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The Israelites Confess Their Sins

Ezra 10:1-6 and Nehemiah 9:1-37

The Israelites confess their sins DIG: What is the effect of Ezra's prayer on the people? What is Shecaniah's message and its effect? Why would the Israelites confess their sins right after Sukkot, which is supposed to be a time of joy? Why did they separate themselves from all foreigners? In the prayer recorded here, God's grace and power are reviewed throughout redemptive history. Where do you see God at work in creation? In Abraham? In Egypt? In the Exodus? In the wilderness? At Mount Sinai? In their possessing Canaan? In the era of the Judges? Of the prophets? Where is the LORD at work in their present situation? What Psalm(s) does this whole prayer remind you of? In seeing God in a new light in this prayer, how do the people then respond (especially notice the verbs)? How do the people think Ha'Shem treated them? What did they say was the source of all their problems?

REFLECT: When was the last time you needed to confess your sins to someone else? What brought it out into the open? How was your confession received? How does a believer today show sincerity in our confession and repentance of sin? In doing so, what part would you attribute to God's Word? To other believers? To prayer? What is the "great distress" from which you want ADONAI to deliver you? What is the connection here between repentance and hope? Between prayer and action? Between unilateral covenant and mutual agreement? Point of decision and process of implementation? When have you been caught in a cycle of learning and relearning the same lesson over and over again? What are some sacrifices you have had to make? How did you feel about them?

**During the ministry of Ezra (to see link click [Bf](#) - The Second Return).
Compiled by: The Chronicler from the Ezra and Nehemiah memoirs
(see [Ac](#) - Ezra-Nehemiah from a Jewish Perspective: **The Ezra and Nehemiah Memoirs**).**

This is one of the great chapters in the Bible on prayer. Like **Abraham's** prayer for Sodom (**Genesis 18:23-33**), the prayer of **Dani'el (Dani'el 9:1-19)**, **Nehemiah's** plea for **God's** help (**Nehemiah 1:1-11**), or the prayer here that is a model for us to employ when our tired prayers need refreshing. From time to time, when prayer has become routine- a shopping list of intercessions, asking **the Lord** to bless this or that, and little by way of adoration or confession – we need to rethink our approach to prayer. All of us, if we are honest, know all too well the experience of lifelessness that can overtake our spiritual condition, when energy and vitality give way to routine and predictability – and, worse, to deadness and prayerlessness. Reading this particular prayer, with its unrelenting, **God**-focused perspective, and unfettered confession of personal and corporate **sin**, should prove a tonic for tried, struggling souls.¹⁶⁷



Now on the twenty-fourth day of Tishri, two days after the celebration of Sukkot ended (to see link click [Bn](#) - The Feast of Sukkot Celebrated), while Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and prostrating himself before the House of God, a very large assembly of Israelites - men, women and children - gathered around him, fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads, weeping very bitterly as the earnestness of Ezra's confession (see [Bo](#) - Ezra's Prayer about Intermarriage) and his profound grief affected them greatly (Ezra 10:1-2a; Nehemiah 9:1).

Then one man, **Shecaniah son of Jehiel (Ezra 8:3)**, who was not involved in the mixed marriages, was bold and chose to obey **God** rather than please **his** relatives, spoke for all **the people** who were weeping and said to Ezra, **“We have been unfaithful to our God and have married foreign women from the people of the land living in Judea. But in spite of this, there is still hope for Isra’el. So now let us make a covenant with our God to send away all these**

unbelieving **women and their offspring, in accordance with the counsel of my lord and of those who fear the commands of our God. Let it be done according to the Torah (Deuteronomy 7:1-6). Arise! For this matter concerns you.**” Shecaniah then promised **Ezra** that **the people** would stand behind **him** in such a decision, saying: **We are with you, so be strong and do it (Ezra 10:2b-4)!** Though **divorce** was not the norm, it may have been preferable in this situation because **the mixed marriages**, if continued, would eventually destroy **the nation**. **Shecaniah** urged **Ezra** to act, but the responsibility was **his**.

So Ezra rose up and made the leading cohanim, the Levites, and all Isra’el take an oath to do according to this word; and they took the oath. Once he had the promise of support from the leaders, he was confident that the rest of Isra’el would follow. The offspring of Isra’el separated themselves from all foreigners, standing and confessing their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. They stood in their place and read in the scroll of the Torah of **ADONAI** their God for three hours; and for another three hours they were confessing and prostrating themselves before **ADONAI** their God (Ezra 10:5; Nehemiah 9:2-3).

Then the Levites - Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, and Chenani - all stood on the same high wooden platform that Ezra had stood on twenty-four days earlier (see Bm - Ezra Reads the Torah Scroll of Moses), and cried out with a loud voice to ADONAI their God (Nehemiah 9:4). The Levites - Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah said to the people, “Stand up! Bless ADONAI your God, from everlasting to everlasting, from the beginning of creation to the end of all existence” (Nehemiah 9:5a)! This is the first of twelve prayers recorded in **Nehemiah** (here, 1:5-11, 2:4, 4:4, 4:9, 5:19, 6:9, 6:14, 13:14, 13:22, 13:29, 13:31).

Ezra and his companions were overwhelmed by **God’s greatness**. This is exactly what **Yeshua** exemplifies in **His** response to the apostle’s request for help in prayer. **He** gave them the model of **the Lord’s** prayer (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Dp - When You Pray, Go into Your Room and Close the Door**), in which the first half sings the praises of **the Father’s** glory and greatness, urging them to focus on **ADONAI**.

In the second example of leadership recorded by Nehemiah (see Bt - The Third Return), of all the disciplines a leader must maintain, nothing - let

me repeat, NOTHING - is more important than prayer. The prayer here consists of seven distinctive sections:

First, praise to God as Creator: May Your glorious Name be blessed; may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. Nehemiah 9:6-11 has passed into the Jewish liturgy as part of the daily morning prayers. You alone are ADONAI. You made the heavens, even the highest heaven with all its array the rabbis teach that this phrase denotes the highest of the seven heavens (Colossians 1:16), the earth and everything on it, the seas and everything in them. You give life to them all, and the multitudes of angels in heaven worship You (Nehemiah 9:5b-6). The doctrine of creation is important because it emphasizes God's sovereignty over all.

Second, a careful review of Isra'el's history with a particular focus on God's faithfulness: You are ADONAI, the God who chose Abram, and through him the people of Isra'el, brought him from 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 Canaanite, Hittite, Amorite, Perizzite, Jebusite and the Girgashite to his seed (see the commentary on Genesis [Eg](#) - I am the LORD, Who Brought You Out of Ur of the Chaldeans to Give You This Land). You have fulfilled Your words, for You are righteous (Nehemiah 9:7-8).

The exodus experience had a decisive influence on the life and thought of Isra'el. You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry by the Sea of Reeds. You gave signs and wonders against Pharaoh, all his servants, and all the people of his land, for You knew how insolently they treated them. You made a name for Yourself which remains to this day. You divided the sea before them, so that they passed through the midst of the sea on dry land! But their pursuers You threw into the depths like a stone into mighty waters (see the commentary on Exodus [Ci](#) - The Waters Were Divided and the Jews Went Through the Sea). You led them with a pillar of cloud by day and with a pillar of fire by night to illuminate for them the way they were to go (see the commentary on Exodus [Cg](#) - After Leaving Succoth they Camped at Etham). God had delivered them from Babylon just as He had delivered them from Egypt (Nehemiah 9:9-12). We should also remember God's daily guidance as a miraculous gift.¹⁶⁸

You descended on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven. You

gave them just judgments, reliable laws, and good statutes and mitzvot. You made known to them Your holy Shabbat and ordained for them mitzvot, statutes and Torah by the hand of Your servant Moses (see the commentary on [Exodus Dj - The Ten Commandments](#)). **You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger** (see the commentary on [Exodus Cr - I Will Rain Down Manna from Heaven for You](#)), **and brought them water from the rock for their thirst** (see the commentary [Exodus Cu - Strike the Rock and Water Will Come Out of It](#)). **You told them to go in to possess the land that You had sworn to give them, literally raised your hand (Nehemiah 9:13-15). God** gave the commandments as not simply negative commands, but a blueprint for godly living. So, **the Jews** did not see **the Torah** as a burden or something negative, but as a gift from **YHVH** to guide **His people** in forming a good and just society. But the corruption of the commandments that we see in the gospels resulted in bondage and not freedom, legalism and not grace (see the commentary on [The Life of Christ Ei - The Oral Law](#)).

Third, a testimony of God's forgiveness, graciousness and compassion in memorable words: The intensity of **the people's** failure seemed to intensify the urgency and conviction of **their** prayer. **But they, our ancestors, became arrogant** and rebellious against **God** even to the point of worshipping a golden **calf**. **They stiffened their neck and did not obey Your mitzvot. They refused to obey and did not remember Your wonders that You did among them. Instead, they became stiff-necked and in their rebellion, appointed a leader (Numbers 14:4) in order to return to their bondage.** The imagery is that of an animal that struggles against having a yoke placed on its neck. This attitude of pride and wickedness was widespread during the monarchical period and was the reason for the fall of both Samaria and Judea. **But You are a God of forgiveness, merciful and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in love. Therefore, You did not abandon them, even when they made a cast image of a calf for themselves** (see the commentary on [Exodus Gq - The Golden Calf Incident](#)) **and said: This is your god who brought you up from Egypt! or when they committed great blasphemies (Nehemiah 9:16-18).**

Yet in Your great compassion, You did not abandon them in the wilderness. God punishes **sin**, but **He** is also a **God** of compassion. This prayer teaches us that to view the **God** of the TaNaKh as a **God** of anger, and the B'rit Chadashah as a **God** of love is false. Even when the people rebelled, He responded with grace. **The pillar of cloud by day did not depart from above them,**

guiding them in the way, nor the pillar of fire by night, illuminating the way they should go. You also gave Your good Ruach to teach them. You did not withhold Your manna from their mouth and You gave them water for their thirst. For forty years You sustained them in the desert: they lacked nothing, their garments did not wear out and their feet did not swell (Nehemiah 9:19-21). **ADONAI** met every need. This prayer reflects the faith of **the people** that just as **God** cared for **the children of Isra'el** who came up from Egypt, they too would be cared for in a similar way.

You gave them kingdoms and peoples and You allotted them their boundaries of the land. They possessed the land of Sihon king of Heshbon and the country of Og king of Bashan. You multiplied their descendants like the stars of heaven (see the commentary on [Genesis Ef - Abram Believed the LORD and He Credited It to Him as Righteousness](#)), and You brought them into the Land that You told their ancestors to enter and inherit. The phrase like the stars of heaven is basic to the original covenant with **Abram**. The fulfillment of the covenant was realized in the fact that there were **people** who had regathered in **the Land** to renew the covenant.¹⁶⁹ **So the children went in and possessed the Land. You subdued before them the Canaanites who were the inhabitants of the land. You delivered them into their hands, along with their kings and the peoples of the land to deal with them as they pleased. They captured fortified cities and fertile land. They took possession of houses full of every good thing - hewn cisterns, vineyards, olive groves, and an abundance of fruit trees. They ate and were satisfied, and grew fat. They enjoyed Your great goodness (Nehemiah 9:22-25).** However, **Isra'el** took all **their** prosperity for granted and disobeyed **God's** commands.

Fourth, an open confession of sin: This section presents the same **four-step cycle** seen in the book of **Judges**: **(1) the people** were disobedient; **(2) God** handed them over to **their enemies, who oppressed them;** **(3)** then **they** cried out to **ADONAI** for help; **(4) YHVH** heard and **delivered them.**

(1) Nonetheless they became contentious and rebelled against You once again. **They cast Your Torah behind their back. They killed Your prophets who warned them (Matthew 23:30-31) to return to You; they committed appalling blasphemies. (2) Therefore, You delivered them into the hand of their enemies who oppressed them. (3) But in the time of their distress,**

they cried out to You and You heard from heaven. **(4) According to Your great compassion, You gave them deliverers, who rescued them out of the hands of their enemies (Nehemiah 9:26-27).** Isra'el seemed to have needed a crisis to recognize her need of dependence of Ha'Shem. **Thus, the cycle repeated itself.**

(1) But as soon as they were at rest, they returned to doing evil before You. Therefore, You abandoned them into the hand of their enemies who ruled over them. When they repented and cried out to You, You heard from heaven, and according to Your compassion You delivered them many times (Nehemiah 9:28). When all goes well, it's easy to neglect our dependence on **God**. Often we do not realize that we need **Him** until we are under oppression. Our last resort is prayer, rather than being our first resort.

The prophetic messages were inspired by **the Spirit of God**. However, even revelation through **the prophets** was rejected. **You warned them in order to turn them back to Your Torah, but they became brazen and disobeyed Your mitzvot. They sinned against Your ordinances - those by which if a man does them he will live. They turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their necks, and would not listen. You bore with them for many years and admonished them by Your Ruach through the hand of Your prophets. (2) Yet they would not listen, so You handed them over to the people of the lands.** This entire prayer emphasizes **God's** abundant mercy. The prayer recognized that **Ha'Shem** would have been justified in putting an end to those **rebellious people**. Yet, **He** kept on loving, guiding and delivering **them**. **Nevertheless, in Your great compassion, You did not put an end to them or abandon them, for You are a gracious and compassionate God (Nehemiah 9:29-31).**

Fifth, with their checkered past and the LORD's faithfulness fresh on their minds, the Jews took stock of their present situation: In this concluding part of **the Levites'** prayer, **they** asked for relief, again acknowledging **ADONAI's** power, majesty and loyalty. **(3) So now, our God - the great, mighty and awesome God, who keeps covenant and mercy - do not let all the hardship that has befallen us throughout our history because of our disobedience seems insignificant to you - our kings, our leaders, our cohanim, our prophets, our ancestors and all Your people, from the time of the kings of Assyria, over four hundred years before Ezra's time, to this day (Nehemiah 9:32).** The **people** could address **ADONAI** as **our God** because **they** knew **He** was merciful.

The Chronicler wrote: **If My people, over whom My Name is called, humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their evil ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their Land (Second Chronicles 7:14).** The covenant relationship between **YHVH** and **His people** is central in the Bible. The people knew that **God** was faithful and merciful because of **His** actions in the past. **Nevertheless, the last cycle was not completed** (also see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Hu - The Parable of the Lost Son and His Jealous Brother**). **The cry for help (the third step in the cycle) is the theme of this prayer, and it looks forward to ADONAI's expected deliverance.**

You are righteous in all that has come upon us. For You have acted faithfully even while we have done wickedly. The people recognized that **God's** judgment was just and **they** deserved punishment because **their** ancestors did not obey **Ha'Shem**. **Our kings, our leaders, our cohanim, and our ancestors have not kept Your Torah or paid attention to Your mitzvot or Your testimonies by which you have admonished them. Even in their own kingdom with the abundance of Your good things that You gave them, or with the spacious and fertile land that You set before them, they did not serve You or turn back from their evil deeds (Nehemiah 9:33-35).**

Sixth, a complaint that the people are in distress: **But see, even today we are slaves! Slaves in the Land that You gave to our ancestors to eat of its fruit and its bounty. We are slaves in it.** Even though the Persians were not cruel to their subjects as **Assyria** and **Babylon** had been, they exacted heavy taxes. **The Jews** were still **their** subjects, but **their** desire was to live only under **the God** of **their** ancestors. **It's abundant produce goes to the kings You have set over us due to our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please.** The prayer ends on a confessional note. **We are in great distress (Nehemiah 9:36-37)!** Such an end to a prayer is a tremendous sign of faith in **YHVH**. **The people** knew that **ADONAI** was **their** only chance for deliverance, just as it had been the case for **the children of Isra'el** when **they** were in **Egypt**.¹⁷⁰

Then Ezra got up from before the House of God and went into the room of Jehohanan son of Eliashib (see Af - Ezra-Nehemiah Timeline: The dates of the high priests). While he was there, he ate no bread and drank no water, because he continued to mourn over the unfaithfulness of the exiles (Ezra 10:6). This was an unusually stringent fast, for people generally only fasted from



food but not from water. It indicated the depth of **Ezra's** grief and alarm over this situation, which underscores the seriousness of marrying an unbeliever.¹⁷¹

Seventh, a solemn, climatic oath and recommitment by way of a covenant in the next file (see **Bq - A Binding Agreement**). Employing these seven observations in our own prayer life would have an immediate, reforming effect on the content of our prayers. The prayer is earnest and forthright. Everything about it suggests sincerity and urgency. **They** knew **themselves** to be **sinners** and knew that **ADONAI** had every right to be angry with **them**. This was not a time for excuses. **They** wanted to have real dealings with **YHVH** and not simply the trappings of religion. It was time for commitment and promise in the face of the covenant mercies of **God**.¹⁷²