

BEN WASHINGTON BAPTIST CHURCH

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Wednesday Noon Bible Study

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The Book of Nehemiah – Chapter 9

CHAPTER 9

Israel Confesses Their Sin
A repentant nation gathers.

(Nehemiah 9:1) An assembly of humble repentance.

Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads.

After the wall was completed, after the wall was working, after the people had heard and obeyed God's Word, after the Holy Spirit was doing a significant work in the lives of people — now there is a scene of dramatic, humble repentance.

Assembled with fasting: Fasting showed their lowly, humble state. They considered themselves so poor before God that they had no food. They also wanted to say, "we are so troubled by our sin, food seems unimportant."

In sackcloth: This was wearing rough fabric, like a burlap bag. Again, this was to show their complete poverty of spirit before God. They also wanted to say, "we are so troubled by our sin, the normal comforts of life are unimportant."

With dust on their heads: This meant they took little handfuls of dirt and cast them on their heads. This was also to show their lowly state before God, and to say "we are so troubled by our sin, the normal comforts of life are unimportant."

- All of this reflects a humble attitude of heart — humble not only towards God, but also humble towards man. They did this publicly, and others would see them in this public state.

(Nehemiah 9:2) An assembly to separate themselves.

Then those of Israelite lineage separated themselves from all foreigners; and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.

Those who were of the pure line of Israel came forth to confess the sin of their nation; they confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.

Confessed their sins: This was important. They had to realize and admit their missing of God's mark.

- How do we sin? The English word sin comes from the idea "to miss the mark." A sin might miss the target by an inch, or it might miss it by ten feet — but it was still a sin either way. We sin when we do what God has told us not to do (telling us either in His Word, in our conscience, or through legitimate authority), or when we do not do what God has told to do (telling us in Word, conscience, or authority). Not all sin is the same, but all sin is sin.

And the iniquities of their fathers: This was also important, because they had to admit that not only they were sinners, but they came from **sinful ancestors**. This was especially important in Israel, where there was a tradition of glorifying their forefathers.

This does not mean there was some type of “**generational curse**” that had to be broken. God does not punish the children for their father’s sin, and it is evil to say He does (Ezekiel 18). We do recognize that those raised in an environment of sin may very well repeat those same sins, but not because they must — but because their environment made it an easy choice to make.

It should not seem strange that after such great victories, both with building and spiritually, there was such humble repentance. This shows that repentance isn’t something we finish after coming to Jesus. It is something that grows as we grow closer to Jesus.

(Nehemiah 9:3) An assembly to hear God’s Word and to worship Him.

And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for one-fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God.

The humble repentance and confession of sin would have been an incomplete work if it were not for hearing the Word and worship. God does not show us our sin just so we will humbly confess it, but so that we can walk on in what is right before Him.

This brokenness of heart has led them to humbly come before God and hear His Word. A sure first step of revival is this brokenness of heart.

The prayer of repentance.

(Nehemiah 9:4-5a) Those leading the congregation.

Then Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, and Chenani stood on the stairs of the Levites and cried out with a loud voice to the LORD their God. And the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabniah, Sherebiah, Hodijah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah, said:

This mentions those Levites and leaders gathered to lead the people in their humble confession. It shouldn’t surprise us, or make us feel like failures, if we must be led into confession and repentance. Obviously, all eight of these men did not pray the following prayer at the same time. Perhaps it was written out and they took turns, perhaps it was spontaneously prayed in succession, or perhaps (and according to tradition), Ezra prayed this prayer.

- The following prayer is thought to be the longest prayer in the Bible — and yet takes only six and one-half minutes to say. Prayer does not need to be long to be glorious and effective.

(Nehemiah 9:5b-6) Praise to the God of all creation.

*“Stand up and bless the LORD your God
Forever and ever!
Blessed be Your glorious name,
Which is exalted above all blessing and praise!
You alone are the LORD;
You have made heaven,
The heaven of heavens, with all their host,
The earth and everything on it,
The seas and all that is in them,
And You preserve them all.*

The host of heaven worships You.

After the encouragement to praise, Ezra gave a reason to praise — because this is the great God who made it all. Looking at the glory of God's creation gives us a reason to praise Him, to humble ourselves before Him, and to trust Him. God wants us to praise Him, to humble ourselves before Him, and to trust Him — but He gives us good reason to. We sometimes want our own reasons, but God gives us plenty of His own reasons.

(Nehemiah 9:7-8) Praise to the God who chose Abraham and made a covenant with him and his descendants.

*"You are the LORD God,
Who chose Abram,
And brought him out of 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 Canaanites,
The Hittites, the Amorites,
The Perizzites, the Jebusites,
And the Girgashites—
To give it to his descendants.
You have performed Your words,
For You are righteous.*

This says to God, "Lord, You promised this land to Abraham and his descendants, and now here we are! Your promise is indeed true."

(Nehemiah 9:9-15) Praise to the God who delivered Israel from Egypt and provided for them in the wilderness.

*"You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt,
And heard their cry by the Red Sea.
You showed signs and wonders against Pharaoh,
Against all his servants,
And against all the people of his land.
For You knew that they acted proudly against them.
So You made a name for Yourself, as it is this day.
And You divided the sea before them,
So that they went through the midst of the sea on the dry land;
And their persecutors You threw into the deep,
As a stone into the mighty waters.
Moreover You led them by day with a cloudy pillar,
And by night with a pillar of fire,
To give them light on the road
Which they should travel.*

*"You came down also on Mount Sinai,
And spoke with them from heaven,
And gave them just ordinances and true laws,
Good statutes and commandments.
You made known to them Your holy Sabbath,*

*And commanded them precepts, statutes and laws,
By the hand of Moses Your servant.
You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger,
And brought them water out of the rock for their thirst,
And told them to go in to possess the land
Which You had sworn to give them.*

A second sure sign of revival (following brokenness of heart) is reflection on the goodness of God. When our pride is cast down, and our hearts humble before God, we can begin to see Him for who He is — and when we see that, we see how good God is.

(Nehemiah 9:16-17a) The sinful response of man to God's goodness.

*"But they and our fathers acted proudly,
Hardened their necks,
And did not heed Your commandments.
They refused to obey,
And they were not mindful of Your wonders
That You did among them.
But they hardened their necks,
And in their rebellion
They appointed a leader
To return to their bondage.*

This was a terrible response to the great and good works of God on behalf of Israel. God had been so good to Israel, but they and our fathers acted proudly. Our sin is bad enough; but to consider we sin against a God who has only treated us well is far, far, worse.

Hardened their necks... refused to obey... were not mindful: This is a third sure sign of revival — recognition of our own sinfulness. When we humbly seek God, and see His goodness, we can't help but next to notice our own sinfulness — the blackness of our sin stands out against the brightness of God's purity and goodness.

(Nehemiah 9:17b-21) God's gracious reply to rebellious Israel.

*But You are God,
Ready to pardon,
Gracious and merciful,
Slow to anger,
Abundant in kindness,
And did not forsake them.*

*"Even when they made a molded calf for themselves,
And said, 'This is your god
That brought you up out of Egypt,'
And worked great provocations,
Yet in Your manifold mercies
You did not forsake them in the wilderness.
The pillar of the cloud did not depart from them by day,
To lead them on the road;
Nor the pillar of fire by night,
To show them light,*

*And the way they should go.
You also gave Your good Spirit to instruct them,
And did not withhold Your manna from their mouth,
And gave them water for their thirst.
Forty years You sustained them in the wilderness,
They lacked nothing;
Their clothes did not wear out
And their feet did not swell.*

God's gracious answer to the rebellion of Israel was glorious. Ready to pardon is especially wonderful, indicating that there is nothing keeping God from pardoning us except our refusal to come to Him through Jesus. He is ready to pardon, if we are ready to receive it.

Even when they made a molded calf for themselves: This was God's gracious response to Israel — even after they made the golden calf and worshipped it, He still did not forsake them. He still provided the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, He still guided them by His spirit, He still fed them and gave them water. Together it all shows not how special Israel was, but how special God is.

We are often impressed at how patient God is with the sinner; how He somehow holds back His terrible judgment against those people who deserve it so badly. Yet it seems that His patience toward us is even greater, those who have received so much more from Him, but still act like Israel did.

(Nehemiah 9:22-31) The cycle of Israel's relationship with God.

*"Moreover You gave them kingdoms and nations,
And divided them into districts.
So they took possession of the land of Sihon,
The land of the king of Heshbon,
And the land of Og king of Bashan.
You also multiplied their children as the stars of heaven,
And brought them into the land
Which You had told their fathers
To go in and possess.
So the people went in
And possessed the land;
You subdued before them the inhabitants of the land,
The Canaanites,
And gave them into their hands,
With their kings
And the people of the land,
That they might do with them as they wished.
And they took strong cities and a rich land,
And possessed houses full of all goods,
Cisterns already dug, vineyards, olive groves,
And fruit trees in abundance.
So they ate and were filled and grew fat,
And delighted themselves in Your great goodness.*

*"Nevertheless they were disobedient
And rebelled against You,
Cast Your law behind their backs
And killed Your prophets, who testified against them*

*To turn them to Yourself;
And they worked great provocations.
Therefore You delivered them into the hand of their enemies,
Who oppressed them;
And in the time of their trouble,
When they cried to You,
You heard from heaven;
And according to Your abundant mercies
You gave them deliverers who saved them
From the hand of their enemies.*

*“But after they had rest,
They again did evil before You.
Therefore You left them in the hand of their enemies,
So that they had dominion over them;
Yet when they returned and cried out to You,
You heard from heaven;
And many times You delivered them according to Your mercies,
And testified against them,
That You might bring them back to Your law.
Yet they acted proudly,
And did not heed Your commandments,
But sinned against Your judgments,
‘Which if a man does, he shall live by them.’
And they shrugged their shoulders,
Stiffened their necks,
And would not hear.
Yet for many years You had patience with them,
And testified against them by Your Spirit in Your prophets.
Yet they would not listen;
Therefore You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands.
Nevertheless in Your great mercy
You did not utterly consume them nor forsake them;
For You are God, gracious and merciful.*

The cycle began with God showing His goodness to His people (You gave them kingdoms and nations) and with God's people being blessed. Then, in the time of comfort and abundance, God's people turn from Him. Then, God brings correction — a “wake-up call” to His people. You heard from heaven... You gave them deliverers: As a result, God's people then turn back to Him.

Then, blessed and satisfied, God's people again turn from Him, and the cycle continues. As the cycle continues, the motions of each cycle get deeper and deeper — but God doesn't change.

- We sometimes feel as if God has gotten tired of us; that we can't ask him to forgive us for something He has forgiven us for so many times before. But God never gets tired of us, and never turns away the repentant heart.

(Nehemiah 9:32-37) A plea to God for intervention.

*“Now therefore, our God,
The great, the mighty, and awesome God,
Who keeps covenant and mercy:
Do not let all the trouble seem small before You*

*That has come upon us,
Our kings and our princes,
Our priests and our prophets,
Our fathers and on all Your people,
From the days of the kings of Assyria until this day.
However You are just in all that has befallen us;
For You have dealt faithfully,
But we have done wickedly.
Neither our kings nor our princes,
Our priests nor our fathers,
Have kept Your law,
Nor heeded Your commandments and Your testimonies,
With which You testified against them.
For they have not served You in their kingdom,
Or in the many good things that You gave them,
Or in the large and rich land which You set before them;
Nor did they turn from their wicked works.*

*“Here we are, servants today!
And the land that You gave to our fathers,
To eat its fruit and its bounty,
Here we are, servants in it!
And it yields much increase to the kings
You have set over us,
Because of our sins;
Also they have dominion over our bodies and our cattle
At their pleasure;
And we are in great distress.*

Because of who God is, and because of who they are (rebellious and wicked), they needed God to do the work of saving them from their enemies.

- Israel, at this time, was not an independent nation — they were a province of the Empire of Persia and were under heavy Persian taxes and obligations. They ask God to deliver them once again from this oppression!

You are just in all that has befallen us: This gives a good description of what real confession is all about. It recognizes that God is right and we are wrong (but we have done wickedly). Confession is agreeing with God about both things.

(Nehemiah 9:38) Conclusion: a point of decision.

*And because of all this,
We make a sure covenant, and write it;
Our leaders, our Levites, and our priests seal it.*

Israel needed to come to this place, where knowing who God is, and knowing who they are, they come and make a covenant with God — even writing it down — to commit themselves to His ways.

The fourth sure sign of revival — after brokenness of heart, after reflection on God’s goodness, after recognition of our sinfulness, is a renewal of our obedience. We come to a place of decision, so this work of God is not just a wonderful experience, but something that shapes our future.