

## I. INTRODUCTION

We continue in our series on the timely book of Nehemiah. A couple weeks ago, Pastor Jason walked us through chapter 8 and the priority of God's word. Today, I have the privilege of guiding us through chapter 9, which is the people's repentance in response to that word. By now, you know that Nehemiah is about rebuilding the city of God. From chapters 1 to 6, we saw the physical rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem in just 52 days. But, now it is time to rebuild the people of God (listed in chapter 7), who will become the living temple of God. This is done through covenant renewal that spans chapters 8 to 10.

In the midst of this renewal, the returnees with Nehemiah must have found it hard to shake off the feeling that the past century of destruction and exile was nothing other than the chastising hand of God against their centuries of sin. God's covenant with his people is central to the Bible. It is summed up in the familiar words: "I will be their God, and they will be my people."<sup>1</sup> But, the people, in the intensity of guilt and despair, probably wondered, "If God is against us, who could be for us?" "Will he really still be our God and we his people?"

While we too feel guilt, shame and remorse over sin, it is often not to the same extent as the Israelites. And this leads to a failure of true repentance. Why? Could it be that our response is deficient because our view of God is deficient? Perhaps our view of God is too small or too curated like our social media posts and profiles. Perhaps we treat sinning against God merely like disappointing a friend, when it is more like cheating on your spouse or betraying your king. A skewed vision of God leads to a muted response to his word, which in turn trivializes our sin. We stop taking our sin seriously like the idolatry, infidelity, and treason that it really is.

**What can we do to reverse this trend? We enlarge our vision of God through repentance.** Through confession of sin, God becomes greater in our hearts and minds not just abstractly or in principle, but as a *living reality*. Repentance, at its essence, involves both a turning away from sin and turning toward God. Nehemiah 9 will help us do this. After a flyover of this chapter, I want to focus on three aspects of repentance. First, how do we actually repent. Second, what should drive us to repent. Finally, where repentance leads us. It has been personally convicting for me to prepare this message as I fought inner accusations of hypocrisy, inadequacy and shame. I preach this morning not from a higher plane of holiness, but rather in the trenches of one who needs to keep growing in repentance.

## II. OVERVIEW OF NEHEMIAH 9

Let's start off with a quick bird's eye survey of the skillful structuring of this chapter, so keep your Bibles open to follow along. Chapter 9 starts on the 24<sup>th</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month, after the Feast of Booths finished. On this day, the Law is once again read aloud. However, unlike in Chapter 8, when the leaders told the people not to weep because it was a day holy to God, here, the people assemble to mourn for their sin. In verse 4, the Levites once again lead this solemn worship service.

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<sup>1</sup> Gen 17:7, Ex 6:7; 36:28, Jer 7:23; 31:33, Ezek 14:11, Zech 8:8, etc.

From verses 5 to 31, they provide the fullest summary of the Old Testament found in the Old Testament. It is the Bible's direct commentary on itself from the very beginning until their present day. It starts off with the Levites calling the assembly in verse 5 to "Stand up and bless the Lord your God from everlasting to everlasting." With this opening, the priests are urging the people to look at their difficult circumstances – their barely inhabitable city, the encircling heathen, and their seeming insignificance – as a momentary affliction transcended by the glorious reality of God.

The Levites praise God because in verse 6, he alone deserves glory for all the wonders of creation. God has no rivals and "the host of heaven worships you." From Creation, they go to Abraham's call and God's covenant with him in verses 7 and 8.<sup>2</sup> The promises of God to Abraham and his descendants appear several times in this prayer, which reinforces again the centrality of God's special covenant relationship with his people.

Then, from verses 9 to 21, the Levites offer extended reflection on the Exodus and 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. There are references to the 10 plagues in verse 10, splitting of the Red Sea in verse 11, the 10 Commandments in verse 13, and manna in verse 15. But, then there is a key pivot in verse 16 with the first reference to Israel's sin. The Egyptians, in verse 10, had "acted arrogantly," but it is now, in verse 16, "*our* fathers" who "acted presumptuously." The people are in solidarity with the infamous incidents of insolence of their fathers, such as the faithless spies, rebellion against Moses, and the golden calf mentioned in verses 16 through 18. Yet, the Levites also recall God's character: that he is forgiving, gracious and merciful (alluding to how God announced his name to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7), that he is a fierce protector in verse 19, and a generous provider in verse 21.

The Levites then shift gears in verses 22 to 26 to the story of Joshua and the conquest of Canaan. God's fulfillment of his promise to Abraham is again highlighted in verse 23, as are the people's ungrateful and unruly response in verse 26. The judges, referred to as "saviors" in verse 27, are next, along with the notorious and catastrophic cycles of disobedience, punishment, deliverance, then more disobedience in verse 28. Finally, the Levites speed up events to their present day by referencing, in verse 29, the prophets through whom God warned his people, and then in verse 30, God giving Israel into the "hands of the peoples of the lands," referring to the Babylonian exile. Verses 32 to 37 is the actual petition of the Levites, but I will return to that later.

### III. HOW TO REPENT

This historical overview, woven with episodes of sin and God's grace, not only shows the need for repentance, but also 4 ways on how to repent. First, you **repent through prayer**. Nehemiah 9 is basically a long, corporate prayer. Of course, individual confession is needed, but Church, it is vital for us to gather with each other to repent together. And, do not let your prayer requests just be those that even a non-Christian would make such as: "pray for success for my test tomorrow," or "pray for healing for my sick relative." For sure, pray for these things, but do not neglect personal and corporate confession of sin when you pray together.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf Genesis 11-12, 15:6, 17.

Second, you **repent Scripturally**. The Israelites' confession is prompted, soaked, and directed by God's word. When they prayed, they made God's words their own and repeated them back to him, like a baby imitating his mother. God speaks to us so we know how to speak to him. HCC, confess your sins by using the Bible's own words. The penitential psalms (e.g., 6, 32, 51, and 130) are a great starting place to learn how to repent Scripturally.

Third, Nehemiah 9 teaches that you **repent sincerely**. The prayer starts in verse 1 with the people wearing sackcloth, which symbolized mourning and humility. It ends with them broken and in "great distress" in verse 37. Throughout, there is no glossing over or excusing away the seriousness of their sin. Beloved, we can especially learn from this point. Though you may sin in secret, let it not remain a secret. So, I exhort you, after confessing your sin to God, confess to one another. Yes, there needs to be wisdom in knowing how much to share and with whom, but the point is that you should be telling others about your sin.

I empathize that it can be very scary to do that. None of us wants our dirty laundry aired in front of others. But, the longer you keep sin concealed, the more you deceive yourselves. Slowly, you quench the Spirit's convicting voice, and eventually you normalize living with hidden lies. This is exceedingly dangerous! Avoid this by confessing your sin to God *and others* so that you can breathe the air of honesty and see Christ afresh.

As one pastor writes: "Who *really* knows you? Who has permission to ask you penetrating questions *and* is also acting on that permission? Are you being honest with that person? Are you answering questions evasively or trying to project an image of someone you're not?"<sup>3</sup> Friends, in the spirit of the astronomical event happening tomorrow, do not let sin eclipse God's light and trap you in its shadow. *Step into the light*, and take hold of the freedom of Christ that comes by honest repentance. Even today, pray for a brother or sister with whom you can confess each other's sins, bear one another's burdens, and in doing so, "fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2).

Finally, Nehemiah 9 shows you **repent specifically**. The Levites recount their history with particularity and accuracy. This helped them realize how caring God has been in correcting, restoring and equipping his people. Similarly, when you confess your sin, do not be generic, vague or superficial. Instead of saying, for instance: "Lord, I confess I am impatient; help me when I struggle to be patient," share specific instances of when you were impatient. What caused you to be impatient? Why? Why is it such a struggle to be patient? As you confess in detail, it may unveil deeper layers to your sin that also need to be repented of. For instance, as you confess impatience, the Spirit may reveal to you that an unhealthy desire to be in control fuels your impatience. We see then how Nehemiah 9 teaches us how we repent prayerfully, Scripturally, sincerely, and specifically.

#### IV. WHAT SHOULD DRIVE US TO REPENT

But, the Levites' prayer also teaches what ought to *drive* our repentance, which is the greatness of God. According to our passage, **his greatness motivates us to repent** in two ways. First, we are moved to repent by the greatness of his faithfulness and mercy. Though the people rebel, God shows great faithfulness, such as guiding them with pillars of cloud and fire (v19), and gifting them with physical stamina (v21b) and military success (v22). God

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.crossway.org/articles/how-and-how-not-to-fight-sin>

also demonstrates great mercy by what he does *not* do. He does not forsake his people (v19). He does not refuse his help nor withhold his material provision (v20).

Second, God's greatness compels us to repent when we contrast it against our sin and idolatry. This is what happened with the people as they experienced a heightened sense of personal sin in the presence of so faithful and great a God. The people weep and mourn as they confess their sin because they realize just how appalling was their betrayal against God. They recall how they cast God's law "behind their back" (v26), and turned "a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey" (v29).<sup>4</sup> They also plainly and painfully recall how they forgot God during times of prosperity. In verse 25, they "became fat and delighted themselves in your great goodness." But the next verse starts: "Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you."

Worse, they didn't just forget God, they also attached themselves to false gods (the "golden calf" in verse 18 and "great blasphemies" in verse 26). This is a flagrant violation of the intimate covenant relationship God established with his people. That is why his harshest criticism of Israel likens her to a whore, prostitute, and adulterous wife. Idolatry is thus fittingly compared to infidelity in marriage. You might be tempted to think, "Sin is bad, but not *infidelity-level* bad, right?" or "I know I sin, but never to the extreme of adultery!" Hear the apostle Paul's response: "[L]et anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor 10:12).

I read a very sad blog about a missionary whose husband committed adultery.<sup>5</sup> When he disclosed it to her, she wrote: "I asked all of the questions, sobbed my heart out, and entered a depression so deep I'd forget what time of day it was. I set recurring reminders on my phone to remind me to brush the kids' teeth at the correct times of day, and we relied heavily on rotisserie chickens from Walmart. I was too depressed to cook and clean in the evenings." She continues: "The marital vows had meant nothing to him; the dishes and photos celebrating those vows meant nothing to me. I preferred barren walls to the reminders of what my husband had destroyed. . . I told God that if he indicates that he is not fully repentant through deception or recurring sin, I'll divorce; if God works deep repentance into his heart, I'll reconcile this once. I would not agree to be just one woman in a union of one man and many women – **genuine repentance was an absolute must.**"

Her husband, who was approved by his church and sending agency to be on the frontlines of sharing the gospel with unbelievers, devastated his wife by his adultery. The title of that heartbreaking blog was "Betrayed Missionary Spouse." The wife was courageous to reconcile at all; but, can you imagine if her husband kept on betraying her? What human marriage could survive that? Yet, don't we see in Nehemiah 9 Israel's recurring betrayals? God was fully entitled to divorce his bride Israel because of her spiritual and serial adultery. Yet, as grieved as he was by Israel's habitual infidelity, verse 28 says, "*Many* times you delivered them according to your mercies."

Does this not elevate the greatness of God's compassion, grace and love? Stepping back then, God's greatness drives us to experience our sin more intensely, much to our shame. But, then God's grace toward us despite our wretched sin magnifies his greatness,

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<sup>4</sup> They also contrast God's tenacious loyalty with their own persistent evil and ingratitude (v. 8, 33). Note how Israel did not appreciate God's protection (pillar of fire), did not mind of his wonders (v17), did not obey his law (v26a), did not value his message, and did not listen to his prophets (in fact, they killed them, v 26b).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.alifeoverseas.com/dear-betrayed-missionary-spouse/>

much to our comfort. This cycle – of God’s greatness, our deeper sense of sin, but then more of God’s greatness – enlarges our vision of God.

## V. WHERE REPENTANCE LEADS US

As I mentioned at the outset, we need to expand our vision of God. We **need a bigger vision of his greatness and sufficiency**. Which brings us to our final point: Repentance helps us enlarge our vision of God because it leads us in two directions, down and then up. First, we should face the ground desperately pleading for mercy. But, we should then face the heavens humbly receiving a forgiveness we don’t deserve.

In verses 32 to 37, repentance leads the Levites to make a heartfelt **plea for mercy**. In their petition, they beg God to listen to them like he did to Israel in Egypt. They entreat God to once again have mercy on them like he did on their fathers countless times. “Let not all the hardship seem little to you that has come upon us,” they implore in verse 32. “[W]e are in great distress,” they lament in verse 37. Yet, Israel still clings to God, for they know they worship a great God who is faithful to his covenant promises, even when they are not.

This great vision of their great promise-keeping God **takes away their discouragement**. For some of you, this message is a long overdue wakeup call to take your sin more seriously. But for others, you may be overly discouraged by your sin. The Israelites, when confronted with the fullness of their failure and futility against sin, were crippled to the core and demoralized. Some of you may feel that way too when you take stock of your sin: snapping at your spouse or children in anger, judging others in your heart or not forgiving them, once again giving into sexual immorality, grumbling about work, idolizing personal success or family welfare...the list goes on.

But, note the Israelites did not wallow in self-pity nor were paralyzed with shame, but *clung to God’s mercy*. Take heart, then, beloved, and recall how great God is in his mercy and forgiveness. He will empower you with his grace to fight lingering sin and grow in holiness. Do not beat yourself up or tear yourself down, for God will take what is foolish and weak in the eyes of the world, even your own eyes, and make them into strong, beautiful and effective instruments for his sovereign purposes.

It is good to fall down on God’s mercy when confessing sin. But, repentance also leads us upward to an even more precious place: **inspired worship of God**. In verse 33, the Levites say something astounding: “Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly.” But, can God really be righteous if he did not punish Israel as they deserved? Israel betrayed Almighty God over and over and over again. And though he would have been perfectly just to destroy them, instead, the Levites proclaim in verse 31: “Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.” Beloved, God should have made an end of Israel as justice for their sin, but he did not. And somehow, he is rightly called righteous.

This is so because in great love for his people, **he planned to one day lay the iniquities of Israel, of us all, upon a chosen Lamb who would be slain for our sin.**<sup>6</sup> This he fulfilled centuries later when he sent his Son, Jesus. In a sense, the Father made an end of his Son by having him nailed to the cross. He forsook him as he bore his infinite, righteous

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<sup>6</sup> Cf Isaiah 53:6.

wrath against *our* sin.<sup>7</sup> There is no condemnation for we who are in Christ because Christ was condemned for us.

Treason is the highest crime known to law. At its core, treason is betrayal. Betrayal to one's country, its people, and its leaders. So, treason is a capital offense, which can invoke the death penalty. Imagine you are in the courtroom of heaven with God the Father seated on high as the judge. As the supreme ruler over all creation, rebellion against God is treason of the highest order. James 2:10 says that anyone who fails to keep God's law in just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. As it is *God's* law, the offense is against God himself.<sup>8</sup> Beyond a reasonable doubt then, you are a traitor.

Eternal death in hell must be the punishment for your sin. Anything less would be a mockery of justice. God exemplifies perfect justice, so he will not and cannot let your treason go unpunished. As your sins are read aloud, what can you do but break down because you know the judgment is true, there is no appeal, and punishment is inevitable. Shaking with regret and dread, and in great distress, you cry out, "I'm sorry! I know I'm guilty as charged. Yet, is there anyone who can save me?" You brace yourself, expecting to hear the Judge of all the earth thunder: "I find you, sinner, guilty of treason and hereby sentence you to eternal death in hell."

But, instead, something inexplicable happens. For, God is not just a God of perfect justice, but also perfect love and mercy. You see the Father take off his judicial robes, and speak to Jesus Christ, his beloved Son, who then comes to you, saying "Do you believe I am your Savior? Do you want to be saved?" Stunned but believing, you step aside and let him stand in your place before the judgment seat of God. And, through your sobbing, you hear your awful sentence handed down on Jesus, then, through your tears, you see him taken away to bear the penalty you know should have been yours to pay.

And if this isn't staggering enough, the Father orders the seraphim to remove your handcuffs, and replace your orange jumpsuit with garments of pure white. He then says tenderly, "You were my enemy and a sinner without hope. But now, you are a sinner saved by grace, a new creation. You are my beloved child, covered by the blood of my Son, and because of him, I am well pleased with you."

You shake your head in bewilderment; you cannot fathom what has just happened. But, you catch yourself whispering, "In your great mercy, you did not make an end of me or forsake me, for you are a gracious and merciful God. Lord Jesus, thank you...thank you! What can I ever do to repay you?"

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

Friends, this is the gospel. And it's not a fictional courtroom drama; it is a historical event, the effects of which ripple to this day and, I pray, resonate within your hearts. For any of you who do not yet know the gospel, repent of your sins *today* and trust in Jesus as your Lord and Savior. As we celebrated last Sunday, Christ is risen from the dead and will return to judge all and reign over all. Only if you believe in him, by stepping aside and letting him bear the penalty your sin, will you be saved. Otherwise, it is yours alone to bear.

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<sup>7</sup> Jesus cried on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Matthew 27:46, quoting Psalm 22:1.

<sup>8</sup> Cf Psalm 51:4.

For many of us, I praise God you already embrace this gospel. But, **deepen your marvel of it by confessing your sin daily**. We behold God's greatness – his great love, mercy and righteousness – and his glorious gospel in proportion to how much we grasp the gravity of our sin. The gospel helps us appreciate God's grace not as a license to sin, but liberty from sin; not as insurance from hell, but inspiration for holiness. Though the events of Nehemiah 9 occurred almost 500 years before the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, it points us so vividly to him.

What can you do to repay him? Nothing, for salvation is by grace alone. But, you can respond by obeying his commandments and worshipping him. Yes, repentance causes the weight of sin to bear down on you, but it also anchors you more firmly to God. When the full weight of Christ's love and sacrifice bears down on your heart, you cannot help but be inspired to worship and live for him.

Following Nehemiah 9 then, **worship Jesus**, through whom and for whom "all things were created" (Col 1:16-17). Jesus, whose day Abraham longed to see, saw and was glad (John 8:56). Jesus, who is your exodus from being slaves to sin, who is the end of law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Ro 10:4), and who is the greater Moses, the very Bread of Life from heaven (John 6:35). Jesus, who conquered the grave, to whom the Father will give all kingdoms and peoples. Jesus, who is the true Savior who saves you from the hand of your enemies, sin and death, once and for all. Jesus, who is the Messiah of whom "Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote" (John 1:44). And, Jesus, who rescues you from dark exile imposed by sin and brings you into God's marvelous kingdom of light!

Repentance builds and *rebuilds* our faith to become a stronger and purer people of God. Enlarge your vision of God then through repentance and be continually inspired to worship our great Savior, who loves us with an undying love and mercy as endless as the sea!