next seven days they kept the feast and followed it with the solemn assembly. The last verse of chapter 8 said, Nehemiah then didn't take advantage of the people's first outburst of sorrow to manipulate them and push the revival forward.

Certainly there was probably a temptation to do that, and we've seen other religious figures in our day do the same thing when they were able to capitalize on people's emotion. But Nehemiah knew this.

He knew that if the observed sorrow for sin was real and truly from God, it would remain past the time of the celebration. He also wanted to direct the people's thoughts to God during the feast and not having them centered on their own feelings, even though the sorrow was proper for them.

So the feast that Nehemiah prescribed in chapter 8 was a feast of thanksgiving for who God was and for what God had done for them. As we get to the text in chapter 9, the people have arrived at a proper time to express their sorrow over their sin.

[2:55] Even here, though, we'll see that when penance is allowed to go forward, the prayer of the Levites is still focused on the greatness of the acts of God. The prayer directly addresses the Israelites' past sins, but it also drives home the point that we serve a God who habitually and willingly restores people who confess their sins to him.

Because the chapter is long and it doesn't really have a good breaking point, we're going to cover it a little bit differently than what we normally do on a Wednesday night. We're going to read the verses in sections instead of reading them all at once.

The last couple verses of this first section start the prayer, but before we get to the prayer that's the main focus of the chapter, we need to look at the first few verses. And in verses 1 through 6, we see the confessions that ensued.

The confessions that ensued. The word confessions there in your handout is plural, and we'll see why that is as we unpack the first six verses. The first confession comes in verses 1 through 3.

They say, So you can see from verse 1, like we said, that the date is the 24th of the month, and that's the same month that started in chapter 8, the seventh month on the Jewish calendar.

[4:36] And on our calendar, that would be equivalent to the middle of October. As the Israelites gathered before the Lord, they give evidence of their contrition. Their fasting bears witness to their

devotion, and the sackcloth symbolizes their inner repentance.

The scattering of the dust on their heads further shows their sorrow of heart. This is a solemn convocation, so the foreigners who have not embraced Judaism are not allowed to attend. The order here is important, though. It was first the word, then prayer, then confession, and worship. So the word had been having its effect as it was wonderfully read in a real way since the seven days feast.

So the word judged what the people had been doing, and what the word commanded they sought to do. So we have here the remnant reaching what was probably the highest moral state they've ever occupied since the Babylonian captivity.

So they come together again, desiring to learn more of the mind of God so that it will lead to increased devotedness. The Bible reading, again, is prominent here. You notice it said the first quarter of the day was spent in hearing the word, then the next quarter is given to prayer.

[5:49] It's unwise, and it may even be hurtful to reverse this order because although the word and prayer should go together, it should always be the word first, and then prayer following in response to that.

So the believer should be holding the even balance of learning from the word and cultivating the spirit of prayer. We need to hear God speaking to us so that we can rightly speak back to God. They talked about what their sin is, and just so that we're aligned on the definition of sin, here's what the Westminster Shorter Catechism says about sin. It says, Sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God.

Sin is defined by reference to God's law. This is what makes it sin as distinguished from an act that is merely mean or offensive or criminal. The confession of the people's own sins was for personal and corporate forgiveness.

The confession of their father's sins was for remembrance that they might not continue the past evil actions and attitudes. In other words, they weren't asking for forgiveness on their father's behalf.

[6:56] They were saying what their fathers had done wrong to remind themselves that they didn't need to go down that same path. That's quite a bit different than what we see today, isn't it?

Because today, if people refer to their sins or their parents at all, it's to excuse themselves rather than to assume any share of responsibility.

How often have you heard people bring their sins on their genes or their upbringing? So, quite often, somebody says, well, I can't help it. That's just the way I am. When a revival comes, though, people stop trying to excuse themselves by what others, even their parents, have done and instead confess their sins openly.

The Jews did two main things during the assembly that we see in this chapter. They did reading. Of course, that was reading of the word. And then repentance. The word worshipped in verse 3 doesn't mean a third activity because there was worship in both the reading and the praying. The word translated worship for us is translated from the Hebrew word that also means to prostrate or bow. It often means worship, but here it actually means the posture that the Jews had when they confessed their sins.

When the word was read, their posture was always that of standing, but when they confessed their sins, their posture was that of bowing and sometimes standing, too. But it was mostly bowing, and that's why we see what we see in verses 4 and 5.

[8:21] Let's go ahead and look at verses 4 and 5. They say, stand up and bless the Lord your God because they've been in a kneeling position with their heads bowed between their knees, and that's why the Levites instruct them to stand up.

So they say, stand up and bless the Lord forever and ever. So this might have been a very impressive sight, even though that they were numerically small compared to their enemies. Their faith, however, had been quickened by the promises of God. And this example should really encourage us because we may be tempted to think of ourselves as weak and relatively ineffective at times.

To us, as to the Israelites of old, we have the same assurance that prayer is a greater power than any possible combination of man-made powers. Prayer places us in touch with God, and that enables us to tap into God's infinite resources.

Before we get into the prayer itself, here's some background on the prayer. This, too, is a prayer of confession. That's why it's included here.

[9:56] But it's also a prayer that directs the people's thoughts to the goodness and power of God and prepares them for a final appeal to Him for mercy in their current condition. It's similar to a lot of the Psalms, like Psalm 78, 105, and 106, which tell about the dealings of God with His people as recorded in Old Testament history.

One of the interesting things, though, about this prayer is that the Nehemiah 9 prayer is said to be the longest formal prayer in the Old Testament. The tone of the prayer is set by the Levites' challenge to the people to stand up and praise the Lord your God.

Instead of forever and ever, like we see from the New King James, the next line of the Levites' challenge to the people could be translated who is from everlasting to everlasting.

With that translation, you can see more clearly that the focus is on God being forever and ever. So they're not saying to praise God forever and ever. They're saying to praise God who is forever and ever.

Because the prayer praises God, there's something glorious about it, even though it's a prayer of sorrowful confession. So now that we've introduced the prayer, let's start digging into it.

[11:08] The last half of verse 5 and all of verse 6 are a different type of confession. And the prayer begins, Blessed be your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise.

You alone are the Lord. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and everything on it, the seas and all that is in them, and you preserve them all.

The host of heaven worships you. Usually we think of a confession as admitting something that we've done wrong. But a confession can also be a positive confession that voices something that we know.

For a New Testament example of that, think about Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ. That's a confession not that he did something wrong, but it was a confession of what he believes.

And so that's why we actually have two confessions in these first six verses, and that's why the heading for the section is plural. The people first confess their sins, and then at the opening of the prayer, they confess that their God is the one true God.

[12:16] He created everything, and he deserves their worship. The prayer itself contains three main parts, and the first part is the work of God in creation.

That's what we see from the prayer in verses five and six. The prayer begins by praising God as the creator of the heavens and earth. The prayer also shows the influence of the scripture reading of the previous three weeks.

The Old Testament, you know, begins with a creation account, and in fact, the entire prayer follows an outline based on the content of the early books of the Old Testament. So they modeled their prayer off of what they had read.

Verse 5b says, God's name needs to be honored greatly. To use his name in vain, as so many do, greatly dishonors him.

And the important name of God that is being honored above all names here is the name Lord in all capital letters. In Hebrew, we know this is the special name by which God revealed himself to the Israelites.

[13:22] It's found over 6,800 times in the Old Testament. The meaning of the name exalts God above all others. The meaning is found in the divine revelation given to Moses in Exodus 3.

Moses was told that God's name was I am that I am. And of course, that comes from Exodus 3.14. The I am that I am meaning says that God is absolutely sovereign.

He's self-existent. He's eternally existent. He's immutable, all-powerful, and unequalled. Only one person can say I am that I am.

The one that can say this has to be absolute in all authority and power. Nobody can be equal or higher. And we can understand why this confession in our text says that this name is to be exalted above all blessing and praise.

Verse 6 also shows more of God's uniqueness. We saw some of that uniqueness already in the meaning of the name. But here in verse 6, the confession of the Jews plainly says that God is the only God.

[14:29] And this truth was emphasized by Moses when he said, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord. And of course, that comes from Deuteronomy 6.4, part of what they had been reading just a few weeks before.

In the verses at the beginning of the chapter, we've seen the confessions that ensued. Beginning with verses 7 and continuing through verse 31, we'll see the history they reviewed.

So the history they reviewed is the second main part of the prayer. We'll again take these verses in section and we'll start with just verses 7 and 8.

They say, You are the Lord God who chose Abram and brought him up out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham. You found his heart faithful before you and made a covenant with him to give the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, and the Gergesites to give it to his descendants.

You have performed your words for you are righteous. The Lord had called Abraham from the land of the Chaldeans and led him to the promised land. To confirm his word to Abraham, God had made a covenant with him and that of course comes in Genesis 12, 1 through 3.

[15 : 48] And this covenant promised him and his people personal, national, and universal blessing. Its provisions, though, seemed a far cry from the present experience of the Israelites who were now praying to God.

The people must have been thinking about the actual text of Genesis then, though, because only Nehemiah 9-7 contains a reference to Abraham's name being changed from Abram to Abraham. At least that's the only one outside of the Genesis account itself. So the name calls attention to the unilateral way in which God dealt with Abraham. That's a point made repeatedly throughout this section.

Notice that God is the subject of every action in these verses. Verse 7 says that God chose Abraham, brought Abraham, and gave Abraham his new name.

Verse 8 says that God performed his words and that God is righteous. Even the reference to Abraham's faithfulness in verse 8 gives the credit to God. The text does not say Abraham was faithful or even that Abraham served faithfully.

[16 : 55] It says, but you found his heart faithful. And of course, the you there is a reference to God. The emphasis is entirely upon God, but unlike God who kept his promises, the people did not keep theirs.

God was utterly faithful. They were not. And obviously, that's the conclusion that the Levites wanted the people to draw. The disparity between God's promise and the current people's experience would naturally lead them to ask, if God could bless Abraham and fulfill his covenant with Abraham, what must we do to enjoy similar blessing?

The answer to that question is found in the example of Abraham. Abraham had obeyed the Lord. He'd responded in obedience whenever God revealed his will to him.

He'd willingly turned his back on the land of his birth and he'd journeyed to a strange land that he'd never seen before. Throughout his life, he'd lived in submission to the will of God. And his example should provide encouragement for those who are now living in Jerusalem in Nehemiah's day.

And they are acutely conscious of their subservience to the Persians. God, however, is still the same. He's not changed and obedience continues to be the passport to blessing.

[18 : 12] And of course, we can say the same today in our lifetime. God hasn't changed and obedience continues to be the passport to blessing for us as well. As we move on with the prayer, the next several verses review the exodus in Israel's years in the wilderness.

Look at verses 9 through 12. The prayer continues, You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry by the Red Sea. You showed signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his servants, and against all the people of his land.

For you knew that they acted proudly against them, so you made a name for yourself as it is this day. And you divided the sea before them so that they went through the midst of the sea on the dry land.

And their persecutors you threw into the deep as a stone into the mighty waters. Moreover, you led them by day with a cloudy pillar and by night with a pillar of fire to give them light on the road which they should travel.

Notice again that God is the subject of each action. They said, You saw the affliction. You heard their cry by the Red Sea. You showed signs and wonders against Pharaoh. And on and on throughout all of those verses.

[19 : 27] So this section of the prayer obviously is praise to God, but do you get the feeling that the Levites are also praying these things to remind the people about God's power? They obviously want them to remember what God had done for the nation in the past.

So these statements are in narrative form but in recounting God's acts the words also reveal God's attributes because they show that he is omniscient. He saw all their suffering.

They show that he's all powerful because he sent miraculous signs and wonders against Pharaoh.

They show that God is righteous because he threw their persecutors into the depths.

And they show that God is merciful because this is an act of deliverance for God's people. So with that in mind look at verses 13 through 15 next.

They say you came down also on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them just ordinances and true laws good statutes and commandments.

[20 : 29] You made known to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them precepts statutes and laws by the hand of Moses your servant. You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger and brought them water out of the rock for their thirst and told them to go in to possess the land which you had sworn to give them.

Obviously this paragraph retells the giving of the law on Mount Sinai and it also shows the preservation of the people during their passage to the promised land.

Again we see the focus being on God because it says you came down you spoke you gave them regulations but the text also stresses the justice of God's commands and God's goodness.

These characteristics place the rebellion described in the next verses in a proper light. The people rebelled against God and that rebellion was both wrong and ungrateful.

It was wrong because it was against God's righteous commands and it was ungrateful because it was against God's goodness. The verses that come next do explicitly describe the rebellion of the people for the first time.

[21 : 37] On one side the prayer is very blunt in its honest description of the people's rebellious attitude and sin. On the other side God was ready to pardon he's gracious and merciful slow to anger and abundant in kindness.

Verse 17 is a direct quotation from Exodus 34 5-7 showing that the people had remembered it from the earlier reading. God was slow to anger even when the people cast for themselves an image of a calf and said this is your God that brought you up out of Egypt.

So listen to verses 16-18 now to hear the contrast between God's behavior and the people's behavior. The verses say but they and our fathers acted proudly hardened their necks and did not heed your commandments.

They refused to obey and were not mindful of your wonders that you did among them. But they hardened their necks and in their rebellion they appointed a leader to return to their bondage.

But you are God ready to pardon gracious and merciful slow to anger abundant in kindness and did not forsake them. Even when they made a molded calf for themselves and said this is your God that brought you out of Egypt and worked great provocations.

[22 : 52] The same theme continues in the next paragraph which recounts how God sustained the people during their 40 years of wilderness wandering. So here are verses 19-21 They say yet in your manifold mercies you did not forsake them in the wilderness.

The pillar of the cloud did not depart from them by day to lead them on the road nor the pillar of fire by night to show them light and the way they should go. You also gave your good spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst.

Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness they lacked nothing their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell. Going on with the prayer verses 22-25 recount what happened when the Israelites finally entered the promised land.

They say Moreover you gave them kingdoms and nations and divided them into districts so they took possession of the land of Sion the land of the king of Heshbon and the land of Og king of Bashan.

You also multiplied their children as the stars of heaven and brought them into the land which you had told their fathers to go in and possess. So the people went in and possessed the land you subdued before them the inhabitants of the land the Canaanites and gave them into their hands with their kings and the people of the land that they might do with them as they wished and they took strong cities and a rich land and possessed houses full of all goods cisterns already dug vineyards olive groves and fruit trees in abundance so they ate and were filled and grew fat and delighted themselves in your great goodness notice again here that the focus is what God did for the people obviously the people had a pretty good time because the last line says they delighted themselves in your great goodness after they ate and grew fat so when they eventually entered the

promised land God drove out many of the enemies he caused the Israelites to increase in number he gave them the fortified cities the fertile land and they didn't really have to work for it the wells had already been dug the vineyards olive groves and fruit trees were already there so all the people really had to do was just enjoy it so how would you think the people would have reacted to this favorable treatment you know if we didn't know better we might think that the story would end there a fitting ending would be that the people rejoiced in God and lived happily ever after because the story has a different ending that actually gives the Bible more credibility because if the people were making up the story certainly they would have portrayed themselves and their forefathers in a better light instead verses 26 through 30 summarize how the people really acted despite God's blessing so as we look at 26 through 30 the prayer continues like this they say nevertheless they meaning the people were disobedient and rebelled against you cast your law behind their backs and killed your prophets who testified against them to turn them to yourself and they worked great provocations therefore you delivered them into the hand of their enemies who oppressed them and in the time of their trouble when they cried to you you heard from heaven and according to your abundant mercies you gave them deliverers who saved them from the hand of their enemies but after they had rest they again did evil before you therefore you left them in the hand of their enemies so that they had dominion over them yet when they returned and cried out to you you heard from heaven and many times you delivered them according to your mercies and testified against them that they might bring them back to your law yet they acted proudly and did not heed your commandments but sinned against your judgments which if a man does he shall live by them and they shrugged their shoulders stiffened their necks and would not hear yet for many years you had patience with them and testified against them by your spirit in your prophets yet they would not listen therefore you gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands so these verses describe what became a sad but steady pattern in Israel's life there was increasing sin and rebellion followed by God's disciplinary judgments!

[27 : 14] followed by a temporary return to God followed by more rebellion sin and apostasy and the list of Israel's sin grows very specific in these paragraphs as all true confessions of sin must do despite all this sin though God remained true to his character and never completely abandoned the Israelites and we see that from the closing verse of this history section look at verse 31 the Levites prayed to God nevertheless in your great mercy you did not utterly consume them nor forsake them for you are God gracious and merciful the review of their national history provides each Jew with the stimulus of a noble example the encouragement of what God has done in the past an example of the consequences of ingratitude and the chastening of sin goes unconfessed but most important of all we see hope for the future that hope is based not on what they do it's based upon the unchanging character of

God they see in the present a product of the past but also the seed of the future their anticipation now is that the knowledge of past events will help them avoid the evil and follow the good so here's the key sentence from that explanation again most important of all there's hope for the future hope based on the unchangeable character of God because God's character is unchanging we still serve the same God today if the Israelites had hope for the future based upon the unchanging character of God what should that mean for us obviously we have the same hope and once again we have the same hope the question is what should be our response to that hope and our response to that hope should be the same as the response of the Israelites on the day that the prayer was first prayed that's the last section of tonight's passage in the last section we see the response to that and we've studied the confessions that ensued we've studied the history they reviewed and in verses 32 through 38 we see the covenant they renewed the covenant they renewed so look at verses 32 through 38 to see that covenant renewal this is how the prayer ends it says now therefore our God the great and mighty and awesome

God who keeps covenant and mercy do not let all the trouble seem small before you that has come upon us our kings and our princes our priests and our prophets our fathers and all your people from the days of the kings of Assyria until this day however you are just in all that has befallen us for you have dealt faithfully but we have done wickedly neither our kings nor our princes our priests nor our fathers have kept the law nor heeded your commandments and your testimonies with which you testified against them for they have not served you in their kingdom or in the many good things that you gave them or in the large and rich land which you set before them nor did they turn from their wicked works here we are servants today and the land that you gave to our fathers to eat its fruit

and its bounty here we are servants in it and it yields much increase to the kings you have set over us because of our sins also they have dominion over our bodies and our cattle at their pleasure and we are in great distress and because of all this we make a sure covenant and write it our leaders our

Levites and our priests seal it this appeal for god's mercy in the present distress is the third section of the prayer as the litany of the people's sins has been built to a climax so have the repeated affirmations of god's patience goodness and mercy we see again how the prayer contrasts the people's behavior with god's behavior and verse 33 neatly summarizes that contrast verse 33 said however you are just in all that has befallen us for you have done faithfully but we have done wickedly the prayer of the Levites quite naturally leads the people to a new commitment of themselves to the one whose favor they seek they have a desire for a new relationship with their covenant keeping god and only this new relationship will satisfy their spiritual longings and let them realize their nationalistic hopes therefore they decide to make a solemn agreement in writing and to seal the agreement with the signatures of the leaders of the people in this way they hope to consolidate the quickening of the spirit which they have just experienced and also consolidate the spiritual gains of the last few weeks so we can learn several things from this prayer and from Israel's history first history gives us good and bad examples from which to learn history encourages us by reminding us of all that God has done in the past and the lives of others and from their experience we learn the benefits of godliness and the sorrowful consequences of spiritual waywardness history also helps us avoid the errors and false practices of men and nations and this is particularly true of biblical history the sons of Israel for example could turn their thoughts to the period of the judges and see the recurring cycle of departure from the Lord discipline repentance and deliverance seen in this light the benefits of righteousness integrity and morality become obvious second the history of man and his ability to enjoy life individually as well as nationally is closely tied to his conformity to the will of God after observing the testimony of the centuries [33:08] Daniel Webster remarked if we abide by the principles taught in the Bible our country will go on prospering and continue to prosper but if we in our prosperity neglect its instructions and authority no man can tell how a sudden catastrophe may overwhelm us and bury our glory in profound obscurity there is no adequate substitute then for godliness and that's what the Webster quote is trying to tell us third from our study of Nehemiah nine tonight we can take courage from the fact that God is active in history at times we may be tempted to doubt his involvement the Israelites we know certainly were not always conscious of his care and loving concern but this did not mean that he wasn't active and working behind the scenes by observing God's activity in the past they came to know more of his work in the present they learned of his majesty when they heard him described they came to know more about his faithfulness through his covenant keeping with them in spite of their faithlessness and they experienced a revival of hope as they contemplated his compassion because

God is the same yesterday and today and forever as Hebrews 13:8 tells us we may have confidence when we approach him a biblical approach to history will neither make us wide-eyed optimist nor downhearted pessimist it does give us confidence though as we face tomorrow we see man's triumphs for God and also observe the efforts of those whose lives have produced few tangible results and when this is set against the continuing conflict of good and evil and the downward trend of every civilization since Cain's civilization we can realistically anticipate the future a view like this corrects our system of values motivates us to consistent Christian living and makes the return of Christ an eagerly anticipated event that return of Christ is going to be the only thing to ultimately set things straight you notice though that the title is one nation under God and the United States may never be one nation under God but we can be individuals under God and Highland Park can be one church under God we've recently seen God's blessings on our church and it's up to us to respond properly to those blessings and act accordingly our hope is the same as the Israelites hope we heard the same God we serve the same God I mean who described himself to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7a Exodus 34:6-7a say and the Lord passed before him and proclaimed the Lord the Lord God merciful and gracious long suffering and abounding in goodness and truth keeping mercy for thousands forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin that's the same God we still serve today