

Nehemiah: Building a City Within the City, week 14
Prayer and Repentance (Nehemiah 9:1–37)

Father's Day, June 17, 2007
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... they made confession and worshiped the LORD their God.
— Nehemiah 9:3

In this week's Father's Day sermon, we will not be deviating from the natural flow of the book of Nehemiah. Thankfully, in God's good providence, we find ourselves at the point of that great urban revival where God's people respond to God's word with prayer and repentance. Curiously, their repentance includes both turning from their own sins and the sins of their fathers. God's people are demonstrating for us two invaluable truths that are almost altogether neglected in our current culture. First, we are not merely individuals but also members of families that have shaped us for better and worse. Second, rather than denying the sin in our families or using that sin as an excuse for our own sin, God in His kindness welcomes us to repent of personal and familial sin. In light of this great section of Scripture, we all, especially fathers, will learn of the twin gifts of prayer and repentance, which enable the transformation of individuals, families, churches, and entire cities. While reading this prayer, notice that the words "you" (in reference to God) and "they" (in reference to sinful people) indicate the flow of the prayer as it is centered on the goodness of God and the wickedness of people.

The People of Israel Confess Their Sin

¹Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads. ²And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. ³And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day; for another quarter of it they made confession and worshiped the LORD their God. ⁴On the stairs of the Levites stood Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, and Chenani; and they cried with a loud voice to the LORD their God. ⁵Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah, said, "Stand up and bless the LORD your God from everlasting to everlasting. Blessed be your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise.

⁶"You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you. ⁷You are the LORD, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham. ⁸You found his heart faithful before you, and made with him the covenant to give to his offspring the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite. And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous.

⁹"And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea, ¹⁰and performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants and all the people of his land, for you knew that they acted arrogantly against our fathers. And you made a name for yourself, as it is to this day. ¹¹And

you divided the sea before them, so that *they* went through the midst of the sea on dry land, and *you* cast their pursuers into the depths, as a stone into mighty waters. ¹²By a pillar of cloud *you* led them in the day, and by a pillar of fire in the night to light for them the way in which *they* should go. ¹³*You* came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments, ¹⁴and *you* made known to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses your servant. ¹⁵*You* gave them bread from heaven for their hunger and brought water for them out of the rock for their thirst, and *you* told them to go in to possess the land that you had sworn to give them.

¹⁶“But *they* and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments. ¹⁷*They* refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them, but *they* stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. But *you* are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them. ¹⁸Even when *they* had made for themselves a golden calf and said, ‘This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt,’ and had committed great blasphemies, ¹⁹*you* in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness. The pillar of cloud to lead them in the way did not depart from them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night to light for them the way by which *they* should go. ²⁰*You* gave your good Spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst. ²¹Forty years *you* sustained them in the wilderness, and they lacked nothing. Their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell.

²²“And *you* gave them kingdoms and peoples and allotted to them every corner. So *they* took possession of the land of Sihon king of Heshbon and the land of Og king of Bashan. ²³*You* multiplied their children as the stars of heaven, and *you* brought them into the land that *you* had told their fathers to enter and possess. ²⁴So the descendants went in and possessed the land, and *you* subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gave them into their hand, with their kings and the peoples of the land, that *they* might do with them as *they* would. ²⁵And *they* captured fortified cities and a rich land, and took possession of houses full of all good things, cisterns already hewn, vineyards, olive orchards and fruit trees in abundance. So *they* ate and were filled and became fat and delighted themselves in your great goodness.

²⁶“Nevertheless, *they* were disobedient and rebelled against *you* and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to *you*, and *they* committed great blasphemies. ²⁷Therefore *you* gave them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer. And in the time of their suffering *they* cried out to *you* and *you* heard them from heaven, and according to your great mercies *you* gave them saviors who saved them from the hand of their enemies. ²⁸But after *they* had rest *they* did evil again before *you*, and *you* abandoned them to the hand of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them. Yet when *they* turned and cried to *you*, *you* heard from heaven, and many times *you* delivered them according to your mercies. ²⁹And *you* warned them in order to turn them back to your law. Yet *they* acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your rules, which if a person does them, he shall live by them, and turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey. ³⁰Many years *you* bore

with them and warned them by your Spirit through your prophets. Yet **they** would not give ear. Therefore **you** gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands.

³¹Nevertheless, in your great mercies **you** did not make an end of them or forsake them, for **you** are a gracious and merciful God.

³²“Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love, let not all the hardship seem little to **you** that has come upon us, upon our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and all your people, since the time of the kings of Assyria until this day.

³³Yet **you** have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for **you** have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly. ³⁴Our kings, our princes, our priests, and our fathers have not kept your law or paid attention to your commandments and your warnings that **you** gave them. ³⁵Even in their own kingdom, enjoying your great goodness that **you** gave them, and in the large and rich land that **you** set before them, **they** did not serve **you** or turn from their wicked works. ³⁶Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that **you** gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves. ³⁷And its rich yield goes to the kings whom **you** have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress.

Principle #1 – Prayer must be radically biblical.

This prayer was preceded by a sermon that lasted upwards of six hours from Ezra, followed up by Bible training for the men, and then concluded with Bible studies that lasted upwards of three hours. As a result of reading Scripture, God’s people are compelled to pray. These twin disciplines of Scripture and prayer are how God speaks to us and how we speak to God. As a result, anyone struggling with prayer must first examine their life to see if they are regularly in Scripture because such time is used by God the Spirit to compel His people to biblically informed, heartfelt prayer. The prayer listed above, which many consider to be the longest in the Old Testament, is in many ways a summary events from creation to Abraham and Moses in the first five books of the Old Testament (Pentateuch) that they had been studying for many days.

Principle #2 – Prayer must be radically God-centered.

Throughout this prayer, who God is remains in constant sharp focus. The prayer itself quotes Exodus 34:5–7, where God Himself declares who He is, and those verses are so important that they are referenced more than any other section of Scripture throughout Scripture. In referencing those verses amidst their prayer, we are safe to infer that they committed it to memory and that is something wise for us to do as well.

Furthermore, the prayer is radically committed to declaring who God is so that He is glorified and we are humbled. In this prayer we learn that there is only one God and that God is our creator, sustainer, savior, covenant-maker, faithful, righteous, miraculous, glorious, powerful, judge, provider, leader, law-giver, provider, gracious, forgiving, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, enduring, teacher, conqueror, child-giver, enemy-crusher, home-maker, business-blessor, food-giver, chastiser, prayer-hearer, savior-sender, prayer-answerer, sin-forgiver, prophet-sender, great, mighty, awesome, righteous, and altogether perfect in all He does.

Principle #3 – Prayer must be radically honest about human sin.

In this prayer the people and their forefathers are consistently referred to in specific sinful terms such as presumptuous, stiff-necked, forgetful, ungrateful, idolatrous, blasphemous, needy, incapable, fat, lazy, disobedient, rebellious, law-breaking, prophet-murdering, evil, disobedient, stubborn, wicked, sinful, and distressed.

Principle #4 – Prayer must be radically repentant.

This prayer, in the end, is a prayer of repentance. As a prayer of repentance, it is NOT:

Mere Confession – Had God’s people only confessed their sins without truly repenting, they would have agreed that they were guilty of evil but would never have lived lives of repentant transformation.

Worldly Sorrow – In 2 Corinthians 7:10 we are told that “worldly grief produces death.” This is because worldly sorrow makes us feel bad for sin, but does not help us understand that Jesus died for sin as our “man of sorrows” (Isaiah 53:3) so that we can move from sorrow to salvation, forgiveness, new life, and joy marked by His salvation and not just our sin.

Self-Righteous – Proud and self-righteous repentance is when we confess the sins of other people all the while neglecting our own depravity. Perhaps the most legendary example of this is spoken of by Jesus in Luke 18:9–14.

Religious Repentance – Religious repentance simply has no functional understanding of the good news (gospel) of the person and work of Jesus. As a result, religious repentance is prone to be motivated by such things as keeping God happy, getting God to bless me, and feeling sorry for getting caught in sin or sorry for the consequences of sin, but not the sin itself as against God and so severe that Jesus had to die for it. Furthermore, religious repentance seeks to in some way pay God back by feeling really bad and wallowing in shame, guilt, and condemnation; the gospel, on the other hand, is about Jesus taking away our shame, guilt, and condemnation so that we are no longer under such things (e.g., Hebrews 12:1–2; Romans 8:1). Through the gospel we receive forgiveness, but in religious repentance we grossly seek to earn it by somehow punishing ourselves, often by denying ourselves the pleasure of gifts from God. This is because religious repentance falsely believes that if we do not punish ourselves for our sin then God will be angry and punish us. Yet the gospel tells us that Jesus was already punished in our place for our sin and that because God is just He will not punish us too, because the demands of justice have been met. Lastly, religious repentance is rare because religious people find their righteousness in their good works, not the cross of Jesus. As a result, religious repentance is very proud whereas the gospel brings humility by telling us that we truly are sinners, and joy by telling us that Jesus loves us and died to forgive our sins and take them away.

In closing, repentance is made possible only because of Jesus Christ.

Repentance should be the continual practice of the Christian as there can be no forward progress in the Christian life without ongoing, sincere repentance. This

point is perhaps most poignantly illustrated in a story from church history. Martin Luther opened the Reformation by nailing *The Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral. The very first sentence of his list said, "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ . . . willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."

Therefore, prayerful repentance is among the greatest gifts given to us because of Jesus' work on the cross for our sins. In it we will find our humility, joy, forgiveness, hope, redemption, perspective, identity, and future. Through it we will see the transformation of our lives, friendships, marriages, children, churches, cities, nations, and future offspring. Subsequently, it is wise for us to not only repent of sin when God the Spirit forgives us, humbly asking God and others we have sinned against for forgiveness so as to keep short accounts, but also set aside specific, regular times for inventory of our sin and subsequent repentance, such as was modeled by the great revival preacher George Whitefield who spent time each evening in repentance of sin.