

Nehemiah Chapters 9-10 John Karmelich

1. My title for this lesson, is "conviction". To summarize these two chapters in a few thoughts, most of Chapter 9 is a prayer to God reciting Israelites history to date. In Chapter 10 the Israelites feel a strong sense of conviction and agree to obey God's laws. Yes, I'll get into detail about what it was that was read, why it convicted them and why they responded the way they did in this lesson. In the meantime, the big question I want to bring up here is should conviction be a part of our life as believers? Should we be "guilted" into being good Christians? Is it proper for a priest or a pastor to try to make us feel guilty to be better Christians? Of course not. Our conscious can do that all by itself. God's word has a way of making us realize, "Wait a minute that' is how God wants me to live who am I to say otherwise? Yes there are issues about grace versus the law. I would never argue we're more saved by keeping the law. The issue isn't salvation, it's being a good witness for Jesus. Obviously in this lesson there will be laws discussed that are not appropriate for us today. I will discuss all of that. In summary, God's word does a lot to convict us of our sins and we will read in these chapters the proper response to such conviction.
2. At this point, it's probably best if I talk about the two chapters a bit. Then I'll return to the issue of conviction. When we last left off with the Israelites they just finished celebrating a feast that is God ordained and lasts for a week. During that time the Israelites were to live in booths to recall how God preserved their ancestors to get to the land of Israel. Anyway, that's done and all of the Israelites are now gathered for another bible study.
 - a) It may help before I begin to consider the idea of having a purpose for living. A big need all of us have is a reason for living other than say paying the bills or raising a family. We desire a purpose for existence. I state that here because the Israelites in Chapter 9 will be reviewing their history. The main purpose isn't to study such history as much as it was to understand the Israelites purpose for living, to be a witness for God. The same of course is applicable to us. Whatever our ministry, whatever our spiritual gifts, we were created for the purpose of giving glory to God. Understand that purpose gives us proper perspective in life and yes convicts of how we should be living.
 - b) With that said, Chapter 9 describes a six hour bible study! And you thought I had studies that were too long! It was essentially three hours of bible study, three hours of singing to God and honoring Him by gathering together to study and praise Him.
 - c) Most of Chapter 9 is a prayer. That pray goes over Israel's history from the fact God made the world, through the first Jewish person Abraham, all the way to the time when they are there studying God's word together. In this lesson I'll get a lot into what was and was not included and why. This prayer wasn't designed to teach every detail of Israel's history. It was to convict the Israelites by reminding them of their purpose for living. Certain things were emphasized and ignored. The main point is God preserved them as a nation in spite of all their failures as a nation. The reason they're preserved is due to Gods unconditional promise to preserve Israel as a nation. So if that's true, why bother? If God's going to save them no matter what, why try? The answer's about why we were created in the first place to give glory to God by how we live our lives.
 - d) I'll just say the plan worked. Chapter 10 opens with a list of names of people who agreed to live by God's rules. The rest of Chapter 10 lists ways the Israelites agreed to obey some of the laws such as not buy products on the Sabbath and get rid of wives who weren't part of the faith. Yes I'll get into details of that later.
 - e) One of the things that fascinated me was the lack of any mention of a Messiah! There's no reference to God's promise to King David (about five hundred years earlier) of how one of his descendants would rule forever. It's not that these Israelites didn't believe in a coming ruling Messiah. The issue of the moment is conviction and obedience. Since I brought that up, let me discuss for a quick moment about Jesus and conviction.

- i) It may help to keep in mind in terms of time, this is one of the last books of the Old Testament. From here, there was a 400-year "silent" period. Yes the Catholic bible has books written during that time period. Both Jewish and Protestant scholars do reject those books. The argument is they are interesting, historically factual but not God inspired like the rest of the bible.
 - ii) My question is if the Old Testament ends in effect with the Israelites agreeing to be under the law, why did Jesus reject them 400 years later? The issue comes down to the idea of being a witness for God versus thinking one is saved by such obedience of the law. That was the great flaw of the Pharisees. The Christian view is God is a perfect being by definition. Since we can never be good enough for God, He alone must pay for our sins. Our behavior like the Israelite conviction in thee chapters is about being a good witness for Him "as" saved people, not about being perfect.
- 3. OK John, we get the get the idea the bible convicts of our sins all by itself. We get the idea we are not perfect, but we should make an effort to use our lives as a witness for God. We get all of that. Why study these chapters if that's what's being taught? I'd say it's the "why" answer: It's all about why we're to use our lives as a witness for Jesus. Let's be honest it's so easy to get our focus on all the things in life we must deal with. It's easy to get our focus on "stuff" and forget why it is we're created in the first place (again, to glorify God with our lives). No I'm not saying we have to quit our lives and go to church every day. God is to be part of every aspect of our lives. My point is it is necessary to remind us of what God desires of us. In effect, conviction is necessary to be a good witness for Him. Again not to earn salvation, but to remind us why God created us to begin with.
 - a) Bottom line, I'm not here to convict you of your sins. That's why we got the Spirit inside of us, so to speak. My job is simply to help explain why the bible is written the way it is and what we're to learn from it. I don't get rewarded based on how many people I save. I just have to do what God called me to do, preach His word. The conviction is His business!
 - b) With that said, a lot of verses to cover in these two chapters, so let's get convicting!
- 4. Chapter 9, Verse 1: On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads.
 - a) To recall, Chapter 8 in effect ended with a week-long celebration of a Jewish holiday that is called "Booths" for short. It's now a day or two after it's over and now we're reading of the same group in mourning. For those who like technical details, "sackcloth" is actually a garment made of camel hair. It's itchy and uncomfortable. I'll just say wearing that along with putting dirt on one's head and avoiding food is all signs of being uncomfortable. It's a sign of mourning or sorrow. We'll find out why in Verse 2.
- 5. Verse 2: 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.
 - a) As you can tell, the Israelites were in a "confession" mood. Anybody who wasn't a direct Israelite descendant (think "those separated for God") were separated from this group. At that time they started confessing not only their own sins, but their ancestor's sins. Why is that necessary? The issue is not forgiveness of people long dead. The issue is to avoid the repeating of the same mistakes. To acknowledge the sins of others is to say in effect, "God help me to learn from the bible and not just read it as a bunch of ancient stories. Help me to realize that You're way of living is the best way to live life!" I'm not saying every day is to list the sins of others in the bible. I'm just saying as we read such stories, we should be learning from them and not just reading history.
 - b) I have to admit, this is not something I do enough. I read this and get convicted as much as anyone else reading this. I always thought of my time of confession as a time to confess any and all sins that are on my heart. It didn't occur to me that confession of sins listed in the bible is a way to remind myself that "what is being described here is displeasing God, so it should be avoided". The great mistake we make is we ask God for help in areas that we consider our "weak suit". Then we usually "fall" in our strong suit!

- i) Want an example? What was Peter famous for? His boldness? Peter was the shoot first and ask questions later type of person. Yet out of fear, he was afraid to state of his discipleship to Jesus. My simple point is realizing what's right or wrong in our behavior is an issue we always need to keep front and center with God. We need His spirit to help us with our "strong suit" as well as our "weak suit".
 - c) Since I'm on the topic of confession, let me hit it now and get that out of my system. James 5:16 says we should confess our sins to one another. The idea is being accountable. We're much less likely to sin if we know we have to be accountable to other people. I know that is a practice I don't do enough of as do most Christians. I'm just saying it's in the bible and we should take that idea more seriously.
 - i) What about the Roman Catholic idea of confession? I suspect it's based on James's argument for confession. For many people "confession" is the closet thing they can afford as far as counseling. Often just relieving the burden of sins we carry around inside of us makes us feel better once we let it out. Having someone trustworthy as a confidential source is a great way to relieve that burden. So while I grew up in a Catholic environment, I no longer practice that formal act, but I respect it as a way of confessing sin, but I respect it none the less.
 - ii) Anyway, enough about confession for the moment, back to Nehemiah
- 6. Verse 3: 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 worshipping the LORD their God.
 - a) And you think your church service is too long? Verse 3 says for a quarter of the day (that is three hours) they had a bible study. For another quarter of the day they confessed sins and worshipped God. I don't know about you, but I might be crying "uncle" after about a 90 period session. Maybe even a bathroom break or something! I suspect it went in a few sessions. As we'll read later in this chapter, the confession wasn't just of their own sins, it was of the sins of their ancestors. Like I said in the introduction, the reason they did it is a way of saying, "Let's not make the same mistakes". Again, maybe there was food and the necessary bathroom breaks, but for all intents and purposes, this was a six hour ordeal!
 - b) As to the specifics we'll get to all of that. First we need to introduce the supporting cast of "characters" for this six hour ordeal:
- 7. Verse 4: Standing on the stairs were the Levites--Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani and Kenani--who called with loud voices to the LORD their God. ⁵ And the Levites--Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah and Pethahiah--said: "Stand up and praise the LORD your God, who is from everlasting to everlasting. "
 - a) I picture Ezra leading the whole thing as he was the spiritual leader of Israel at that time. I see these guys as assisting in the worship service, telling everyone when to stand, when to sit and when to sing out in praise. So why are all these people listed? I'd argue it is God's way of saying He's grateful for all people involved in the worship service of Him.
- 8. Verse 5 (cont.): "Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. ⁶ You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.
 - a) From the second part of Verse 5 (shown here) all the way till Verse 37, we get a prayer. It appears to be a prewritten prayer and that's why Ezra had it handy to include here. I bet it was the start of the praise service. In other words, the issue is, "What is it we have to be confessing to God?" It's probably the reason the Israelites were sitting in sackcloth and in ashes as stated to start this chapter. In other words if we're going to be confessing sin, we may as well look and feel the part! I'm not saying that they were not sincere as they did all of this. I'm just saying that if they're in conviction mood, they were prepared for it.

- b) With that said, let's get started on the prayer itself. It starts by praising His holy name. In Jewish thought, God's most holy name is what is commonly called "Jehovah". It means in effect "I am who I am". There are lots of names for God. Each is associated with different aspects of what He is and what He can do. So why praise His name? Does He have a big ego and require praise? Of course not. The issue is us realizing who God is, what He will do for us (save us for all eternity), what He has done (Created us for His glory) what He is doing for us preserving our lives so we can be a witness for Him. That in effect is what all of this is about and it begins by realizing who God is. We start by praising His Holy name to remind ourselves of who He is, and what He's done for us.
 - c) Speaking of what He's done, it leads us to the next key point of this prayer. The emphasis is on what God created. In Jewish thought, there are "three heavens". The first is the what we associate with where birds and airplanes fly. The second is outer space and the third is where God dwells. Verse 5 focuses on the first one. It's the idea that all things created do give praise to God. Let's hold there. It doesn't mean birds have prayer service. It simply means the fact that they exist is proof of God's existence.
 - i) To share an illustration I like the odds of a Boeing 747 being randomly created out of a junk pile is far more likely than even the creation of a human eye. My point is creation could not have randomly happened! Even if you believe in the "big bang" (which I don't), there has to be a "big banger" so to speak! Anyway, those Israelites started this prayer service by thanking God for creating the world we live in.
 - ii) If you haven't figured it out yet, I'm going through this prayer to give you ideas of things you can be grateful for, when you can't think of anything!
9. Verse 7: "You are the LORD God, who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and named him Abraham. ⁸ You found his heart faithful to you, and you made a covenant with him to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Jebusites and Gergashites. You have kept your promise because you are righteous.
- a) From the "creation" we skip over the flood and man's early years and move right into the time of "Abraham". The name "Abram" means exalted father, which one has to admit is a strange name to give a baby. I suspect his father gave him that name prophetically. God changed his name to "Abraham" which means exalted father of a multitude. It is a strange name to give a man who didn't have any children until he was 100 years old! Still it shows how he trusted in God.
 - b) The text then says how God would give him essentially the land of Israel. At that time, it was populated by the nations listed in Verse 8. It is both a conditional and unconditional promise at the same time. God never told Abraham "I'd give you this land only if you and your descendants obey My laws. He just said He'd give it to His descendants. Think about it this way, how can Jesus return unless there's an Israel to "return to". Why do you think nonbelievers are so "hell bent" on Israel's destruction? So in that sense its unconditional. I will also argue it's conditional in that God gave this promise in order for His people to be a witness for Him. A failure to do that will put them in the penalty box for a while! Still, in the history of civilization, no nation has ever been conquered scattered and came back together again to be a nation, except Israel who did it twice.
 - c) Back to the prayer question: Why bring that up here? All the Israelites knew this. It's for them to think about why they're back in the land after the Babylonians conquered them. It is to show that God's still in charge and He still has a plan for that nation. That's why I'm convinced Israel is in existence today. Yes it's mostly secular today, but that's His business so to speak. Ours is to be a good witness for Him.
 - d) OK John, most of us reading this are not Jewish. We get that God's timing is God's timing. So how does His relationship with Israel affect us as Christians? For starters if we do not trust in His unconditional promises to Israel how can we ever trust in His unconditional promises to us as Christians? The point is He's faithful and He demands we be that too!

10. Verse 9: "You saw the suffering of our forefathers in Egypt; you heard their cry at the Red Sea. ¹⁰ You sent miraculous signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his officials and all the people of his land, for you knew how arrogantly the Egyptians treated them. You made a name for yourself, which remains to this day. ¹¹ You divided the sea before them, so that they passed through it on dry ground, but you hurled their pursuers into the depths, like a stone into mighty waters. ¹² By day you led them with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire to give them light on the way they were to take.
- a) One of the things the Old Testament is "never endlessly tired of" is describing the Red Sea miracle. It's constantly mentioned far more than the plagues on Egypt. Why is that? The best I can tell is it's sort of the Old Testament equivalent of "Baptism". Such an act doesn't save us, it just means we're called to be a witness for God. The same idea is with "Red Sea Crossing". It's the idea of emerging out of the water to be a witness for God. Don't get me wrong, I doubt the Israelites got wet during that crossing. It's the symbol of coming out of the water that's key. Anyway, it's emphasized. The miracles that God used to destroy the Egyptians are also emphasized. The idea again, is about God separating His people so He will have a group of people to be His witnesses to the world.
 - b) For those who don't know, Thomas Jefferson, one of the founders of the United States, did want a drawing of the Israelites leaving Egypt to be a symbol for the United States. He did think of this country as people separating themselves from the tyranny of Europe that did exist at that time. That's off topic, but I wanted to sneak that in.
 - c) Bottom line is we get a few verses how God separated His people and preserved them as a nation as they wandered in "no man's land" for 40 years. Again, the big picture is about realizing no matter how much we've messed up, God still wants to preserve those He has called so we can make a difference for Him. That'll be more obvious as we continue with this prayer. Meanwhile we're up to the "10 Commandments" time frame:
11. Verse 13: "You came down on Mount Sinai; you spoke to them from heaven. You gave them regulations and laws that are just and right, and decrees and commands that are good. ¹⁴ You made known to them your holy Sabbath and gave them commands, decrees and laws through your servant Moses. ¹⁵ In their hunger you gave them bread from heaven and in their thirst you brought them water from the rock; you told them to go in and take possession of the land you had sworn with uplifted hand to give them.
- a) Ever stop to think, why didn't God give the 10 Commandments to Adam, or even gave them to Abraham whose considered the "First Jewish person"? Why wait until the whole group of them got out of Egypt? The short version is because the big picture is about the separation of a "nation" to honor Him as God. There's a view that aspects of the law were given long before then. For example God told Noah to take seven of the "clean birds" and two of the unclean ones (Genesis 8:20). The classic question is how did Noah know what is a clean bird since the law didn't come until roughly a thousand years later? While there may have been aspects revealed previously the law was formally given at Mount Sinai. It was to say in effect, "now that I've separated you (Israel) to worship Me, here is how I will expect you to live".
 - b) Then, despite the fact they disobeyed God as far as conquering the land and wandered in the desert for forty years, God still preserved them. Again, the point is to show how God is preserving them as an entity despite their disobedience. Yes that generation did die off in the desert in effect to show that God's not to be messed with and we lose our chance to be a witness for Him if we turn from Him. But until God calls us home, we always have a choice whether or not to live for Him and be a witness for Him. That's the big picture that we're seeing in these verses. Remember again the point isn't to go over ancient history but to get the Israelites at this bible study (and us) to realize that we too are called, which is an opportunity for them and us to be a witness for Him.
 - c) With that understood, let's continue with the desert wandering years:

12. Verse 16: "But they, our forefathers, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and did not obey your commands.¹⁷ They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them,¹⁸ even when they cast for themselves an image of a calf and said, 'This is your god, who brought you up out of Egypt,' or when they committed awful blasphemies.
- a) I have to admit, I've always wondered, what motivated the Israelites to make the "Golden Calf" (Verse 18, a reference to Exodus 32). Here was this large group that walked through the Red Sea. They saw the miracles that God did in Egypt. Food came down from the sky daily, a pillar of fire guided them by night and a cloud by day, yet despite seeing all that, I still wonder, why did they make the golden calf? Part of it was that was a god when they were in Egypt. So when Moses was gone to be alone with God, they desired to worship a thing they knew, so they made the calf. It's sort of like us veteran Christians. We've seen lots of amazing things yet we're still prone to wander toward sin when we our focus gets off of God for a moment. That's the main point of these verses. Despite the miracles they saw, they still turned from God "the first chance they got".
 - b) Again, the purpose isn't to review history as much as it was to get the Israelites to realize in spite of the mistakes they make God is still preserving them (and us) so we can make a difference for Him.
 - c) OK, we're only half way through the prayer. Let's get on with all this guilt!
13. Verse 19: "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.²⁰ 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.²¹ For forty years you sustained them in the desert; they lacked nothing, their clothes did not wear out nor did their feet become swollen.
- a) When I taught Exodus I kept thinking about a place about a 100 miles northeast of where I live called "Death Valley". It's about halfway between Las Vegas and Los Angeles. I like to use "it" because it reminds me as a mental picture of what the territory was sort of like the Israelites wandered through. My simple point is they traveled through what would be the worse of weather. It's truly a no-man's land. Despite that, God still preserved them so they remained an entity despite their sins during that time period, again they were preserved.
 - b) There's a classic joke of what did Moses do for 40 years in the desert? Hold funerals. The best I can calculate is 12 people per day died if that whole generation died in the desert!
 - c) Again the point is despite their sins, God still provided food and water for them, so they'd lack nothing they need for survival. During that time their clothes didn't wear out.
 - d) I happen to have a friend who's a foot doctor. I asked him about swollen feet. He said the most common reason for swollen feet is the lack of a proper diet. So the reference to them not having swollen feet means the manna provided all the nutrition they needed for all of the time in the desert.
 - e) For those who think the Holy Spirit is only a New Testament thing, He's occasionally gets mentioned in the Old Testament. The view is the Holy Spirit comes and goes then. What is thought of as the Spirit is God's divine will being expressed. David believed the Spirit's His inspiration as David wrote the Psalms. (See Psalm 51:11.) Obviously the Holy Spirit is the inspiration for the first five books of the bible.
 - i) While I'm in the neighborhood, a few quick words about the Spirit. He is working in the background of the believer's life. His role as to draw us closer to God when we pray or honor Him. Jesus promised to give us the Spirit when we trust in Him to guide our lives. I think of the Spirit as a "gentleman who won't violate our free will", but when we want to honor God, He guides us as to how to worship Him.

14. Verse 22: "You gave them kingdoms and nations, allotting to them even the remotest frontiers. They took over the country of Sihon king of Heshbon and the country of Og king of Bashan.²³ You made their sons as numerous as the stars in the sky, and you brought them into the land that you told their fathers to enter and possess.²⁴ Their sons went in and took possession of the land. You subdued before them the Canaanites, who lived in the land; you handed the Canaanites over to them, along with their kings and the peoples of the land, to deal with them as they pleased.²⁵ They captured fortified cities and fertile land; they took possession of houses filled with all kinds of good things, wells already dug, vineyards, olive groves and fruit trees in abundance. They ate to the full and were well-nourished; they reveled in your great goodness.
- a) In these verses the emphasis is on the land that was conquered. It includes all of what we consider the land of Israel today as well as parts of what is Jordan today. The point is God lead the Israelites to conquer territories and took over their land "in tact". They got to live in their cities and enjoy that land.
 - b) A few quick words on why God allowed that conquering. First Israel is "His land" and for God to say to other nations, "You're squatting on My land", it's His business. If you study how these nations lived (archeological evidence) prior to the Israelites conquering them, it is amazing that God waited as long as He did. Let's just say it involved child sacrifice and sex with animals. Yes God used the Israelites as His instrument of judgment on the people of the land as God told Abraham that He would 400 years earlier (Genesis 15:13). Still His intention was for the Israelites to be His people and occupy that land despite all their sins they committed to date. Again the model is about preservation of God's people in spite of the sins we commit. Yes it's designed to convict us and it's doing a number on me as well!
15. Verse 26: "But they were disobedient and rebelled against you; they put your law behind their backs. They killed your prophets, who had admonished them in order to turn them back to you; they committed awful blasphemies.²⁷ So you handed them over to their enemies, who oppressed them. But when they were oppressed they cried out to you. From heaven you heard them, and in your great compassion you gave them deliverers, who rescued them from the hand of their enemies.
- a) Speaking of conviction, these verses pour it on strong. Despite the fact God lead them into the Promised Land. Despite the fact God gave them victories over all the nations that did live in that land, the people still rebelled. Why is that? The short version is it's so easy for us to get our focus on our problems and forget the fact that God's there and wants to help us get through life. God never promises life will be easy. He promises He a "rope line" to guide us through whatever He allows us to deal with at any moment in time. After all of the things we've been there in life, God's still there and still guiding us for His glory. Yet, the bible shows example after example of what happens when we ignore Him and just are focusing on our problems, things always get worse.
 - b) Let me explain it another way. Jesus promised us peace no matter what we're facing at the moment. One of the great blessings of living the Christian life is a great sense of peace in spite of all we're dealing with in life. When we fail honor God as God, and ignore Him to deal with "problems of the moment", things will always go from bad to worse.
 - c) In other words, God will always do what He can to draw us back to Him. So if that's true, why doesn't God appear as a 500-foot monster to scare us back to Him? Because He wants us to come by faith, not out of fear!
 - d) With all that in mind, we read here of God turning the Israelites over to their enemies. It's a common story through the books of Joshua, 1st and 2nd Samuel and the "Kings" of how it was that the Israelites turned their backs on God. Yet in spite of all that disobedience God still preserved them as a nation.
 - e) Hopefully, you see the pattern and the reason for this prayer by now. It's not to study the history of the Israelites and think, "We're not as bad as them". It's to realize we too can be turning from Him just as easily. We need to realize our ancestors mistakes and learn!

16. Verse 28: "But as soon as they were at rest, they again did what was evil in your sight. Then you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies so that they ruled over them. And when they cried out to you again, you heard from heaven, and in your compassion you delivered them time after time. ²⁹ "You warned them to return to your law, but they became arrogant and disobeyed your commands. They sinned against your ordinances, by which a man will live if he obeys them. Stubbornly they turned their backs on you, became stiff-necked and refused to listen. ³⁰ For many years you were patient with them. By your Spirit you admonished them through your prophets. Yet they paid no attention, so you handed them over to the neighboring peoples. ³¹ But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.
- a) There's a classic joke that God has a "dilemma". So how can a perfect God even have such a dilemma? The answer is how does He get His people's attention without destroying the nation of Israel out of existence? As I said, the "200 foot monster" idea would only cause a fear of Him. God wants us to turn from Him because it's the right thing to do, not due to a sense of fear. The issue in effect is the conflict between God's unconditional promise of the Israelites having that land and the promise of a Messiah ruling from that land one day. It is a conflict with His conditional promise that we they can only be in that land if they live as witnesses for Him. Therefore, God punishes them and sent them prophets all for the purpose of trying to drive them close to Him again.
 - b) So are we any different? Of course not. Once we turn our lives over to Jesus, we will be a miserable person when we turn from that. What God desires of us is we use our lives as a witness for Him. What if we've messed up to date? Welcome to the club. Confess sin, turn from it and ask the Spirit to guide our lives for His glory. He works with imperfect people like us for His glory. So why don't we get punished like the Israelites did? Sometimes He will in ways to get our attention. Sometimes God allows evil to play out to make a point.
 - c) Bottom line the dilemma continues to this day as it did during the Israelite history.
17. Verse 32: "Now therefore, O our God, the great, mighty and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes--the hardship that has come upon us, upon our kings and leaders, upon our priests and prophets, upon our fathers and all your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until today. ³³ In all that has happened to us, you have been just; you have acted faithfully, while we did wrong. ³⁴ Our kings, our leaders, our priests and our fathers did not follow your law; they did not pay attention to your commands or the warnings you gave them. ³⁵ Even while they were in their kingdom, enjoying your great goodness to them in the spacious and fertile land you gave them, they did not serve you or turn from their evil ways.
- a) These verses cover the "conquering years". The short version is Israel split in two nations at the time of King David's grandson. The North one went into idolatry fist and they got conquered by the Assyrian Empire (that lasted for 700 years by the way!) The South one lasted about another hundred years. At that time the Babylonian Empire conquered all of the Assyrian Empire and took over the Israelites who the Assyrians conquered. The South got conquered by the Babylonians and Israel was no longer an independent nation. Then the Persians conquered the Babylonians and let the Israelites return to the land but as part of the Persian Empire. That's where the Israelites were when Nehemiah was written. That is why it's amazing that Israel exists as an independent nation today. No one nation in the history of civilization every pulled that off. (Conquered, scattered and became a nation!)
 - b) During that time as things went from bad to worse, the Israelites continued to turn from a life of doing God's will. While a few of the South Kings were good men, for the most part it was a downhill slide and God in effect had nothing left to do but say, "There is nothing more I can do, off to the penalty box you go!"
 - c) Again despite all that sin, God's still faithful to keep His unconditional promise that Israel as an entity would still exist. That's the key point of this whole prayer.

18. 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 produces.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.
- a) The good news is we're done with the prayer. It ends with this verse. It ends with the fact that the Israelites are now in effect "slaves" to the Persian Empire. Yes they'll also be under the Greek Empire and the Romans after that. Even with their rejection of Jesus, God's still keeping His unconditional promise of preserving Israel as an entity. That's what we see in thousands of years of history.
- b) Okay enough guilt for one lesson. What does all that guilt do?
19. Verse 38: "In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it."
- a) Bottom line, the guilt of that sin got the Israelite to "renew" their commitment to God. No, it still caused the fall of that nation (the Romans destroyed it) but it shows that God wants us to commit our lives to serving Him.
- b) With that said, it's time for a list of names we'll probably forget after reading it.
20. Chapter 10, Verse 1: Those who sealed it were: Nehemiah the governor, the son of Hacaliah, Zedekiah,² Seraiah, Azariah, Jeremiah,³ Pashhur, Amariah, Malkijah,⁴ Hattush, Shebaniah, Malluch,⁵ Harim, Meremoth, Obadiah,⁶ Daniel, Ginnethon, Baruch,⁷ Meshullam, Abijah, Mijamin,⁸ Maaziah, Bilgai and Shemaiah. These were the priests.⁹ The Levites: Jeshua son of Azaniah, Binnui of the sons of Henadad, Kadmiel,¹⁰ and their associates: Shebaniah, Hodiah, Kelita, Pelaiah, Hanan,¹¹ Mica, Rehob, Hashabiah,¹² Zaccur, Sherebiah, Shebaniah,¹³ Hodiah, Bani and Beninu.¹⁴ The leaders of the people: Parosh, Pahath-Moab, Elam, Zattu, Bani,¹⁵ Bunni, Azgad, Bebai,¹⁶ Adonijah, Bigvai, Adin,¹⁷ Ater, Hezekiah, Azzur,¹⁸ Hodiah, Hashum, Bezai,¹⁹ Hariph, Anathoth, Nebai,²⁰ Magpiash, Meshullam, Hezir,²¹ Meshezabel, Zadok, Jaddua,²² Pelatiah, Hanan, Anaiah,²³ Hoshea, Hananiah, Hasshub,²⁴ Hallohesh, Pilha, Shobek,²⁵ Rehum, Hashabnah, Maaseiah,²⁶ Ahiah, Hanan, Anan,²⁷ Malluch, Harim and Baanah.
- a) The leaders of Israel all signed this. Nehemiah was the governor over Israel so his name is listed first. Then other government leaders (assumed), then the priests then the Levites and then other leaders. Ezra isn't listed. My guess is Ezra is the one who circulated all of this and maybe it's assumed he already made the commitment. The important things here is the Israelites were making the commitment to serve God. Obviously action speaks a lot louder than words, but at the least people are willing to confess their sins and show a big desire to turn their lives to be a witness for God. That's what the list shows.
- b) We're almost done, We got a few more people to make the commitment next:
21. Verse 28: "The rest of the people--priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, temple servants and all who separated themselves from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the Law of God, together with their wives and all their sons and daughters who are able to understand--²⁹ all these now join their brothers the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD our Lord.
- a) As we can read here, the people involved in daily life in Israel also made this commitment to God. As I stated it's one thing to "sign on the dotted line" for God, it's another to for us to "put our money and our lives where our mouth is". That's what the rest of the chapter's going to deal with.
22. Verse 30: "We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons.
- a) An issue in the book of Ezra was the Israelites were intermarrying with others in the area. Apparently it was still an issue. Ezra 9 talked about it and you can read that lesson if you want details about the issue of Christianity and marrying nonbelievers.

- b) The main point is the Israelites are committed to remaining "Israelites". If they married the "locals" they'd lose their identity as a unique nation. Keep in mind in that era, marriage is an arrangement by parents and the couple "learned to love each other". Yes I know it's not a significant issue for Christians but the point is to preserve the nation "as a nation!"
23. Verse 31: "When the neighboring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts.
- a) From here to the end of the chapter, we're going to read of specific things the Israelites are going to do act "differently". Notice as you read the list, there's no mention of things listed in the 10 Commandments. There's no mention of stealing murder, adultery etc. My point is those things are common in all cultures. Instead we get things the Israelites did in order to distinguish themselves as a people. Yes the things listed are biblical for the most part. I am just saying being a witness for God means acting in a way that tells people that we are a witness for Him, period.
- b) The first issue listed is keeping the Sabbath holy. Non-Jewish people would bring stuff in Jerusalem to sell. This verse says in forget it won't be allowed. I could give a long lecture over what is the Sabbath and should Christians honor it. Different denominations have a bunch of rules about it. I'll just say treat God as Lord of your life and let Him guide you as to how to live on that day.
- c) The next law mentioned is about not working the land every seven years and canceling all debts owed. Earlier in this book, we read of Nehemiah dealing with some Israelites acting as "loan sharks" and putting many Israelites in debt. God's law calls for them to cancel all debts after seven years. Here we read of it being enforced here.
- d) Yes problems grew in Israel later as interpretation, enforcement and getting around all the laws became an issue. I'll save that for another day. At the moment we're reading of those Israelites actually trying to use their lives to be a witness for God and I'll let them do that!
24. Verse 32: "We assume the responsibility for carrying out the commands to give a third of a shekel each year for the service of the house of our God: ³³ for the bread set out on the table; for the regular grain offerings and burnt offerings; for the offerings on the Sabbaths, New Moon festivals and appointed feasts; for the holy offerings; for sin offerings to make atonement for Israel; and for all the duties of the house of our God.
- a) The "third of a shekel" of Verse 32 is not a biblical command. It was an "over and above" thing to help with the service of God's house. Keep in mind the Israelites were required to tithe their income to support the Jewish festivals and the priests. That's not including the taxes they had to pay to Persia so it was an expensive proposition. Anyway, they did keep their lives simple between taxes and supporting the Israelite priests.
- b) Giving is a complicated topic. I disagree with some Christians as I'll argue that "tithing" is a part of the law and Christians are not under the law. At the same time, I'd argue we are required to give generously to support God's work. As to where we give, first it should be to where we are blessed. It should then go to organizations that we see make a difference for God. I know many Christians disagree on this debated topic and I'll leave it at that.
- c) Anyway these verses show the Israelites willing to be faithful to what God called them to do as listed in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.
25. Verse 34: "We--the priests, the Levites and the people--have cast lots to determine when each of our families is to bring to the house of our God at set times each year a contribution of wood to burn on the altar of the LORD our God, as it is written in the Law.
- a) Of all the commands or duties to bring up, we get the fact that lots were cast to determine who will bring wood to the temple to be used to burn the sacrifices. While it seems simple the point is people were willing to use some of their time to make a difference for God in the simple things of life. Yes, that's a clue of what God likes and I'll leave it at that.

26. Verse 35: "We also assume responsibility for bringing to the house of the LORD each year the firstfruits of our crops and of every fruit tree. ³⁶ "As it is also written in the Law, we will bring the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, of our herds and of our flocks to the house of our God, to the priests ministering there.
- a) The Israelites didn't use "cash" for all transactions. For example, one of the requirements of the Israelites was that 10% of what they produced went to God's use. So when harvest time came, 10% went to God. That idea also applied to the animals they raised. The law also specified that sons needed to be dedicated soon after birth. Jesus Himself did this as stated in Luke 2:22-23. Obviously male babies were not killed. It was how they kept track of new Jewish men in the community. Again the overriding issue isn't the specifics. What God cares about is obedience. These were signs of obedience and trust.
 - b) Let's be honest, paying taxes and giving up part of what we earn for God is hard. It's easy to see what "goes out the door" and complain we get nothing for it. Like most people what my tax dollars get spent on isn't what I'd do, but one must live under authority as long we are alive. That means taxes and it means supporting the work of the church. I've set to see one person starve to death because he or she gave too much away. I'm not saying we have to go broke by giving it all away then trusting God. I'm saying a generous heart is the best way to go through life and we'll appreciate life more when we give part of what we make for a greater purpose than just having more "stuff" in life.
 - c) Anyway, the Israelites wanted to show that they were trusting God. After hearing all the ways God had "got them this far" (conviction) the natural reaction we should all have is to then use our lives for His glory. That's what we're reading about here. OK, almost done.
27. Verse 37: "Moreover, we will bring to the storerooms of the house of our God, to the priests, the first of our ground meal, of our grain offerings, of the fruit of all our trees and of our new wine and oil. And we will bring a tithe of our crops to the Levites, for it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all the towns where we work. ³⁸ A priest descended from Aaron is to accompany the Levites when they receive the tithes, and the Levites are to bring a tenth of the tithes up to the house of our God, to the storerooms of the treasury. ³⁹ The people of Israel, including the Levites, are to bring their contributions of grain, new wine and oil to the storerooms where the articles for the sanctuary are kept and where the ministering priests, the gatekeepers and the singers stay.
- a) Realize that giving to God doesn't mean the priests were then free to go buy expensive an expensive car or house. They were required to use what they got to support God. Yes the priests had to eat too, so I'm not saying everything they got was traded for "Church stuff". Even 10% of what they got had to be dedicated "up the ladder" so to speak (Verse 38). All I'm saying is that what we're to be giving for God has to be used for making a difference for Him. That's what we read here. So why state what's obvious to them? It's all about a commitment. It's a natural reaction to conviction. It's one thing to be convicted by reading God's word, it's another to do something about it! Remember what God desires of us, for us to use our lives for His glory. Don't get me wrong, He wants us reading, praying and seeking Him. He also wants "action". If all we do is take in and take in, what good is that going to do? To state an old quote, if we naturally take in a deep breath of air, we'll want to release it after that. The Israelites took in a "deep breath" of conviction. They let out a "deep breath" of action. That's what this chapter is all about.
 - b) I've spent a whole lesson discussing how Christians should view these specific laws. For a short version, just remember that there is no "central temple today", so God wants us to use our lives for His glory. It means getting involved in ways that will make a difference for His glory. If we can combine what we enjoy doing with our spiritual gifts, it's a great way to go through life using them to honor the one who created us in the first place. That is old news to most of us.
 - c) The underlying point of this lesson is simply "Godly conviction produces Godly action". I hope all this conviction helps each of us to use our lives for His glory.

28. Verse 39 (Part 2): "We will not neglect the house of our God."
- a) John's very loose translation: Our hearts convict us when we realize that He calls us to be a witness for Him. Therefore we'll find ways to do something about it".
 - b) I should also add that we shouldn't use our lives just to relieve the conviction. It should be the desire of our hearts to want to make a difference for God. Reading about how God has been faithful even when we're not faithful, yes is convicting. I'm not denying that. What I am saying is if God created us to glorify Him, that desire should be a natural output when we realize why we were created in the first place.
 - c) OK that's enough conviction for one lesson. Time to close in prayer.
29. Heavenly Father, Thank You that You've separated us to be with You forever. Help us to use our time and resources for Your glory. Help us to realize the most valuable thing we own is our time and use it to glorify You. May Your Spirit guide us as to how it is You wish us to use our lives as we are called to make a difference for You. Yes we mess up constantly. Forgive us and help us to realize areas of our lives that are not pleasing to You. Guide us so that our lives may glorify You in all that we do. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen