

October 29  
Lesson 9 (NIV)

# GOD'S COVENANT

## WITH THE RETURNED EXILES

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 103:1-14

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Nehemiah 9, 10

### NEHEMIAH 9:32-38

<sup>32</sup> “Now therefore, our God, the great God, mighty and awesome, who keeps his covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes—the hardship that has come on us, on our kings and leaders, on our priests and prophets, on our ancestors and all your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until today. <sup>33</sup> In all that has happened to us, you have remained righteous; you have acted faithfully, while we acted wickedly. <sup>34</sup> Our kings, our leaders, our priests and our ancestors did not follow your law; they did not pay attention to your commands or the statutes you warned them to keep. <sup>35</sup> 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.

<sup>36</sup> “But see, we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our ancestors so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces. <sup>37</sup> 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.

<sup>38</sup> “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.”

### NEHEMIAH 10:28, 29

<sup>28</sup> “The rest of the people—priests, Levites, gatekeepers, musicians, 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— <sup>29</sup> all these now join their fellow Israelites 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.”

### KEY VERSE

*In all that has happened to us, you have remained righteous; you have acted faithfully, while we acted wickedly.—Nehemiah 9:33*

### LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Recount the main themes of the prayer offered by God's people.
2. Give an example of God's faithfulness in contrast with the ancient Israelites' faithlessness.
3. Make a plan to correct the problem of (or resulting from) one unkept commitment.

### LESSON OUTLINE

#### Introduction

- A. Never Forget
- B. Lesson Background

#### I. Pleading with God (NEHEMIAH 9:32-37)

- A. Faithful God (v. 32a)  
*Keeping*
- B. Unfaithful People (vv. 32b-37)  
*It's Their Fault?*

#### II. Pledging to God (NEHEMIAH 9:38; 10:28, 29)

- A. Stated Commitment (9:38)
- B. Solemn Ceremony (10:28, 29)

#### Conclusion

- A. The Greater Work
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

## Introduction

### A. Never Forget

September 11, 2001, lives long in American memory, the terrorist attacks of that day claiming about 3,000 lives. On every anniversary, the names of the victims who died in New York City are read aloud there against a background of somber music. Memorial services are also held at the Pentagon and in Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

Lessons of the past, even very painful ones, can help us prepare for the future. The exile to Babylon was a painful experience for the people of God. Upon returning, the exiles took time to reflect on their past and seek guidance for their future.

### B. Lesson Background

Today's study comes from a Scripture text taken from the time near the conclusion of Old Testament history. God's people in the northern kingdom of Israel had been conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BC. To the south, the kingdom of Judah fell to Babylon in 586 BC. But the time of captivity in Babylon that followed was not a period (in grammatical terms), as though it marked the end for God's people. It was a comma, a pause during which God disciplined his wayward people with the intent to bring them back home. Isaiah, writing some 150 years before that homecoming occurred, prophesied that it would happen and even gave the name of the ruler (Cyrus) who was to issue the decree that permitted the captives to do so ([Isaiah 44:24-45:1](#); [2 Chronicles 36:22, 23](#)).

There were three return trips to Judah after Cyrus's decree. The first was in 538 BC, led by Zerubbabel, Sheshbazzar, and Joshua (or Jeshua). About 50,000 made the trip (see [Ezra 1-6](#)). The second journey came in 458 BC when Ezra traveled to Judah with fewer than 2,000 fellow returnees ([Ezra 8](#)); the reason was to provide needed spiritual guidance ([7:6-10](#)). The third journey was led by Nehemiah in 444 BC.

Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the king of Persia when he learned the distressing news that the walls around Jerusalem still lay in ruins ([Nehemiah 1](#)). That was nearly 100 years after the first return to Judah! He felt compelled to rectify this situation personally so the city could properly defend itself from attack. Thanks to Nehemiah's steady, courageous, and prayerful leadership, the wall was completed in less than two months ([6:15](#)).

Nehemiah, working with Ezra, understood that while protecting the city physically was vital, maintaining the spiritual defenses of the people was even more critical. [Nehemiah 8](#) records a time of concentrated teaching from God's law. Later that month (the seventh month), God's people observed the Festival of Booths, or Tabernacles, as prescribed in the law ([8:13-18](#)).

Later that same month, the people began a time of intense prayer and reading of the law. The prayer is recorded in [Nehemiah 9:5-37](#); a special focus of the prayer was confession of sin. Our printed text is taken from the conclusion of this prayer. Indicators of the intense earnestness of this prayer are seen in how the people dress, from whom they disassociate themselves, and in the amount of time spent reading God's law, confessing sin, and worshipping ([9:1-3](#)).

## I. Pleading with God

([NEHEMIAH 9:32-37](#))

### A. Faithful God (v. 32a)

**32a. "Now therefore, our God, the great God, mighty and awesome, who keeps his covenant of love,**

## HOW TO SAY IT

Assyria Uh-sear-ee-uh.  
 Babylon Bab-uh-lun.  
 Babylonians Bab-ih-low-nee-unz.  
 Cyrus Sigh-russ.  
 Deuteronomy Due-ter-ahn-uh-me.  
 Israelites Iz-ray-el-ites.  
 Jeshua Jeh-shoo-uh.  
 Levites Lee-vites.  
 Nehemiah Nee-huh-my-uh.  
 Nethinims Neth-ih-nimz.  
 Samaria Suh-mare-ee-uh.  
 Sheshbazzar Shesh-bayz-er.  
 Sinai Sigh-nye or Sigh-nay-eye.  
 Zerubbabel Zeh-rub-uh-bul.

God's steadfast character is highlighted throughout this prayer ([Nehemiah 9:6, 8, 17, 27, 28, 31](#)). He has remained faithful in spite of the unfaithfulness of his covenant people. The verse before us continues this theme as God is addressed as *the great God, mighty and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love*. The word *awesome*, trivialized by modern culture, refers to the sense of reverent fear that should grip us when we contrast who God is (holy and righteous) with who we are (sinners deserving only his judgment). This prayer is making just such a contrast.

This should also bring to mind how God revealed himself to the Israelites in the passages studied previously for [lessons 6](#) and [7](#). There we saw how he spoke from Mount Sinai in such a display of sounds and sights that the Israelites trembled with fear ([Exodus 19:16](#)). They begged Moses to speak with them rather than having them hear the voice of God ([20:18, 19](#)).

The references to God's keeping *his covenant of love* may reflect an awareness of the language that is found in Moses' address to the Israelites in the book of Deuteronomy, particularly in its latter chapters. There Moses describes a series of curses or punishments that the people of Israel will experience if they turn away from the Lord. These are explained in detail in [Deuteronomy 28:15-68](#).

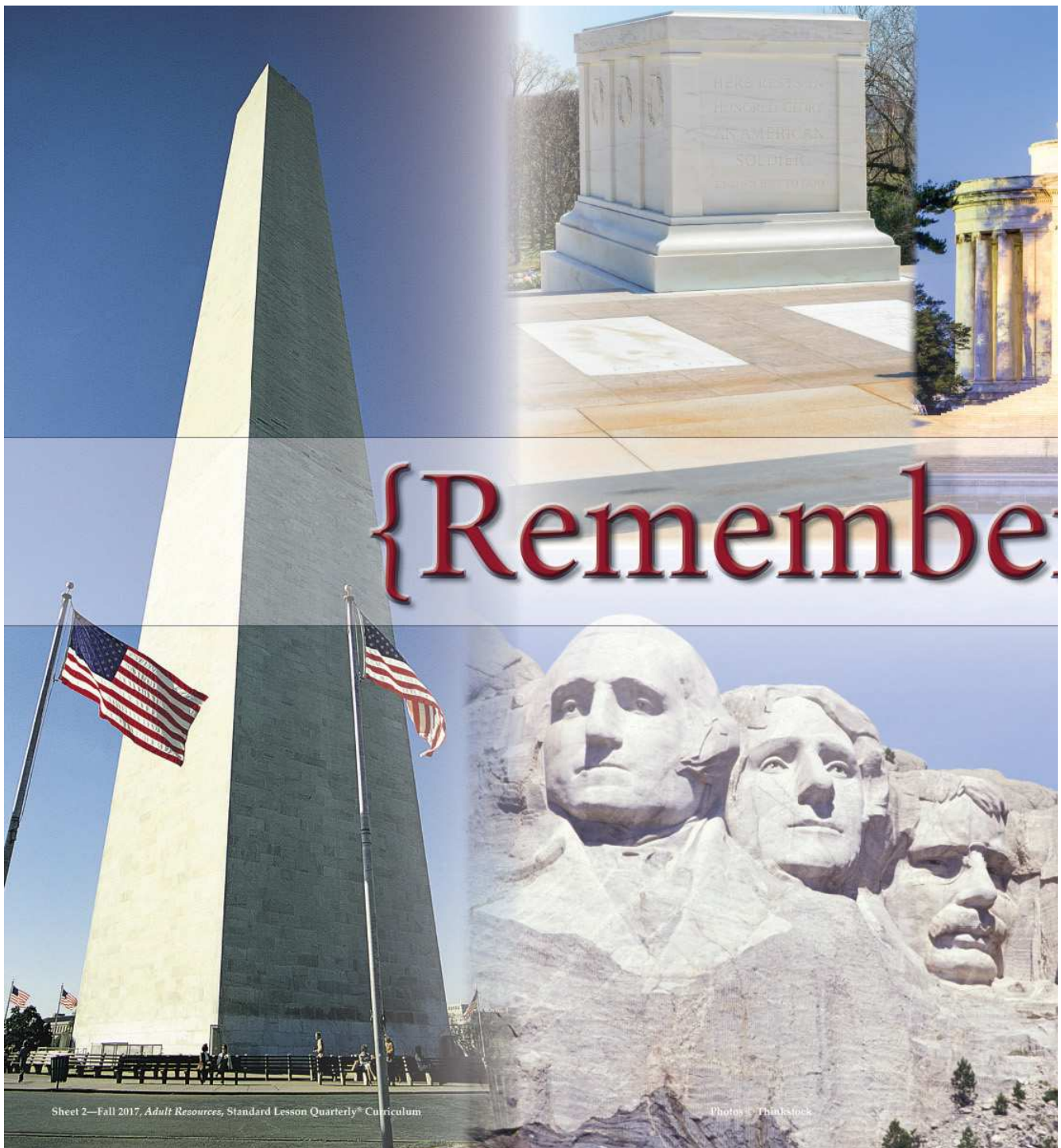
But then comes the promise of compassionate restoration should the people repent ([Deuteronomy 30:1-10](#)). Those who lift up the prayer in our lesson text for today repeatedly call attention to the Lord's compassion ([Nehemiah 9:17, 27, 28, 31](#)). These wise leaders know there is no hope for them apart from God's mercy. Their prayer imparts this same reality to those in attendance.

*What Do You Think?*

What steps should we take if we discover that our prayers are intensely "deep" only when we are in need or distress?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

- Considering preparation to pray
- Considering location of prayer
- Considering our view of God
- Other



Visual for Lesson 9. *Point to these images (or comparable ones of other nations) as you ask your class how the words memorial and memory relate.*

### ***KEEPING***

I have a friend whose wife was recently put into a nursing home because of declining mental and physical ability. She probably never will return to her home. So he decided it was appropriate to go through some of the stuff that she has accumulated over the years. In the process, he discovered how much of a “keeper” she has been.

He was not surprised to discover pictures their children drew when they were preschoolers (they are now in their 40s). There were file folders full of copies of letters she had written to her children and programs of youth musicals the children had been in. What did surprise him was the discovery of Christmas cards they had received in the 1970s. There were four groups of unused Christmas cards, some of them accompanied by books of unused stamps. (And since these are from before the days of “forever” stamps, they will need additional postage.)

As a mother and a wife in charge of the household, she kept many things—some useful, some not. Some had nostalgic value, others valueless in every sense. Perhaps we can identify with some of her accumulation, but the fact remains she was a “keeper” (in the sense of “hoarder,” but much less extreme). Nehemiah

reminds us that God is also a “keeper.” The covenants God makes are valuable and worth keeping. How unfortunate and disastrous that the Israelites did not keep their side of the covenant! Lesson learned?

—J. B. N.

## B. Unfaithful People (vv. 32b-37)

**32b. “do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes—the hardship that has come on us, on our kings and leaders, on our priests and prophets, on our ancestors and all your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until today.**

From greatest to least, everyone has been affected by the Lord’s discipline. No one has been immune or exempt. Everyone has suffered *from the days of the kings of Assyria until today*; this is a period of about 278 years from the viewpoint of those present. (See the Lesson Background for more chronology.) As the prayer is uttered, it is the Persian Empire that has the upper hand over God’s people.

The phrase *do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes* may seem puzzling. Would the afflictions of God’s covenant people ever seem like a trifle to him? Why would such a plea need to be offered? Such language is not meant to remind God of something he might forget. Rather, it is a way for the praying person or persons to voice dependency on God for his mercy. If the people think he views their woes as trivial and ignores their cries, to whom will they go for help?

**33. “In all that has happened to us, you have remained righteous; you have acted faithfully, while we acted wickedly.**

Those praying are also quick to note that all they have experienced in the form of the Lord’s discipline is completely deserved. God is *righteous*; he has *acted faithfully* in all his dealings. His people have no one to blame for their sorry condition but themselves, as confessed throughout the prayer ([Nehemiah 9:16-31](#)).

### What Do You Think?

What place should affirmations of God’s justice have in prayers of new-covenant believers?

### Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Considering the evil present in the world
- Considering cultural definitions and redefinitions of right and wrong
- Other

**34. “Our kings, our leaders, our priests and our ancestors did not follow your law; they did not pay attention to your commands or the statutes you warned them to keep.**

For leaders to act with a callous disregard for God’s *law*, his *commands*, and his *statutes* does not bode well for the people as a whole. His law contains warnings that sin brings consequences. When the people failed to heed the warnings, the resulting divine punishment testifies that they got what they deserved. Although technical distinctions can be made between laws, commands, and statutes, to probe such distinctions is not the author’s intent. The author intends, rather, to show the all-encompassing nature of the people’s guilt.

**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.**

Once more the Lord’s great goodness and abundant provisions are contrasted with the people’s abundant instances of rebellion. *The spacious and fertile land* implies great size and also signifies prosperity or blessing (compare [Isaiah 30:23](#)). The promised land was God’s gift to the people, but that gift had to be received according to the giver’s terms. That did not happen.

### What Do You Think?

How would you describe the relationship between a person’s “gratefulness index” and his or her dedication to God?

### Talking Points for Your Discussion

- In terms of speech patterns
- In terms of behavior
- In terms of prayer life
- Other

**36. “But see, we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our ancestors so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces.**

The people are *slaves* in that they are subservient in what is meant to be their home. Even though they are now back in the land that God had given them, they are under the control of the Persians.

**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.**

The yield of the promised land was originally intended to benefit God’s people. Now much of it is given to *the kings* who have been *placed over* the people. This goes back to the days of the Assyrians, to whom the kings of both Israel and Judah had paid tribute. Once more those who pray this prayer acknowledge that this has all happened, not because of the superior strength or military might of these kings. It is *because of our sins*. The real problem confronting the nation is not any foreign rule; it is the bondage of sin—and this has always been the case.

The concluding statement of this verse captures well the condition of the people: *we are in great distress*. Their only hope is to call upon the Lord in humble repentance.



### *IT'S THEIR FAULT?*

It seems like a law of human nature to blame others for our failures. Eve blamed her disobedience on the serpent. Adam blamed his on Eve. He even blamed God (since God had given Eve to him). I read once of a woman whose husband was prone to blaming her for everything. After he got into an argument with his own mother on the telephone, he hung up, turned to his wife, and said, “Well, it’s *your* mother-in-law!”

It’s so easy to blame our government for all that is wrong in the country. Yet we are the ones who elected the officials to office. It is easy to blame the producers of television shows for “all the garbage” that appears on our TV screens. Yet if people did not buy the products of companies that advertise on such programs, the programs would disappear. To place the blame, we often need to look at ourselves.

As the prayer looked at the problems of Judah, it acknowledged that the problem was not “someone else” but “us.” Although the prayer refers to various individuals of the past who got the downhill slide started, it is also quick to affirm that the problem of foreign domination is “because of our sins.” As my favorite comic strip character, Pogo, once said, “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

—*J. B. N.*

## II. Pledging to God

(NEHEMIAH 9:38; 10:28, 29)

### A. Stated Commitment (9:38)

**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.”**

Normally we think of God as the one who initiates covenants. But here those who have prayed so earnestly demonstrate their desire to take action. The word *agreement* (which is what a covenant is) is not actually present in the Hebrew text. But the intent of the people and their leaders to obligate themselves to God is clear nonetheless.

Mention of *their seals* likely refers to the manner in which documents of the time are made official. This is done by means of a signet ring ([Genesis 41:41-43](#); [Esther 3:10-12](#)). Those in positions of authority—namely, the *leaders*, the *Levites*, and the *priests*—set the example. This time they lead the way not in terms of wickedness but in pledges of obedience.

[Nehemiah 10:1-27](#) (not in today’s text) goes on to list the names of dozens of these leaders who put their seal on the prepared document. Thereafter follows a description of a further act of dedication.

### B. Solemn Ceremony (10:28, 29)

**28a. “The rest of the people—priests, Levites, gatekeepers, musicians, temple servants**

*The rest of the people* follow the example set by the leaders cited in [Nehemiah 9:38](#). The additional *priests* and *Levites* are perhaps those who have not taken part in leading the time of reading and teaching God’s law and of repentance described in [chapters 8 and 9](#). But they desire to be part of this pivotal moment of renewed commitment to the Lord.

*Gatekeepers* take care of the temple’s gates (compare [1 Chronicles 9:21](#)). They may also include those who guard the new gates to the city ([Nehemiah 7:1-3](#)), but the offices mentioned in this verse are associated more with temple service. David had designated individuals to serve in this capacity as part of his efforts to help prepare Solomon for the building of the temple ([1 Chronicles 26:1-18](#)). David also organized those “in charge of the music” ([1 Chronicles 6:31](#)) and the *musicians* mentioned likely serve a similar function.

The word translated *temple servants* is a general reference to those who are given over to serve in some capacity in the temple. Their specific function is not clear to us. (Compare [1 Chronicles 9:2](#); [Ezra 2:43, 58, 70](#); [Nehemiah 3:26, 3](#); etc.)

**28b. “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—**

Part of preparing for this service of rededication involved the people who are “of Israelite descent” separating themselves “from all foreigners” ([Nehemiah 9:2](#)). This separation may refer to Israelites who had married outside the covenant (compare [Deuteronomy 7:3](#)), but now divorce their pagan spouses. Ezra had dealt with similar forbidden arrangements previously ([Ezra 9:1-10:8](#)), and Nehemiah will have to deal with it later ([Nehemiah 13:23-28](#)). The separation could also describe the putting away of foreign gods.

#### *What Do You Think?*

What techniques can we use to separate ourselves from the world while still engaging it with the gospel?

#### *Talking Points for Your Discussion*

Considering “separation texts” such as [2 Corinthians 6:14-18](#); [Colossians 2:8](#); [1 Timothy 4:7](#); [1 John 2:15](#)

Considering “engagement texts” such as [Matthew 5:13-16](#); [28:19, 20](#); [Acts 17:22-31](#)

Those who take the bold step of separation join others in the act of commitment (see the next verse). This group includes *all . . . who are able to understand*. Similar language is used in [Nehemiah 8:2, 3](#) to describe those who received the teaching of the Law of Moses as spearheaded by Ezra. Perhaps those who could not understand (infants and small children, for example) were gathered in another location where they could receive teaching presented on their level.

**29. “all these now join their fellow Israelites 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.”**

The next action taken by those listed in the previous verse is outlined here. There is no mention of their sealing the prepared document of [Nehemiah 9:38](#) as do those whose names are listed in [10:1-27](#). But they indicate their agreement with that document by placing themselves under a *curse and an oath to follow the Law of God* in its entirety.

We do not know the exact contents of this curse and oath, but the terms themselves indicate sincere intent. Perhaps the curse is something similar to the self-

maledictory oath discussed in [lesson 5](#) (page 46).

When we read the action steps that are promised in the rest of [Nehemiah 10](#), we see how seriously the people are taking this covenant. This is no mere lip service. A general promise to live a holier life is one thing; to list specific actions of genuine repentance is another.

#### *What Do You Think?*

In what ways can we model submissiveness to God without appearing sanctimonious?

#### *Talking Points for Your Discussion*

In terms of speech patterns

In terms of behavior

Considering the difference between the words submissive and passive

## Conclusion

### A. The Greater Work

One of the most noteworthy characteristics of Nehemiah (both the book and the man) is the priority of prayer. Most of the prayers mentioned in the book are quite brief ([Nehemiah 4:4, 5; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31](#)). In two cases praying is referred to, but nothing is said of the contents ([2:4; 4:9](#)). A longer prayer comes at the beginning of the book after Nehemiah learns the distressing news about the city walls ([1:5-11](#)). By far the longest prayer is found in the passage from which today's lesson text is drawn ([9:5-37](#)).

The title of today's lesson (and the theme for this unit of studies) highlights God's part in making covenants with various individuals and groups in the Old Testament. Even so, the importance of prayer as part of the covenant renewal ceremony in today's study must not be bypassed. We live in a time (in Western society) when the resources for studying the Bible and planning various church programs are incredibly numerous. Just a few seconds with a computer provides us with access to scores of such materials.

While consulting all these resources, it's easy to forget to consult our most important and needed resource: earnest prayer. In fact it is an insult to count prayer as just another "resource" to aid us in getting our work done. As Oswald Chambers put it, "Prayer does not fit us for the greater work; prayer is the greater work."

Many churches used to schedule "prayer meetings" for the middle of the week. True, sometimes these gatherings focused on physical or personal needs more than larger spiritual concerns; but nowadays prayer meetings seem to have gone the way of revivals and community youth rallies.

The perceived needs of church members have resulted in some churches adding staff to meet those needs. Thus we have ministers of visitation, ministers of education, ministers of missions, etc. There are even "ministers" of technology and sports on some church staffs! Is it time to consider creating a staff person designated as a "minister of prayer"? Can you think of someone in your congregation who would be able to fulfill such a role? If you can't think of anyone, what does that say?

### B. Prayer

Father, forgive us for our prayerlessness. Help us to give prayer the priority your Son and the first-century church gave it. Let us not view prayer as just another tool; may we seek to be your instruments who pray and serve only to bring glory to you. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

### C. Thought to Remember

Reflect on the past, but pray for the future.

## INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at [www.standardlesson.com](http://www.standardlesson.com) or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

### Into the Lesson

As class begins, have learners give examples of the ways people remember daily commitments and obligations. (Possible responses: calendars, sticky notes, schedules, alarms, etc.)

Then ask volunteers to identify some ways we honor and remember specific events or people from history. (Possible responses: national memorial structures, certain days of the year, etc.)

*Alternative.* Before learners arrive, place in chairs copies of the "Remember This?" activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have class members work on this as others arrive. After everyone has had at least 90 seconds to work, continue.

After either activity, dig deeper by asking the following questions: (1) What happens when we don't use daily reminders to keep us on track? (2) What might happen if we didn't remember and reflect on events from the past?

To transition into Bible study, say, "Lessons of the past can help us prepare for the future. That is the purpose of some holidays, memorials, and monuments. The returning exiles took time to reflect on their past for that same reason. Let's learn about that."

### Into the Word

Say, "In the chapters preceding today's lesson text, Nehemiah discovered that Jerusalem was in spiritual and physical ruins. After addressing these needs, he reviewed past actions that led to these situations, examined current conditions, and set a course for the people's future."

Write these headings across the top of the board:

**Past ([Nehemiah 9:32-35](#))**

**Present (Nehemiah 9:36, 37)**

**Future (Nehemiah 9:38; 10:28, 29)**

Have volunteers read each section of the text. After a section is read, ask the class to give information from those verses that describes the past, present, and future of Israel. Write their answers under the appropriate headings as they are called. Use the following possible responses as prompts when necessary:

**Past**—*God kept his covenants and promises; Israel's kings, princes, priests, prophets, fathers, and everyone else have been afflicted since the Assyrians conquered them; God has exacted justice on the Israelites for their wicked behavior; none of the Israelites have kept the law or obeyed the Lord, and their sin has brought God's punishment; God gave the Israelites the bountiful land they live in, and the Israelites continued to ignore God and his law.*

**Present**—*The Israelites are servants in the land God had given them; the foreign kings who rule over the Israelites make a great profit from the Israelites' land; the Israelites' bodies, livestock, and land all belong to their foreign overlords.*

**Future**—*Certain priests, Levites, and rulers initiate and seal a covenant with God; the rest of the Israelites follow this example and set themselves apart for the Lord; they all agree to follow God's law, binding themselves with a curse for failure to do so; the Israelites realign themselves with God and his will and resolve to turn away from their sin.*

Say, "Like the Israelites, we all have made mistakes, but by remembering our pasts, we can keep ourselves on the path that God has set out for us."

## Into Life

Have learners pair off to discuss this question: "Are there one or more people in your world who need their relationship with God restored as Israel's was?" Give pairs the opportunity to spend a few minutes praying together for the person or people.

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the "Daily Bread" activity from the reproducible page. Have learners spend several minutes completing the activity on their own, or send it home to be used throughout the week.