

Confessing Their Sins

Nehemiah 9

Assembled Before God: *Nehemiah 9:1*

Desire

With the conclusion of the Feast of Tabernacles the Jews returned to their mourning. They were not controlled by their emotions but deeply affected by their sin before God. In the weeks leading up to this point, their eyes were opened to their spiritual condition. The reading of the law combined with the feasts made a great impression on their hearts. Whenever we consider the LORD our hearts will be impacted (Hebrews 4:12). That's why it's important to read the Bible daily and remain faithful to church services. When we focus on God's Word we will be encouraged to live for Him (Psalm 119:11). The Jews displayed a great desire to seek after God's ways, which was a direct result of hearing the Word of God.

Since the feast was over, the Jews were able to manifest their broken hearts. They fasted, which is common for mourners because it allows one to focus on spiritual matters instead of physical desires. They wore sackcloth to show their humility before God, it was usually a coarse clothing made from the dark hair of a goat or camel. Earth, or dirt, was placed upon their heads as a sign of their seriousness (2 Samuel 13:19). "By these outward expressions of sorrow and humiliation they gave glory to God, took shame to themselves, and stirred up one another to repentance."¹ It's clear the Jews understood the greatness of their sin (Psalm 106:6). Before one desires to seek God's forgiveness they must realize they have offended Him (Psalm 51:4). Only after this occurs, will one look to the LORD for mercy (Psalm 41:4)

Decisions

The first thing the people did was separate from strangers. "Strangers were foreigners who had become mixed with the Jews by commercial interest or by marriage."² Ezra had previously dealt with this problem but apparently some relapsed into sin and others joined them (Ezra 10:11). We know the nobles of Judah aligned with Tobiah because he and his son married Jewish women. It's possible many other situations similar to this existed amongst the Jews. By separating from these prohibited alliances, the Jews were able to seek God's forgiveness (2 Corinthians 6:14-18). It appears their hearts were truly repentant for the sin that overcame them. If one is sorry for sin, they will turn to God and forsake their wicked ways.

With heavy hearts the Jews confessed their sin to the LORD. Confession is the acknowledgement of wrong before God. It is saying, "I am wrong and the LORD is right." On that day, each one addressed their personal sins (Psalm 32:5). This was not a public confession where everyone took a turn before the crowd to share their misconduct; each individual simply settled the matter with

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¹ Matthew Henry, "Matthew Henry's Commentary, Volume 2," (United States: Hendrickson, 1996) p. 848

² John Lange, "Lange's Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Nehemiah," (Michigan: Zondervan, 1951) p.39

God. If there were public sin, it may have been addressed before the congregation but private sin was taken to the LORD in prayer. They also dealt with the sin of the nation and their ancestors. Through the years Israel had neglected God's Word and aligned with the world. The people were sorry for this rebellious and offensive conduct. The seriousness of the matter is seen in the time spent on it. For three hours the Word of God was read then for the next three hours their sins were confessed, another six hour service. The reading of the Word produced conviction, which led to repentance. Never forget the power of God's Word. It is able to challenge the heart in a way that results in a changed life (Hebrews 4:12). When the Word of God is neglected sin will reign but when it is read and applied, sin will be forsaken. Today we don't need new teachings or methods but a new desire for God's Word. Instead of ignoring the Bible or rewriting it to fit our sinful desires we need to read it and accept it as God's Word (Psalm 119). After many years of neglect, the Jews were able to settle their sin with God. This was brought about because they heard His Word.

Adored God: Nehemiah 9:4-38

His Person

The people stood up and praised the LORD, the one and only God. There are none above Him and He knows no equal. What follows is a prayer of worship to the LORD. It begins with praising Him as God and continues by remembering His great works. The LORD was honored as the Creator of all things. Since we are His creation we should seek His presence (Proverbs 8:17). We are also reminded that all things consist because of Him (Colossians 1:17). Without God there is no life. The world has done its best to remove God from its thinking but it is futile, the LORD our creator does exist. The sooner we admit that the better (Psalm 14:1). To the Jews that humbly confessed, the LORD was everything. What is He to you?

God was praised for His grace towards Abraham, whom He called out of idolatry (Joshua 24:2-3). Abraham was led to another land where he was given a new name (Genesis 17:5). He faithfully followed the LORD and became the recipient of a divine covenant that extended to all those that came after Him (Genesis 15:18-21; Romans 4:16). This was an act of grace towards Abraham, who did nothing to deserve the LORD'S blessings. The Jews praised the LORD for His goodness towards sinful Abraham. Likewise, salvation is a gift of God's grace (Ephesians 2:8-9). Nothing can be done to earn salvation; we have it because God lovingly sent His Son to make atonement for sin (John 3:16).

*"Christ doth not call us
because we are holy, but that
we may be holy."
Thomas Manton*

His Power

Next, the LORD was praised for His great works concerning the Jewish captivity in Egypt. In a foreign country they lived in bondage, slavery, with no hope of being set free. This did not escape the LORD'S attention. He intervened, calling Moses to lead them out of Egypt. In the process His great power was displayed, first with the ten plagues then with the parting of the sea. Afterwards the LORD continued to provide direction. His guidance came from a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. He generously gave the people His law so they would know how to live correctly, which was a blessing no other nation has received (Deuteronomy 4:8). The LORD even established the Sabbath, a day of rest given to the Jewish people, a privilege that distinguished them from the rest of the world. Concerning

their physical needs, the LORD met them all. Both food and water were provided while they continued towards their land. Once again none of this was earned or deserved, the LORD was kind to them because He is a good God (Psalm 25:8, 34:8).

One would think all these blessings would produce a faithful life, but that was not the case. Out of pride, the Jews refused to submit to the LORD (Proverbs 21:4). Instead of worshiping Him alone they set up a golden calf, similar to the Apis or ox worshiped in Egypt.³ They ignored the LORD'S wonders and ways, because of this they spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness. The LORD never forsook them but sustained the Jews by providing their needs, including food, water, and clothing (Exodus 16:3-4, 17:6; Numbers 20:8,11). He even continued to offer His instruction proving to be full of grace and mercy (Exodus 34:6-7). One thing is certain, the LORD is willing to forgive and pardon sinners. Yes He is a powerful God, but also a God of forgiveness who will show mercy to those that seek Him (Psalm 86:5).

His Patience

The Jews were again blessed; they entered the land of promise and were given power to overcome kingdoms, with 31 kings being conquered (Joshua 12:9-24). The land was quickly filled as their numbers multiplied. It was a time of great prosperity, they controlled strong cities, lived in a flourishing land, possessed houses full of goods, had plenty of water, and an abundance of fields with fruit trees. It was far better than what they experienced in Egypt. Eventually they became ungrateful and ignored the LORD'S commands. His law was cast behind their backs, treated as if it meant nothing at all, while His prophets were slain. These faithful men were killed because the nations against sins and challenged them to turn to God (Hebrews 11:36-38). Instead of seeking the LORD that greatly blessed, they accepted and worshiped false gods, such as Baalim and Ashtaroth (1 Samuel 12:10; 1 Kings 18:18; 2 Chronicles 33:3). They were delivered into bondage where they remained for 70 years. Once again we are reminded of the LORD'S patience and goodness. Yes they were in captivity but the LORD did not destroy them or forsake them, which would have led to their destruction. He waited for them to seek Him out (Numbers 14:18).

*"If God hath loved me once,
then He will love me forever."
Charles H. Spurgeon*

This chapter comes to an end with the Jews of Nehemiah's time pleading with the LORD for mercy. Jerusalem's wall was rebuilt but the city remained in ruins, while the people lived in poverty surrounded by hostile neighbors. They were free but continued under the authority of the Persian Empire. The people understood it was a result of their sinful conduct. No excuses were given instead they accepted God's judgment. It was agreed, His actions were correct (Psalm 19:8). Here we have an example of true repentance. They were sorry for sin and hoped God would be merciful. No demands were made and the people had not expectations. The only request found in this prayer is for God to recognize their trouble as being serious. These humble sinners did not tell God what to do they simply asked Him to consider them and their hardship. Understanding the dangers of sin, the people were willing to make a covenant with the LORD. They were prepared to live right before Him. This was the result of reading the Word and confessing of sin. From man's point of view, every covenant with God begins with confession (Psalm 32:5). If we hope to be blessed we must separate from sin. If there is sin in our lives, we must confess it to God who is willing to forgive and bless (1 John 1:8-9).

³ John Gill, "Gill's Commentary on the Bible: Nehemiah," (Bible Truth Forum: E-book, 2005) p.67

Questions for Consideration

Why did the people mourn?

How did they display their grief?

Why was it important for them to separate from strangers, the world?

Whose sins did they confess?

How did the LORD show grace to Abraham?

How was the LORD'S power displayed in Egypt?

How was the LORD patient with the Israelites?

What were the results of their rebellion against the LORD?

Did the LORD ever forsake the Jews?

What was the request of the Jews in Nehemiah's time?

Points to Ponder

How should you view separation?

It's not shunning unbelievers, they are welcome at church and with God. It encourages believers to do what is right; you need to separate from the world so you can serve the LORD. Separation is not popular today, but it never has been.

Why is confession important?

Confession accepts the blame for sin instead of excusing it. With confession pride is removed as you humbly seek the LORD'S forgiveness. This leads to a correct relationship with God where you can be blessed.

How is God's Word powerful?

Reading the word produces conviction because the more you know the more your eyes will be opened to sin. Sometimes you may read the word and think you're becoming more sinful, but in reality you're becoming more holy. Sin is more obvious when you read God's Word.

Is God's Word important for repentance?

Yes, repentance without the Word leads to religion, man made teachings; while the Word without repentance leads to hypocrisy, correct teachings but sinful conduct. God's Word and repentance are required for true confession of sin.

Is it worse to have less?

As far as physical blessings, the Jews in Nehemiah's time were worse off than their ancestors. But they were better off because they worked for the LORD, read His Word, and looked for His mercy. It is always better to be right with God than to possess earthly blessings.