

Nehemiah 9-10

Overview

Moses prescribed three appointed times in the seventh month, at the beginning of Israel's agricultural year:

<i>Ref in Lev 23</i>	<i>Appointed Time</i>	<i>Date</i>
23-25	Feast of Trumpets	7/1
26-32	Day of Atonement	7/10
33-36	Feast of Booths	7/15-22

This coming Thursday is the holiest of the Jewish appointed seasons, the Day of Atonement. Alone among the biblical holy days, it is a fast, not a feast, a time for the people to “afflict [their] souls,” Lev 23:27. It addresses perhaps the central problem of human existence, the problem of sin. All of us have disobeyed God, and fall under his judgment. Even worse, deep down inside, we know that we have disobeyed him. Try as we may, we are powerless either to live a perfect life, or to deal with the emotional consequences of our guilt. The Day of Atonement was the focal point in the Jewish calendar for dealing with this problem of sin.

When the Jews returned to their homeland after the Babylonian captivity, restoration of these feasts was high on their list of priorities. In Neh 8-10 we have a record of events that reflect all three of these appointed times.

- 7:73-8:12 records an assembly on the first day, corresponding to the feast of trumpets.
- 8:13-18 describes their rediscovery and celebration of the feast of tabernacles.
- ch. 9-10 describe a time of fasting and confession, very similar in spirit to the Day of Atonement. Curiously, it is not at the right time. It takes place on the 24th day of the month, two days after Booths, rather than on the 10th day, between Trumpets and Booths. It also does not include the elaborate rituals that God prescribed for this special day.

Today we study Neh. 9-10. By topic, this corresponds to the Day of Atonement, but it falls at the wrong time. As we study this passage, we will learn what can, and what cannot, solve the problem of our sin.

Lev 16, God Provided a Detailed Ritual

This chapter describes an elaborate set of sacrifices and ritual:

- v.4, Aaron bathes and dons special garments

Day of Atonement 2005

- v.11, a bullock for a sin offering for himself
- v.13, incense on the altar in the holy place
- v.14, applies the blood of the bullock to the mercy seat, the lid of the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies
- v.15, a goat as a sin offering for the people; bring its blood into the holy of holies and apply to the ark
- v.18, put the blood of the bullock and goat on the horns of the altar
- v.21, send the living goat into the wilderness.
- v.23, change his clothes and bathe
- v.24, offer two rams, one for himself, and one for the people, as burnt offerings.

This ceremony was the high point of the Jewish religious year, and would have been very impressive. Many religions follow this example and provide elaborate rituals that a priest must follow to take away the sin of the people. Are such ceremonies enough to take away sin?

Neh 9, Religious Ritual is Not Enough.

An answer to the question about the effectiveness of ritual is found in our initial observation: the Jews who returned after the captivity didn't celebrate this elaborate ritual, and what they did do, they did on the wrong day (7/24 instead of 7/10). This was not a matter of ignorance. They discovered the need for the feast of booths from their reading in the law. They must have discovered the day of atonement, which is mentioned right next to the feast of booths in both Lev 23 and Num 29. Why did they omit the ritual?

Consider Isa 58:1-9, where the Lord rebukes the people for conducting the ritual of the day of atonement without a penitent heart. The ceremony was not enough to take away sin. Religious ritual may provide an attentive heart with a vivid picture of God's work, but it has no power in itself to rid the soul of sin. Isa 58 shows that the ritual is not *sufficient to take away sin*.

The Lord subsequently made it impossible for them to celebrate the holiday, because the Ark of the Covenant disappeared after the captivity (Josephus, Jewish Wars, 5.219). According to Lev 16, the ceremony could not be celebrated without the ark to which to bring the blood. In the light of Isa 58, we can conclude that God took away the ark of the covenant to force them to realize that the ceremony in itself was of no effect. God would not have permitted the ark to be lost if the ark were essential to his people's relationship with himself. The removal of the ark shows that the ceremony was not only not sufficient, but also not *necessary* for the removal of sin.

Maybe they are heeding Zech 7:1-7; 8:18-19. This is dated in the fourth year of Darius, which would be 518/517. God promises that one day all of the fasts will be turned into joyful feasts. They may have concluded that this promised time has come.

So the people could not celebrate the day of atonement as described in Lev. 16. Still, they felt the

burden of their sin.

Chapter 9 shows that only two days after the end of Tabernacles, they assembled to confess their sin to the Lord. They are motivated by the same dynamic that we noticed in 8:9, “the people wept.” They have been exposed to the Law of God, not only on the feast of trumpets, but also daily throughout the feast of Tabernacles (8:18). The first effect of the teaching of God’s word is reproof, an awareness of our sin. The people cannot escape the convicting effect of God’s word. With or without an ark, they must come to grips with their sin.

When we find ourselves under such conviction, the right thing to do is to confess our sin to God. Nehemiah’s contemporaries do this in ch. 9. vv. 1-3 describe their confession in general terms. Then their long prayer recalls the nation’s sad history of repeatedly spurning the Lord’s blessings and sinning against him. Examples:

- 13-19 (Israel in the wilderness)
- 24-30 (Israel in the land, leading up to the Babylonian captivity)
- 33-37, they recognize that this is not just history, but that they are guilty, too.

So the people were not just outwardly going through a ceremony. They really were sorry for their sin. This is a good thing to do. Was this enough?

Neh 10, Being Sorry is Not Enough

Being sorry is not enough to fix the problem. The Jews resolve to correct their disobedient behavior. In ch. 10, they set in place a solemn covenant, agreeing to obey the law of God. Perhaps they are guided by Solomon’s wisdom in Prov 28:13, “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.”

vv. 1-28 contain a long list of the people who signed this covenant. They felt a need to commit themselves by name, so that they could hold one another accountable. The list starts with Nehemiah, the royal governor, and includes the prominent members of the community, though v.28 makes clear that everyone else joined in as well.

They committed themselves to obey the law of God in general (v.29), but in addition called out several specific areas where they had been lax, tempted to compromise by their dealings with the pagans around them.

- v.30, they will not intermarry with the people of the land. This was a problem when Ezra first arrived (Ezra 10, 457-456 BC). Now, thirteen years later, the problem has returned.
- v. 31, they will observe the sabbath day and other seasons of ceremonial rest. Again, they have been tempted by the practices of their unbelieving neighbors. The sabbath is the focus, but they pledge to give special attention to the sabbatical year (leaving the fields fallow, forgiving debts) also, even though that would put them at a disadvantage with respect to their neighbors.

Day of Atonement 2005

- vv. 32-37, they will donate tithes of their produce to support the Levites in the temple, so that the priests and levites can be free to conduct the temple worship.
- 38-39, the Levites will store the tithes in the appropriate chambers temple.

This resolve is a commendable action on the part of the community. They are not only sorry for their sin, but they resolve to take specific action to set things right.

Ritual was not enough to solve the problem of sin, and being sorry is not enough. Will their solemn resolution fix the problem?

Neh 13, A Resolve to Reform is Not Enough

Now we fast-forward about 19 years. Nehemiah returns to Persia, and then comes again to Israel. Ch. 13 tells us what he finds. Amazingly (and tragically), the people have forgotten every one of the commitments that they made in chapter 10.

13:4-9 describes how the storerooms in the temple had been turned into a private apartment for Tobiah the Ammonite, a character who throughout the book of Nehemiah tries to frustrate the Jews in their effort to rebuild. This directly violates the fourth provision of the covenant in 10:38-39, that the Levites would lay up the tithes in the chambers of the treasure house for the use of the priests.

13:10-14 describes how the Levites had forsaken the service of God in the temple to tend their own fields, because the people were not faithful in bringing in the tithes. This directly violates their promise in 10:22-37 to tithe their produce for the support of the temple.

13:15-22 describes how the people traded with one another and with the people of the land on the Sabbath day, a direct violation of the second promise of the covenant, in 10:31.

13:23-29 describes how they had intermarried with the people of the land, in direct violation of their promise in 10:30.

In other words, in less than 20 years, they had violated every one of the promises they so solemnly made on that great day of confession and covenant renewal reported in Neh 9-10.

Everyone who has ever made a New Year's resolution understands what's going on here. All of us have an acute sense of right and wrong—in others. Sometimes, we can even see what's wrong in our own lives. But we do not have a corresponding ability to live up to our own standards. We may resolve to do better, but we cannot keep our own resolutions. After two days, or two years, or two decades, we slip back into our old ways. This is because we haven't really changed inside. The Jews made as strong a resolution as one possibly could. They signed a document, so that others could hold them accountable. Yet they fell back—just as we do.

Ritual can't solve the problem of our sin. Sorrow for sin isn't enough. Neither is a strong personal resolve to do better. What hope is there for us?

The True Hope: The New Covenant

We need to change on the inside, and that's a change that God must do to us. He promised it to the children of Israel even before they went into captivity, in Jer 31:31-34. Note

- the weakness of the former covenant, v.32, "which my covenant they brake."
- the promise to change them inwardly, v. 33.

Ezekiel also wrote of this glorious promise (36:24-28), and explains that through his indwelling Spirit, he will cause them to walk in his statutes (v.27). This is the only solution to the problem of our sin. No ritual can take it away. Our sorrow over sin is not enough, nor can we reform our own way out of it. God must change us from the inside out, and he promises to do this by his new covenant.

The Jews of Nehemiah's day did not enjoy this new covenant. Like every covenant, it required a special sacrifice to take effect. Our Lord explained what that sacrifice was, the night before his crucifixion. He shared a passover dinner with his disciples, and in the course of that evening, instituted the Lord's Supper. All four records of that supper indicate that when he shared the cup with them, he declared it to be "my blood of the new testament" (Matt 26:28).

The Lord Jesus promised, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest," Matt 11:28. Neither ritual, nor sorrow, nor a resolve to do better can take away our sin or give us a clear conscience. But if we repent of our sin and receive the Lord Jesus, he will take away both our guilt and our guilty conscience, and enable us to live according to God's law.

The Lesson

God provided the Day of Atonement to remind the people of their sin. But many kept the ceremony outwardly without repenting inwardly. God condemned their superficial ritual in Isa 58, showing that the ritual by itself was not sufficient, and then he took away from them the means to perform the ceremony, the ark of the covenant, showing that the ritual was not even necessary.

Exposure to the Word of God at the feasts of trumpets and tabernacles in ch. 8 showed the people their sin. The sense of guilt was so overwhelming that they were driven to a public time of confession (ch. 9). But this was not enough.

They were not just "sorry." They resolved to do better, by identifying four areas in which they had broken God's law and entering into a solemn covenant in ch. 10. But this was not enough. In spite of their sincere desire to change, ch. 13 shows that they had departed from all of the points of their covenant in ch. 10.

What then is the answer to the problem of sin? Religious ritual cannot cleanse us from sin. Confessing our sin is not enough. Nor is it enough to make a firm resolution to do better, because the flesh is weak and we will fail. God must change us from the inside out, as he promised Israel under the new covenant, and as he has provided through the work of the Lord Jesus.