International Bible Lessons Commentary
Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series
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Nehemiah 9:32-39 & 10:28-29
New Revised Standard Version
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The **International Bible Lesson** (*Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series*) for **Sunday, October 29, 2017**, is from **Nehemiah 9:32-39 & 10:28-29**. **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse-by-verse *International Bible Lesson Commentary*. **Study Hints for Discussion and Thinking Further** will help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion: these hints are available on the *International Bible Lessons Commentary* website along with the *International Bible Lesson* that you may want to read to your class as part of your Bible study. You can discuss each week's commentary and lesson at the *International Bible Lesson Forum*.

(Nehemiah 9:32) "Now therefore, our God—the great and mighty and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love—do not treat lightly all the hardship that has come upon us, upon our kings, our officials, our priests, our prophets, our ancestors, and all your people, since the time of the kings of Assyria until today.

Chapters 1-7 of Nehemiah describe how Nehemiah prayed and worked to restore the wall around the city of Jerusalem. Chapters 8-13 of Nehemiah describe how Nehemiah prayed and worked to restore God's people. To restore the people's right relationship with God, Nehemiah had the Bible (the Law of God) read to the people and interpreted so they would understand their Scriptures. The people reaffirmed their commitment to obey the Bible (the Hebrew Scriptures); then, Nehemiah confessed their sins and reaffirmed their commitment to God in prayer.

In prayer, Nehemiah praised God for being "our God." God had chosen them to be His people and He would be their God. God chose them for the purpose of spreading the knowledge of the true God among all the nations of the earth. They would not begin to fulfil their missionary role until the events in the Book of Acts. Their God was no tribal god or idol like the gods of their neighbors. Their God is "the great God," who is "mighty" and "awesome:" "all-powerful" and "awe-inspiring;" the One who can achieve all of His purposes and overcome all of His adversaries; the One whose actions inspire praise and wonder. Of crucial importance to the returned exiles, God had made a "covenant of love" with them through Moses when He gave them the Law of God. God loved them and would faithfully keep all His promises to them. Their idolatrous and immoral behavior had made their loving God angry enough to warn them and then bring sound discipline upon them for their unrepentant hearts, but not

angry enough for God to stop loving them or stop being faithful to them and His covenant of love.

After praising God for His nature and character as revealed in the Bible and their history, Nehemiah gave God an objective description of their sad situation since the time of the fall of the northern kingdom, the Kingdom of Israel, in 722 BC. God is so great that Nehemiah did not want God to think that the hardship of everyone was but a trifle. To the great God, their hardship might seem as nothing, but to them it was overwhelming. Nehemiah prayed for God to help the people return to a right relationship with God, a King and subject relationship, a loving family relationship, a Father and child relationship.

(Nehemiah 9:33) You have been just in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly;

Nehemiah put the blame for their hardship squarely where it belonged, on God's people themselves. God was righteous; God did all the right things when He disciplined His people as He had repeatedly warned them He would do through their prophets (even from the time of Moses, when God gave them the Law of God and made a covenant with them from Mount Sinai: this covenant was also an expression of God's love and required the people to love and God). God had acted faithfully and lovingly as their God and King when He had disciplined them as a king should discipline his rebellious subjects. God was faithful

to them, and in their best interests God punished them and worked to restrain and correct their evil, wicked, self-destructive, God-dishonoring, sinful behavior that hurt others and themselves morally, spiritually, and physically.

(Nehemiah 9:34) our kings, our officials, our priests, and our ancestors have not kept your law or heeded the commandments and the warnings that you gave them.

Nehemiah confessed specifically the sins of their leaders and their ancestors. Their kings, leaders, and priests for as long as any of them could remember had misled the people. King Solomon led the Kingdom of Judah into idolatry, and the nobles and priests from that time forth (with a few notable exceptions) had followed his bad example and had misled the people, who followed the examples of their religious and political leaders. After King Solomon, King Jeroboam led the Kingdom of Israel into idolatry and immorality, which led to the kingdom's destruction by the Assyrians. The leaders and people began their downward spiral by openly not following God's laws (for example, King Solomon married many foreign wives and set up altars for their idols so they could worship their false gods in the high places around Jerusalem, which misled many Israelites). Following their open rebellion, they began to pay no attention to any of God's commands or laws despite God's repeated warnings in His laws and by His prophets. All of them disregarded and disgraced God and themselves among themselves and

their neighboring nations.

(Nehemiah 9:35) Even in their own kingdom, and in the great goodness you bestowed on them, and in the large and rich land that you set before them, they did not serve you and did not turn from their wicked works.

God repeatedly poured out His blessings upon them. He met all their needs and gave them great prosperity. They enjoyed the good life that God gave them; but rather than thank God for His manifold blessings, they ignored God's covenant of love, refused to love and serve God as God commanded and deserved, and persisted in practicing all the evils of their neighbors (if they could not invent new evils for themselves to practice and spread to their neighbors, they practiced whatever their neighbors did). They were totally ungrateful to God for His many blessings. If God did not intervene, they would go from evil to worsening evils, destroying others as well as themselves in every way imaginable.

(Nehemiah 9:36) Here we are, slaves to this day—slaves in the land that you gave to our ancestors to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts.

Under Nehemiah's leadership as governor, the Jews (the tribes of Judah and Benjamin) had returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the city's walls, but they were still slaves to stronger surrounding kingdoms. After being exiles in

Babylon, they were slaves to the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans up to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, after which time they were scattered again. When Jesus the Messiah came, He freed (and continues to free) from slavery to sin and satan everyone who trusts Him as their Lord and Savior. When Jesus the Messiah returns, He will establish His kingdom powerfully and visibly over the entire world. After Jesus the Messiah returns, all His loyal subjects around the world will enjoy the fruits and other good things that the new earth will produce.

(Nehemiah 9:37) Its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins; they have power also over our bodies and over our livestock at their pleasure, and we are in great distress."

Nehemiah accurately described their slavery situation and acknowledged they were suffering because of their sins, not because of God's unfaithfulness. Though from time to time the Jews up to the time of Jesus the Messiah would enjoy a measure of prosperity, they remained subjects of foreign rulers (with brief times in between when they would rebel and be repressed once again). As we discover from reading the New Testament, many of the priests and other religious leaders in Jerusalem collaborated with their foreign rulers for power and prestige—leading to the crucifixion of their true Messiah. As Jesus lamented, the people were as sheep without a shepherd: "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they

were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36). No wonder God did postponed His answer to Nehemiah's prayer until the coming of Jesus the Messiah.

(Nehemiah 9:38) Because of all this we make a firm agreement in writing, and on that sealed document are inscribed the names of our officials, our Levites, and our priests.

After reading and interpreting the Law of God for the people, Nehemiah led the people to reaffirm the covenant of love that God had made with them. It was a binding agreement that they would obligate themselves to keep with appropriate "curses" or "consequences" if they broke the agreement. All the kingdom's leaders affixed their seals (signed) the agreement. It would be their responsibility to lead the people by word and example, and require everyone to obey the agreement, which was according to the Law of God. As far as we know, the people and their leaders never returned to worshiping idols, but they did not turn from their immoral practices, and they even intentionally misinterpreted God's Law for their own selfish purposes as Jesus pointed out in His preaching. To the Pharisees and teachers of the law, Jesus said, "Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that" (Mark 7:13).

(Nehemiah 10:28) The rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to adhere to the law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have knowledge and understanding,

Nehemiah affirmed and the agreement stipulated that the Law of God, their agreement, applied to everyone equally. From the greatest to the least of them, no one had special privilege to break God's law. The Law of God was to be taught to and obeyed by the smallest child who could understand. To separate "from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the Law of God," meant they would not practice any of the idolatries or evils of their neighbors, but they would follow the Law of God irrespective of what their neighbors did. They would not marry idolatrous and immoral foreign wives, as King Solomon did. They would only marry those who accepted the LORD as their God and His Law as their Law (much earlier, Ruth, an ancestor to Jesus the Messiah, was a good example of the type of foreign woman an Israelite might take as his wife).

(Nehemiah 10:29) join with their kin, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God's law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord and his ordinances and his statutes.

A law without consequences for obedience and disobedience is not a law but advice. God and all the people (including the nobles) knew what a law was, and they bound themselves to suffering the consequences of breaking their oath and not obeying the Law of God (summed up in the Ten Commandments). If they had obeyed the Law of God as given through Moses and carefully obeyed "all the commands, regulations, and decrees of the LORD our God," then the consequences for their obedience would have included freedom from slavery to foreign nations and the blessing of eating the fruit and all the other good things their land produced. Of course, despite their initial good intentions, they failed to keep their binding agreement. But despite their failures, God kept His covenant of love with them and through them God sent the son of David, Jesus the Messiah, His only begotten Son, into the world to save all who would believe in Him.

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. How did Nehemiah describe God in Nehemiah 9:32?

2. Describe the difference between the way God had acted toward His people and the way His people had acted toward God in Nehemiah 9:33.

3. List the type or social status of the people who did not keep God's Law.

4. How were the people treated in the land God gave to their ancestors?

5. What did Nehemiah lead the people to do?

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