

Nehemiah 9  
Psalm 106  
Acts 13:13-52

“Their Sin – Our Misery”

March 24, 2019

Our fathers really messed up –  
and we’re suffering because of it!

In our day, it’s really tempting to read this in an individualistic way!  
“My parents really screwed up me!”

And certainly that can happen!  
Parents *can* ruin their kids lives!

But that *isn't* what the prayer of Nehemiah 9 is saying.  
When it says that “our fathers” sinned –  
it's not making a genetic connection to my *particular* parents.  
“Our fathers” refers to the whole of the people of Israel:  
whether my *particular* parents sinned is beside the point.  
By virtue of my participation in Israel *now*  
that means that I am the heir of Israel *then* –  
and so whether my particular parents sinned doesn’t matter.  
As a part of this community,  
I have inherited the good, the bad, and the ugly that goes along with it.

Scripture regularly affirms the idea of corporate guilt –  
and particularly the idea that corporate misery is the result of corporate guilt.

Let me use two issues to illustrate this.

First, abortion.

You may never have had an abortion.  
You may never have voted for a politician who approved of legalized abortion.  
But that does not mean that you will escape the miseries  
that come about for this national sin!

When Israel went into exile,  
there was no distinction made between those who really trusted God,  
and those who didn’t!

Or, to use an older example – consider racial slavery.

It was wrong to enslave Africans and transport them to the Americas.  
And the racialization of slavery was especially heinous.  
If it was okay to have black slaves, why not have white slaves?  
But when God’s judgment came against the United States,

abolitionists and slaveholders alike died in the Civil War.  
For that matter, *whites and blacks* alike died in the Civil War.

And as we all know, the Civil War did not end America's sin problem  
with respect to race!

We – as a nation – as a people – continued to oppress and mistreat  
those who were made in God's image.

But national sins result in national judgments.

Our fathers' sins result in our miseries.

Someone might say – “but I'm Korean,  
what did my fathers' have to do with this?!”

No, but you have joined yourself to this nation –

and therefore you inherit its story, both the good and the bad!

As long as you are *here*, you will share in its glories and its miseries.

If someday some terrorist blows up a U.S. city with a dirty bomb –  
no one will be able to get an exemption card  
that saves them from radiation poisoning  
“because my ancestors didn't live here!”

If you are an American, then you share the benefits – and the liabilities – of being an American  
And that's equally true for every nation under heaven.

Our Psalm of response is Psalm 106 –

a song that retraces the same story that we just heard in Nehemiah 9.

With these “story Psalms” I encourage you to get the tune stuck in your head  
and really focus on the words as we pray the word of God back to him!

TPH 106A

Read Acts 13:13-52

Last time we heard about the reading of the Law –

and how the people started to weep as they heard the Law,

since they realized how far short they had fallen from God's standard.

But the Levites told them “do not weep – this day is holy to the LORD your God...

Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.” (8:9-10)

Yes, there is a time to grieve over our sin (as we'll hear today!) –

but *first* we must start with salvation!

Salvation does not start with repentance and grief.

Salvation starts with *what God has done!*

This is the same point that Paul makes in Acts 13.

He starts with *what God has done in Jesus Christ* for our salvation –  
for the forgiveness of sins –

“by him everyone who believes is freed  
from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.”

And at the end of the chapter, the Gentiles who heard this

“began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord,  
and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.”

Salvation begins with the proclamation of what *God has done* for our salvation!

The proper *response* to that message is faith and repentance.

Last time we looked particularly at the response of faith.

Today we look more at repentance.

Our shorter catechism says that

“repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner –  
out of a true sense of his sin,  
and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ –  
does with grief and hatred of his sin,  
turn from it, unto God, with full purpose of and endeavor after new obedience.”

The prayer of Nehemiah chapter 9 is an excellent example.

You see throughout the prayer a strong “sense of their sin” –  
but also a clear apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ.

You see grief over sin – as well as hatred of it.

And you see, at the end, a commitment to turn from sin to God,  
even to the point of signing a covenant to endeavor after new obedience!

### **Introduction: The Twenty-Fourth Day – A Day of Confession (v1-5)**

*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. <sup>2</sup> And the Israelites<sup>[a]</sup> separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> On the stairs of the Levites stood Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, and Chenani; and they cried with a loud voice to the LORD their God. <sup>5</sup> 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.*

We start on the 24<sup>th</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month.

This is the day after Feast of Booths.

The Feast of Booths was an eight day feast (from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 23<sup>d</sup>).

But the people don't go home.

They have spent the last eight days in Jerusalem

celebrating the feast –

but now, before they go home,

they feel the need to commit themselves to new obedience.

We were told in the last chapter that they read the *whole* book of the law during the feast.

But they haven't had enough yet!

They spend a quarter of the next day hearing the Law read again!

Then they spend a quarter of the day making confession before the LORD.

And the people of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners.

As we have seen repeatedly throughout Ezra-Nehemiah

the designation "foreigner" has less to do with biological ancestry

than it does with commitment to the God of Abraham.

One commentator points out that "At the heart of Israel's sins

is the desire to act and worship

in the same way that other nations act and worship." (Levering, 183)

So, not surprisingly, Israel's *repentance*

means that they must separate themselves from the nations.

And then the Levites call them to worship in verse 5.

I'd like you see something here in this call to worship:

God's "glorious name...is exalted above all blessing and praise."

Think about that for a moment:

God's glorious name "is exalted above all blessing and praise."

No matter how much you praise God's name

you can never reach the level of praise that is *due* to his name!

If you praise God with all your breath –

you are but using the breath that *he gave you* to praise him.

If you find all the best words to bless God's name –

you are but using creaturely words to exalt the Creator! (cf. Levering 185)

God's glorious name is *exalted above all blessing and praise*.

As God himself says in Isaiah 55:8-9, "For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts"

But the fact that God's name is exalted *above* all blessing and praise  
does not mean that we shouldn't bother with blessing and praise!  
Far from it!

It just means that we need to remember that our praise of God  
*never* exceeds that which we owe him!  
You can never bless God *too much!*

Verse 5 is spoken by the Levites (perhaps even a Levitical choir).

But verse 6 seems to start a new prayer.  
Indeed, the Septuagint even includes a line, "And Ezra said..."  
which is quite possibly what happened.  
It sounds very much like a solo voice.

On the other hand, given how many Psalms we have that tell stories,  
it is possible that the Levitical choir chanted this prayer  
(eight voices in unison would have more volume,  
and might be heard better all through the Assembly).

Either way, the prayer is a prayer of confession –  
both a confession of faith – as it rehearses the story of salvation,  
and a confession of sin – as it rehearses the story of our sin and misery.

This is given to us as a model for prayer.

The prayers of the Bible are useful for us as examples to follow.  
Praying the story of salvation back to God is important!  
When we pray the story of salvation back to God,  
we align ourselves with *his kingdom*.  
We place ourselves in obedience to him and his ways, his truth, his life.

## **1. Our Fathers' Story – Our Fathers' Sins (v6-31)**

### **a. Creation and Covenant (v6-8)**

<sup>6</sup> [b] *"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.*

Verses 6-8 start out with two confessions of faith.

"You are Yahweh – you alone" – the Creator and Preserver of all things (v6)

"You are Yahweh – the God who chose Abram" –  
the one who is faithful to his covenant (v7)

Throughout the book of Ezra-Nehemiah,

we have often heard God referred to as "the God of heaven and earth,"

so it is not surprising to hear this prayer start with a confession of Yahweh as the maker of the heaven, the earth, and the seas.

But everything else in this prayer is rooted in this basic confession.

“You are the LORD – you alone.

You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host” –

Think about what that means!

You have made heaven – and “heaven” refers here to the visible heavens.

In Genesis 1, when God fashioned the “firmament”

(that blue dome above us) –

he called the “firmament” *heaven*.

And then he created the stars *in* the firmament of the heavens –

and he made the birds to fly “on the face of the firmament of the heavens”

(Just think about how it looks from our vantage point:

the stars look like they are embedded in that great dome above us –

and the birds are plainly flying in between us and that great dome.

Scripture is not trying to give us a precise scientific description,

but a clear observational description.)

So God made the heavens –

and he made the *heaven of heavens* –

if “heaven” refers to the visible heavens (the blue dome above us),

then “heaven of heavens” is regularly used to refer to the invisible heavens –

the spiritual realm.

And God made the heavens, the heaven of heavens, “with all their host.”

The host of heavens also can have two meanings!

If you are talking about the earthly heavens (the sky) –

then the host of heaven refers to the stars;

but if you are talking about the heaven of heavens (the spiritual realm) –

then the host of heaven refers to angelic beings.

So the point of verse 6 is that God made everything:

the three realms of heaven, earth, and seas –

and all that fills the three realms:

the heavens – with all their host,

the earth – with all that is on it,

and the seas – with all that is in them.

This is important, because all throughout the prayer,

we will see that Israel’s sin comes back time and again to rebelling against God –

turning to other gods and disobeying the LORD.

This is why the Creed starts with the confession – “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.”

Everything else ultimately comes back to this:

He is God.

I am not.

He *alone* is God – the Creator of all things.

He is the Creator – we are creatures.

But then, in verses 7-8, we have a second confession of faith:

<sup>7</sup> *You are the LORD, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham.* <sup>8</sup> *You found his heart faithful before you, and made with him the covenant to give to his offspring the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite. And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous.*

If the first point in our confession is that God is the Creator,  
the second point is that God is faithful and just;  
he keeps his promises – he is faithful to his covenant.

God chose Abram.

Everything starts with God’s *electing love*.

It wasn’t that Abram was so good and faithful that God chose him –  
no, the text very clearly puts it the other way around!

The LORD chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans  
and gave him the name Abraham.

Only then does Ezra say,

“You found his heart faithful before you,  
and made with him the covenant to give to his offspring the land.”

If Abraham had refused to go to the Promised Land –  
then he would not have proven faithful –  
and we never would have heard of Abraham!

But God’s *electing love* is an *effectual* love –  
it accomplishes his purpose in history.

As Ezra puts it, “And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous.”

It’s worth pointing out that the only *covenant* explicitly stated in this prayer  
is God’s covenant with Abraham.

The only *promise* that Ezra highlights  
is God’s promise to Abraham.

Everything else in Ezra’s prayer is rooted in God’s covenant and promise to Abraham.

Just as the Creed starts by confessing God as creator, and then moves to God as Savior, so also does Ezra's prayer.

Indeed, verses 6-8 focus on God as Father and Creator,

verses 9-15 focus on God as Savior – who *spoke* the Law – and gave bread from heaven, and water from the rock [all which the NT connects with Christ].

and then verses 16-21 highlight the work of the Holy Spirit (even naming the Spirit).

#### **b. Exodus and Torah (v9-15)**

<sup>9</sup> “*And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea, <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments, <sup>14</sup> and you made known to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses your servant. <sup>15</sup> 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.*”

Verse 9 jumps straight from the call of Abraham to the Exodus from Egypt – indeed all the way to the crossing of the Red Sea.

Verses 9-15 cover the period from the Red Sea to Mt. Sinai, highlighting God's work of salvation and his call to holiness.

Ezra devotes three verses (v9-11) to the crossing of the Red Sea.

Israel was saved through water – the same water that destroyed the Egyptians, thereby prefiguring the waters of baptism.

And God led his people by a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night – bringing them to his holy mountain. (v12)

And at Sinai the LORD himself came down and spoke with them from heaven (v13-14).

Ezra refers to “right rules” and “true laws”, “good statutes and commandments.”

The Law of God tells us how to live in God's world.

It shows us “the way” in which we should go.

Ezra only names *one* of those commands:

“you made known to them your holy Sabbath.”

Even as God worked for six days – and rested on the seventh,

so also do we follow the same pattern.  
(Those made in God's image should expect to imitate their God).

And as this section began with Israel's baptism into Moses in the cloud and in the sea –  
so it ends with God feeding them with bread from heaven –  
and giving them water from the rock.  
Jesus says in John 6 that *he is* the bread which came down from heaven;  
And Paul says in 1 Cor 10 that Christ was that rock which Moses struck.

Israel was baptized at the Red Sea,  
as God called his people out of Egypt – and into a New Creation.  
He taught them his Law – his way of living –  
and then he gave them spiritual food and drink –  
calling them to go in and take possession of the Land of Promise.

But this is where everything began to go wrong!  
You may have noticed that up until now, the only *subject* in verses 6-15 is “you.”  
(The LORD).

It has all been second person singular:

*You made heaven...*

*You chose Abram...*

*You found his heart faithful*

(even Abraham never becomes the subject of his own sentence!)

*You saw the affliction of our fathers...*

*You divided the sea before them...*

*You came down...*

*You gave them...*

### c. Rebellion and Mercy in the Wilderness (v16-21)

<sup>16</sup> “*But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments.*” <sup>17</sup> *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.*<sup>[e]</sup>

As soon as the subject shifts, everything goes wrong!  
When *God* acts, his people are saved!  
When *they* act on their own, trouble follows!

They and our fathers acted presumptuously.

Why does it distinguish between “they” and “our fathers”?

Because many of “them” were totally destroyed with all their offspring.

Ezra wants to make clear that *none of us* can say,

“but *our fathers* were innocent!”

Your father may have been the faithful Joshua – the faithful Caleb!  
But that does not mean that you are exempt!  
You are still part of Israel.

Whenever your family became part of the story – you inherited the whole story!!

*They acted presumptuously.  
They stiffened their neck.  
They did not obey your commandments.  
They refused to obey...*

In verses 17-21, Ezra remembers the story of the golden calf.  
And here you see the contrast between “you” and “them.”

*But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them. <sup>18</sup> Even when they had made for themselves a golden<sup>[d]</sup> calf and said, ‘This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt,’ and had committed great blasphemies, <sup>19</sup> you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness.*

God did not deal with our fathers the way they deserved!  
God’s judgment is a sort of poetic justice.  
He looks at us – and sees how we have treated others –  
and so he treats us the same way!

He judges us *according to our deeds*.

Those who dig a pit to ensnare others – will fall into it themselves.  
We see that in politics all the time!  
One party sets a policy for their own advantage when they are in power –  
only to see the other party using the same policy against them later.

But while God does judge according to our deeds –  
he is also *merciful* – and *slow* to anger.  
And so God did not treat our fathers as they deserved.  
“in your great mercies you did not forsake them in the wilderness.”

*The pillar of cloud to lead them in the way did not depart from them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night to light for them the way by which they should go. <sup>20</sup> You gave your good Spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst. <sup>21</sup> Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness, and they lacked nothing. Their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell.*

Here Ezra focuses on the work of the Holy Spirit –  
in teaching God’s people –  
and in providing bread from heaven (the manna) and living water (from the rock).

God is faithful to his promises.

Ezra’s prayer reminds us what happens when God’s promises and God’s wrath meet.  
Mercy triumphs over judgment.  
God *will be faithful* to his promises.  
Our sin may make a mess of things!  
But God will fulfill all that he has promised!

And so verses 22-25 show us how God gave them the Land.

#### **d. Taking Possession of the Land (v22-25)**

<sup>22</sup> “And you gave them kingdoms and peoples and allotted to them every corner. So they took possession of the land of Sihon king of Heshbon and the land of Og king of Bashan. <sup>23</sup> You multiplied their children as the stars of heaven, and you brought them into the land that you had told their fathers to enter and possess. <sup>24</sup> So the descendants went in and possessed the land, and you subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gave them into their hand, with their kings and the peoples of the land, that they might do with them as they would. <sup>25</sup> And they captured fortified cities and a rich land, and took possession of houses full of all good things, cisterns already hewn, vineyards, olive orchards and fruit trees in abundance. So they ate and were filled and became fat and delighted themselves in your great goodness.

Notice that verses 22-25 give us a picture of the *proper* relationship between God and his people:

*You* gave them kingdoms and peoples...  
*So they* took possession of the land...  
*You* multiplied their children...  
*So the descendants* went in and possessed the land.

God acts – and his people respond by doing what God said to do in response!

It sounds so simple!!

And, indeed, it *is* simple!

No – I didn’t say it is *easy*.

I said it is *simple*.

It is not complicated.

As Proverbs 3:4-5 says,

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.

In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”

Our problem is that we don’t *trust* God.

We can’t quite bring ourselves to believe that he *really* knows what he’s saying!

God says don’t commit adultery –

“but she’s really cute – I just want to look!!”  
So you’ll disregard what God says in order to follow your own understanding.

God says don’t steal –  
“but it’s only a cookie – and I’m hungry!”  
So you won’t trust God – you’ll do what you want.

If you trusted God – if you put your trust in the LORD, and not in your own understanding –  
then you would do what God says.

It *is* that simple!

And verses 26-31 describe the continued rebellion of ‘our fathers’  
throughout the time of the judges and the kings:

**e. Rebellion and Mercy in the Land (v26-31)**

*<sup>26</sup> “Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies. <sup>27</sup> Therefore you gave them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer.*

Disobedience and rebellion lead to suffering and death.

Of course, it’s not just “one sin” and it’s over!

Ezra is describing a pattern of rebellion and disobedience.

Generation after generation continues in its sinful habits.

And the pattern includes cycles of repentance and salvation:

*And in the time of their suffering they cried out to you and you heard them from heaven, and according to your great mercies you gave them saviors who saved them from the hand of their enemies. <sup>28</sup> But after they had rest they did evil again before you, and you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them. Yet when they turned and cried to you, you heard from heaven, and many times you delivered them according to your mercies.*

Why did God do this?

Why did it take so long?

Why did it take hundreds of years of this pattern – over and over again?

God wanted us to see that there was *no way* that we were ever going to get this right!

You hear this in verses 29-30:

*<sup>29</sup> And you warned them in order to turn them back to your law. Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your rules, which if a person does them, he shall live by them, and they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and*

would not obey. <sup>30</sup> Many years you bore with them and warned them by your Spirit through your prophets. Yet they would not give ear. Therefore you gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands.

If only we would *just get it right* – everything would be fine!

The Law shows us how to live!

“if a person does them, he shall live by them...”

which is a quote from Leviticus 18:5 – but also from Ezekiel 20.

(in fact, a lot of Ezra’s prayer is drawn from Ezekiel 20!).

The Spirit spoke to the people of God through the prophets –  
warning them to return to the LORD.

Finally, because of Israel’s rebellion, Israel and Judah were sent into exile.

<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.

God will be faithful to his promises!!

You are a gracious and merciful God!

But we got a problem!

We keep sinning.

The pattern doesn’t ever seem to change!

And so, after rehearsing the whole story of God’s people,  
Ezra comes to the point:

## **2. Their Sin Has Brought About Our Present Distress (v32-37)**

<sup>32</sup> “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. <sup>33</sup> Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly. <sup>34</sup> 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. <sup>35</sup> Even in their own kingdom, and amid your great goodness that you gave them, and in the large and rich land that you set before them, they did not serve you or turn from their wicked works. <sup>36</sup> Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves. <sup>37</sup> And its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress.

Ezra understands very well that nothing has changed.

God is righteous and has dealt faithfully with his people.

*We have acted wickedly.*

When we had our own land – with our own kings – we rebelled.

And so now we are slaves.

God had said to Pharaoh – Israel is my son, my firstborn –

Let my son go, that he may serve (or worship) me.

But now the kings of Persia rule over the son of God.

Israel – God’s firstborn son –

is a slave to Persia.

Our fathers have sinned – and we are in great distress.

As long as Israel remains under the rule of foreign kings,

we are slaves.

That’s why Paul said in Acts 13,

“we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers,

this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus,

as also it is written in the second Psalm,

‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you.’”

Because in the death and resurrection of Jesus,

“through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you,

and by him everyone who believes

is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.”

The Law could never set you free!

But God has done what the Law – weakened by the flesh – could not do.

He sent his only begotten Son – in our flesh –

in order that he might become the sin offering for us.

Jesus has come as the Son of God and savior of sinners –

because when the fullness of time had come,

God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,

to redeem those who were under the law

so that we might receive adoption as sons. (Gal 4:4-5)

<sup>38</sup> [e] *“Because of all this we make a firm covenant in writing; on the sealed document are the names of<sup>[f]</sup> our princes, our Levites, and our priests.*

“This Is the One”