

The People and Prayer Nehemiah 9:1-38

Have you ever entered a teenager's room and wondered, "How on earth could you accumulate so much garbage – or dirty laundry – in one room?"

Or have you ever looked at the dishes of four college guys, & asked a similar question about accumulation? "How is this even possible? How will you deal w/these?"

Accumulation can be a surprising and sad thing to observe.

But have you ever stopped to consider the accumulation *of your sins*?

- How do you deal with all of that? How do you deal with that guilt?
- Your only hope is **the mercy of God**.
- We are thankful today that "**There's more mercy in Christ than sin in us.**"
- **Psalm 130:3-4** – "If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared."

If you are a sinner(!), then this passage has tremendous significance for you.

If you feel burned out, like a tired failure, like you're distant from God, then allow this passage to minister to you.

In **Nehemiah 9**, three and a half weeks after the revival at the Water Gate, having completed about three weeks of festival activity (which was a time of joy), the people resume their previous posture of sorrow over their sin (8:9).

They have unfinished business to attend to, business with God.

- They begin to recount the history of their nation, and the many grievous ways they have offended God, and how God has responded, and they do all of this because of its significance for their present situation.
- Not because the calendar dictated it, but because they had business to do with God.
- They are in need of mercy. They seek God in prayerful repentance.

Ch. 8 shows one mark of revival: Re-establishing the authority of Scripture in our lives.

Ch. 9 shows another mark of revival: Acknowledging sin and seeking God in genuine confession and heartfelt repentance.

This is the **fullest summary of the OT anywhere in the OT!**

Verse 37: I want you to see where this is all headed: "**We are in great distress.**"

Here's the question: **Where do you (or the person you're counseling/discipling) turn when in times of sin and distress – especially when you are in distress due to one's own sin not the sin of another?** **You** made the mess. How do you deal with it?

- Is there any hope for you?
- Here's the answer: **Yes**. There's good news for distressed people.
- If you have made a mess of things, than you are not outside the good news of the gospel!

My main point:

In times of sin and distress, we can experience God's merciful restoration as we prayerfully/repentantly reflect on the storyline of Scripture.

The storyline of Scripture gives you hope!

- We find that our righteous God is also merciful.
- And there's a rhythm of "rebellion" and "response" or "rebellion" and "mercy" within this rehearsing of the OT.

Now, we need to add a paragraph or two to Nehemiah's storyline!

- Something crucial will be lacking if we just pray this prayer without extending it to the New Covenant!
- For we know more than these people knew. We have more resources than they had.
- We know where the story is headed, and how our distress will be dealt with finally and fully, in the person of Jesus Christ; we have the power of the indwelling Spirit to fight sin, and we know the end of the story, where sin will be no more! But we get ahead of ourselves.

They are praying the Bible, particularly the storyline of the Bible.

This passage is so valuable for (1) **counseling**, (2) **disciple-making**, (3) **parenting**, and (4) **our own personal lives**.

- If you want a good study on genuine confession and repentance, then this is a great study. We need it, for after all, we can make no progress, and the people we are ministering to can make **no progress apart from repentance**.
- "Has there been real brokenness?" "Are they just saying the right things?" Is this genuine confession?" Is this "worldly sorrow or godly grief leading to repentance?"

Let's consider it in three parts:

- (1) Pursuing God in Heartfelt Confession and Adoration
- (2) Praying in View of the Storyline of Scripture
- (3) Pleading for Restoration

#1: Pursuing God in Heartfelt Confession and Adoration (9:1-5)

Verses 1-5 set the scene and tone for the great confession that will take place.

We see themes of personal introspection and God-centered adoration introduced.

- Israelites (v. 1)
- Levites (v. 4)
- More Levites (v. 5)

V. 1: Their outer appearance reflected the condition of their heart. **This is serious and emotional.**

- **Fasting** – they are hungry.
- **Sackcloth** – irritation, they want the guilt off of them.
- **Dirt** on the head – low depth of sorrow.

These outward actions reflect their passion and need.

Matt 11: Jesus speaks of repenting in dust and ashes.

I raise all of this not to suggest we show up like this, but for you to see that the prayer we are about to read is **not dispassionate and cold and perfunctory.**

They are broken over sin.

- They were in of **sorrow over sin.** This is where restoration begins.
- **Matthew 5:4:** “Blessed are those who **mourn**, for they shall be comforted”

Confession and repentance is **not something we do at a confession booth.** It’s engaged. **It’s not like paying taxes! “Oh we need to do it, so do it and be done with it.”**

We confess our sin to **God.**

When we take confession and repentance lightly, then it shows we don’t take our sin seriously and we don’t take the One whom we have offended seriously.

V. 2: The people want to confess sin as the people of Israel. They will confess their sins and the sins of their fathers. (There were probably foreigners, newly joined worshipers, who themselves to the Lord but weren’t pure descendants, and therefore didn’t take responsibility for those sins).

V. 3: **The Word of God exposes sin and leads to confession.**

Apart from the Word, we don’t know of our sin – at least in specificity and in gravity – but with the Word, we are cut to the heart, and driven to Christ. This is grace.

They are taking care of **unfinished business with God.** Do you need to do that? Perhaps you have been convicted about something but haven’t confessed and repented and sought to make things right – **go before the Lord and make things right.**

4-5: The Word also leads to **adoration.**

The Levites now “worship” God (3b) with a “loud voice.” (4).

- **They focus their attention upon God** because it is Him whom they seek for restoration.
- **Who you pray to matters – In today’s crazy world, all kinds of books are written about prayer and meditation, but people are dialing the wrong number!**
- **If you were praying and people were listening what would people learn about God?**
- They worship God for his everlasting nature, and exalt him above all.
- **It’s important in our prayer life that we include adoration.**
- **Adore him for all that He is.**

There can be no holiness without a God-centered, Christ-adoring heart.

#2: Praying in View of the Storyline of Scripture (9:6-31)

They view God and themselves in light of Scripture.

They acknowledge how they have rebelled against God, and they acknowledge who God is and what He has done.

Notice the Main Subjects of the prayer:

- **We, They, Us, -- Personal**
- **You, Your, Yours – God – These pronouns are used **some 85 times!****
 - **That's what confession and repentance is about – *God!***
 - **What breaks the heart of the child of God is that we have **offended God.****

The journey of reflecting on the storyline of Scripture begins with creation....

1. Creation (6)

6a: Nehemiah begins with the **uniqueness of God: You alone are God!**

- That's very important for understanding the creation account in Genesis.
- The author is going to great pains to tell us that there's not a god over this and that, but only one God over all things.
- **The uniqueness of God has always come under attack, and it still is today in this pluralistic, superstitious world in which we live.**

6b: **This is a summary of Genesis 1-2.** God made everything! As a result, he deserves praise! And even from the host of heaven!

- **What a time of year to get out and enjoy this creation, and join with creation in praising our creator.**
- But not just in big majestic things like mountains and sunrises, but even as we observe God's world in little ways: **Kids, when your tooth falls out, another one grows back! That's remarkable! That should make you praise and thank God. He created everything.**

2. Covenant with Abraham (7-8)

7a: This is **Genesis 11-12.**

7b: This is **Genesis 17.**

8a: "You found his heart faithful" - This is actually **Genesis 15:6.** Following God's choice of Abraham, Abraham believed, and lived a life of obedience (though not perfect).

The arrangement is theological, not chronological: election (11-12), name change (17), faithfulness (15).

8b: They continue in Genesis 15 with the covenant. So we move from Abraham being made righteous to God's covenant with him.

8c: **God keeps his promise. This is a major emphasis in this prayer.**

8c: Righteousness: **This is one of the most important word in this chapter. Underneath all of God's ways is his righteousness.**

- What does it mean to be righteous? "**Girls are righteous**" (inner-city kid to Shane).

- At a basic level, it means doing what is right. **God always does what is right. He is perfectly just. He always acts consistently with his character. Keep his righteousness in mind as we continue because there's a tension revealed in that God is both merciful and righteous...**

3. Exodus/Wilderness Wandering (9:9-15)

9a: A beautiful word about **God seeing the affliction** of his people (Ex 2:24)

9b: He **heard their cry** at the red sea

10: In between came the 10 plagues

10b: God made a name for himself – the reoccurring theme in the plagues narrative.

Why is all this important? Again, because they are in present **distress**. God had responded previously to Israel's affliction, and now they will ask him to do it again.

11: Reflection on the Red Sea.

12: Reflection on God's miraculous leading of them.

13: Sinai (Exodus 19-20). **What a gift to have the law of God!**

14: God gave them a **good gift in the Sabbath**. The Levites highlight this law, as another profound expression of God's kindness in giving the people rest.

15: **God's provision in the wilderness. God cared for them all the way to the Promised Land, showing divine love and hospitality.**

- Perhaps you say, well, he never dropped bagels from the sky for me? Neither did he for Israel throughout their history. This was a special moment. In Joshua 5, when they enter the land we read "the manna ceased" and they ate the produce of the land. But it was still God's provision. **Whether God provides through a paycheck, an apple tree, the supermarket, or the bread of angels, it's still his provision. It's still grace.**

4. Wilderness/Conquest/Judges/Kings/Exile (16-31): Six Cycles of Rebellion/Mercy

What happens next is a series of six reflections on how Israel sinned against God and how God responded in mercy and discipline. **This is really the heart of their appeal.**

Cycle 1 (16-17)

Rebellion (16-17a): "stiffened their neck" despite God's redemption.

- **They acted like the calf they worshiped**, which is picked up in verse (18). You become like that which you worship (Ps 115)
- They returned to "slavery" (17). That's what sin is. Slavery. **Sin is stupid.**

Mercy (17b): "But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful..."

- They rehearse the foundational text of **Exodus 34:6-7.**
- **Islam – Every chapter but one begins with Allah's compassion... Is it true?**
- Our God is merciful, compassionate, slow to anger, etc. And he has demonstrated it! Not just says it.
- Where sin abounds, grace super-abounds. Therein, lies our hope.

Cycle 2 (18-25)

Rebellion (18): “made a calf and committed blasphemy”

Mercy (19-25): He did not forsake them!

- God’s remarkable provision (19b-21). The “Spirit” is probably referring to the 70 Elders in Num 11. God kept giving them food and drink despite their idolatry.
- No Blisters! No feet swelling!
- **They appreciated nothing yet lacked nothing.**
- Again, they are reflecting on God’s response as the basis for their present appeal
- **22-25:** We come to the book of **Joshua**, to the conquest.
- Now they reflect on their **undeserved inheritance!** This paragraph is about the conquest of the land.
- God had promised to give this land to Abraham, and he did!
- **25b:** His “**great goodness.**” God gave them everything they could ever want. **Released from slavery, and provided with good things.** What happens next?

Cycle 3 (26-27)

Rebellion (26): They responded to the gift of the land the same way the responded to being freed from Egypt: **rebellion.**

Verse 26 takes us to the end of Joshua, and leads into Judges and beyond (since it looks forward to the period of the Kings with the mention of “prophets”).

In light of all of God’s goodness, this was their response!

We see *the sinfulness of sin* here.

- Our sin has taken place in the face of God’s expression of goodness.
- Our sin is defiance, arrogant, stiff-necked, and rebellious.
- It’s as though we say to God, **“I don’t care.”**
- **“I don’t care what you have done for me. I don’t care that you’ve given me life, clothing, a home, friends, family, kids, food, and the gospel – I don’t care, I just want my sin!”** That’s what sin is.

Mercy (27): This time they receive discipline, and then mercy in the giving of **Judges**. (There are seven of these cycles in Judges)

Cycle 4 (28)

Rebellion (28a): After a period of peace (rest), **Israel went right back into sin!**

Mercy (28b): God delivered them (after a period of discipline) in his mercy.

- The Levites are using the same language of mercy/compassion as the basis for their appeal.

Cycle 5 (29-30)

Rebellion (29-30): This is the period of the **prophets** during the reign of the **Kings**. They warned Israel to turn back to the law (29). But they would not obey.

Mercy (30): Many years “you bore with them and warned them by your Spirit through your prophets.” What Mercy! **What patience!**

Cycle 6 (30b-31)

Rebellion (30b): “Yet, they would not give ear.”

- So God gave them into the hand of the people.
- Now we’re at the period of the **Exile**.

Mercy (31): Exiled but not Forsaken...

- “In your great mercies” – That’s what they are banking on, God’s mercy for their present appeal.
- Lamentations 3:22: “Because of your great mercy we are not cut off”

They view themselves and God rightly.

- For confession and repentance to be genuine, we must acknowledge our sin rightly and see God rightly.
- No attempts at positive spin. It’s honest.
- This is what **the Spirit** does (John 16:8, Acts 2:37)
- **When the Spirit produces genuine confession and repentance, you can’t keep people from Jesus!** They are cut to the heart and repent.

#3: Pleading for Restoration (9:32-38)

This prayer now gets painfully personal.

They accept complete ownership for their sin.

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy.” (Ps 130:1, 2)

V. 32: Despite Israel’s history of rebellion, God has been patient and merciful to them. The Levites now ask God to be merciful again!

33-35: Confession of Sin and God’s Righteousness

- They know that God has not acted wrongly. They have been wicked. (33)
- Everyone who has sinned – verse 34.
- God was good to them despite Israel’s past failure (35)

36-37: Slavery and Distress. The Current Problem.

- They describe their own situation.
- Israel had been enslaved in Egypt, but God delivered them.
- They are asking God to deliver them again! For God to show mercy again!
- He has heard their cries of distress before, now please hear again!

38: The Levites come with a specific application point. Having rehearsed God’s dealings with his rebellious people, **they are prepared to make a covenant and keep it**. We will look at the contents of it in chapter 10. It involves many holy commitments.

Continuing the Narrative

Should we retell the story of God's mercy on rebellious people, repent, plead for mercy, and resolve to do better? Well, **yes**, and **no**.

- **Yes**, we should prayerfully reflect on the biblical storyline for our own restoration! This is a great pattern.
- **No**, if you stop at the OT!
- **Yes**, if you continue the narrative forward to Jesus!

We make our plea on the *basis of the gospel* – on the basis of what Christ has done!

If we don't move to the coming of Christ, to his death and resurrection, then **we will just repeat the cycle!**

- They just told a story that essentially says, "It's not going to work."
- In 1,000 years it's cycle of failure! 6 Cycles. What do we do say, "Were number 7!"

"Yeah, but God's merciful" yes but. God is also **righteous**.

- **How is this going to work? What is going to hold sway?**
- **Will the mercy run out or God vindicate his righteousness in judging us?**
- **Do we: Cross your finger and hope God is merciful again, or say, I'm toast because God is righteous.**

2 Questions

1. How do we resolve the tension of God's righteousness and his mercy?
2. Will there ever be a time in which we don't have to deal with sin and distress?

1. Romans 3:21-26

How the Tension of Mercy and Righteousness is Resolved? The Cross.

²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

V. 25: Passing over former sins – oh yes he did! Many narrated in Nehemiah 9!

- **Every time he passed over it, he looked unrighteous.**
- **But in due time, God would act in such a way that his righteousness was vindicated in pouring out his wrath on behalf of sinners, and his mercy was displayed in granting us forgiveness and life through Christ.**
- **Now we can repent and find renewal, and press on in commitment because we are forgiven, and we know God won't crush us, because he already crushed his Son in our place.**
- **Now we can say, in Christ Jesus, this cycle has been broken!**

- **No wrath remains on God's children because a perfect atonement occurred.**
- My friends, the storyline of Bible leads to this conclusion: Either Jesus takes your punishment, or you will bear it in hell.
- But the Savior came to give you a way out – in great mercy, and in demonstration of God's righteousness.
- We rebelled, but God is merciful. He is merciful and righteousness – those attributes meet at the cross!
- **In this life, as forgiven sinners, we stumble, but we find new resources to fight sin, and we have fellowship with the Father, who loves his children.**
- We have hope because of the cross!
- So in sin and distress, run to this Savior! That's what He is – a Savior!

2. Ezekiel 36

New Power and the Hope of Never Sinning Again

²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

- The Spirit will come and empower us for obedience! Not an external law pressing you, but the internal Spirit pushing you to obedience.
- **And the Spirit is *sealing you for the Day of redemption* (Eph 1:13-14).**
- **The Spirit is the guarantee that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion (Phil 1:6).**
- When you take the storyline of Scripture to the very end, you come to this climactic end, **"We know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."** (1 Jn 3)
- There will be a day when we will not sin again! The cycle will be no more!
- And Jesus made it possible *through his blood*.

You know what this does? **This enables us to find mercy when we fail, and we stand in hope knowing that at the end of the fight there is triumph, and we will never sin again!**
We fight and repent as victors!

In times of sin and distress, you can experience God's restoring mercy, as you prayerfully/repentantly reflect on the storyline of Scripture – eventually falling at the feet of the hero of Scripture in Christ our Savior.

Summary: What do we learn about prayer from this passage?

1. Pray passionately.

- Don't just talk about prayer, or read about prayer, but actually pray.
- Think about this: This **God wants to talk with you!** I'm sure some people don't want to talk to you – but God does!
- People say all the time that **the key to marriage is communication**. You want fellowship with God, then hear his Word and talk to him.

- Prayer is not something to check off of a daily **checklist**; it's an opportunity to meet with God.
- In Nehemiah, we have seen short prayers, and long prayers. This is a long one. The **length itself says something**. Their **outer appearance says something**.
- Don't allow the verse "Pray without ceasing" to keep you from finding longer periods of time for unhurried and unhindered prayer -- passionately.
- Pray until you've prayed, as the older saints used to say.

2. Pray Biblically.

- If you don't know how to pray for a long time, then here you go!
 - **If you will pray the Scriptures, you will have a lot to pray for!**
- Your prayers will also be **God-centered**.
 - The Bible begins with "In the beginning, God....." It tells us who the main subject is! It ends with Jesus triumphing.
 - When you read the Bible and pray in light of it, it keeps your prayer from going in bad directions.
 - Just in this prayer: God's mercy, God's faithfulness, God's promises, God's uniqueness, God's creation, God's redemption, God's provision, God's goodness, grace, patience, and more – all here. Entire books have been written on just one of these attributes of God. There's a lot you can pray in light of when you have an open Bible!

3. Pray Honestly

- As you pray in light of Scripture, Scripture reveals your sin, and you need to be honest about sin.
- **We don't like talking about sin, and you know why? We're sinners!**
- For prayer to be life changing, it must be honest.
- But that's hard for us to do when we like to present ourselves in the best possible light.
 - Those of you that have been on dating sights, and know you have to put your traits there – **what would happen if you started using the language of Nehemiah 9?! You start listing your sins? Would someone say, "Hey, want to go out?"**
- Honesty – biblical honesty is hard because don't like to admit and own responsibility for our sins.
- We prefer to
 - i. Minimize sin
 - ii. Manage sin
 - iii. Rename sin
 - iv. Redefine sin
 - v. Shift the blame for our sin
 - vi. Or blame it on the other person's hearing: "You heard that wrong"
 - vii. Will do anything to keep from taking ownership for our sin.

But don't stop with honest confession, move on to...

4. Pray Repentantly

- Repentance is not just admitting our sin; it involves putting it to death, and living a different life. (Rom 6:11-14; Col 3:5-17).
- Repentance is incomplete if it doesn't include a changed life, resulting in obedience – not perfection, but new patterns of obedience, brought about by God's grace, enabled by the Spirit's work.
- There are many versions of *false repentance*
 - i. **Self-Righteousness.** Confessing the sins of others, but not yourself. “Lord I'm glad I'm not like that man” (Lk 18:9-14). It involves failing to see your own sin.
 - ii. **Mere Confession** – No real desire for change, just admitting that you did something wrong. That won't change your life.
 - iii. **Worldly Sorrow.** Being sad you did something wrong. Pagans feel sad for doing wrong. That's a common trait of being made in God's image. Maybe it's sadness for what you lost. As Timmis said last week, “You can cry buckets and not be changed.”
 - iv. **Religious Repentance.** This is the most common false form of repentance for believers. It involves confessing sin, and repenting (making changes) but for the wrong reasons. It involves having the wrong motives. Their change is not directed God-ward. Real repentance is seeking restored fellowship first and foremost with God!

5. Pray Hopefully

- The answer to all these false practices of repentance is **Jesus!**
- **If you are in sin and distress, there's hope because of the atoning work of the Jesus, the empowering/restoring work of the Spirit, and the assurance of God the Father's love for his children.**
- You can always pray and repent in hope.
- So pray.
- Pray biblically, honestly, repentantly, and you will begin to sense the joy of restoration and renewal.
- Pour out your heart in honest confession of sin, turn from that sin in real repentance, believing that Jesus is better than your sin.
- Obedience leads to joy and fulfillment.
- Repent out of love for the Savior, who poured out his soul to death for sinners like us – who promises us a new heaven and new earth, where we will never sin again.