

WEDNESDAY BIBLE FELLOWSHIP

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STUDY NOTES ON NEHEMIAH

Chapter 9: Confession – An Ingredient to Revival

When the people of Israel gathered for the Feast of Trumpets, they were grieving over their sin as they heard the reading of the Word of God. But Nehemiah interrupted their sorrow and said, “This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep...” (Nehemiah. 8:9). Nehemiah with God’s help had not only rebuilt the wall, but he had restored a purpose and rekindled a passion. After the wall was completed, and the people had heard and obeyed God’s Word, and the Holy Spirit was doing a significant work in their lives - there is a scene of dramatic, humble repentance.

How do we sin? The English word *sin* comes from the idea “to miss the mark.” In an archery tournament, if one did not hit the target in the right place, they would say they “sinned.” 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 us to do (telling us in Word, conscience, or authority). Not all sin is the same, but all sin *is* sin.

Nehemiah and the leaders understood that all the problems Jerusalem had experienced stemmed directly from their ancestors’ decision to abandon God’s law. They were wise enough to realize that disobedience, not military weakness, was the ultimate reason that their nation had collapsed, that their city had been destroyed and their wall had been burned down. They knew that if God allowed the wall to be torn down once, He would certainly allow it to be torn down twice, if necessary. At the close of Chapter 9 and verse 38, we read how the people developed a written covenant between themselves and God to make sure it wouldn’t happen again. In these days and weeks and months of rebuilding the wall, these people had learned some very valuable lessons:

1) It costs a lot to obey God. When you finally and truly sell out to God, it will cost you time, money and comfort and it certainly cost those people all of those things to rebuild the wall, but they also learned a second lesson.

2) It costs a lot more not to obey God.

3) It always pays to obey God and never pays to disobey Him.

Verses 1-2. Conviction of sin.

Two days after their solemn assembly, the Israelites again gathered together. But this time, it was not to feast and celebrate. They were returning to their original sorrow, having been

convicted by the Word of God about their sin. True conviction of sin is evidenced in several ways, as we can see from the results here.

Fasting, Sackcloth, and Dirt. In fasting, they denied their flesh the pleasure and satisfaction of food. They afflicted their flesh with the discomfort of abrasive sackcloth on their skin. And they refused to glorify the vanity of the flesh by putting dirt on themselves. As Christians, we are told, "... clothe yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature" (Romans 13:14). When someone is truly convicted of their sin, their flesh is brought into submission.

Separated From Foreigners. Foreigners were non-Jews that worshiped other gods. The influence of their morals and standards was present in the Israelite society, and a stop had to be put to this. The Bible says in 1 Corinthians 15:33 "Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character.'" When someone is truly convicted of their sin, they purify their lives from things that will cause them to stumble.

Confession. Thirdly, they confessed their sins to the Lord. Notice that it wasn't just their personal sins, but even the sins of the Jewish forefathers who'd come before them. I find that many Christians are often convinced that they don't have much to confess. But those who are truly convicted have no trouble at all providing the Lord with a laundry list of ways that they have fallen short. And when they run out, they will confess the sins of their ancestors, their nation, and the entire human race, just to leave no sin unrepented of. The righteous man Job was like this. When his children feasted together, he would consecrate them, rising up early in the morning and offering burnt offerings on their behalf, for Job said, "Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." (Job 1:5). A truly convicted heart will confess too much rather than too little.

Verse 3-5a. Place of Worship and the Word.

The gathering of the people lasted for half the day. This day was evenly divided between reading from the Word and worshipping the Lord. The Levites cried out to the Lord and encouraged the people to do the same. It shouldn't surprise us, or make us feel like failures, if we must be led into confession and repentance.

Verse 5b-6. God as Creator. They praised the Lord as the Creator of heaven and earth and sea, and as the Giver of all life. The Lord as Creator and Life-Giver is a dominant and continual theme throughout the Word of God in regards to witnessing. For example, Barnabas and Paul cried out in Acts 14:15 "...turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea, and everything in them."

As a matter of fact, the entire gospel is predicated on God as Creator. You cannot understand sin without knowing about God's perfect creation. You cannot understand Jesus Christ as the last Adam without knowing how God created the first Adam. You cannot understand what brings death until you understand that God created life. You cannot even worship God in truth until you realize that He is your Creator. The proclamation in heaven shall be, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being." (Revelation 4:11). Those who believe in evolution, even "theistic evolution" cannot understand sin, death, worship, or the cross. 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.

Verse 7-8. God's faithfulness to Abraham. They also worshiped God for His faithfulness, firstly to their ancestor Abraham. There are so many times that, in the midst of today's difficulties, we forget to look back at yesterday's victories. God has always come through every time, and yet when we turn a blind eye to the past, we will doubt him in the present. "Remember this, fix it in mind, take it to heart, you rebels. Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me." (Isaiah 46:8-9).

Verse 9-15. God's faithfulness to those from Egypt. The Lord was faithful not only to Abraham, but to his descendants as well. He heard and responded to the cries of the Israelite slaves in Egypt. He intervened supernaturally - delivering them, rescuing them, leading them, speaking to them, and providing for them.

Verse 16-25. God's faithfulness to sinners. But in response to God's faithfulness, the Israelites were arrogant and stubborn. They wouldn't listen to the Word of God. They wouldn't remember the Lord's miracles. 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. God was gracious, merciful, and long-suffering. Instead of destroying them, He continued to provide for them and give them victory. He gave them a beautiful land that they did not deserve.

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.

Verse 26-31. The vicious cycle. When the people continued to neglect the Word, God sent prophets to admonish and exhort them. Instead of repenting, they killed the prophets. In response, God let them be defeated by their enemies, which brought them to their knees before the Lord. But as soon as the Lord relieved their difficulties, they would fall back into sin again. It was a vicious cycle, repeating itself over and over again. The entire book of Judges documents this cycle of sin, defeat, repentance, delivery, and sin again. God proved Himself to be amazingly loving, compassionate, and gracious over and over again, bearing with them, never allowing them to be destroyed completely.

Verse 32-37. A plea to God for intervention. 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 asked God to deliver them once again from this oppression!

"You are just in all that has happened to us" (v.33): This gives a good description of what real confession is all about. It recognizes that God is right and we are wrong. Confession is agreeing with God about both things.

“It is a tremendous moment in a Christians’ life when he can honestly look up into the face of God and say, ‘Yes, Lord, You are right and I am wrong,’ when he stops arguing with God and drops his controversy. He says, ‘Lord, yes. I’ve got what I deserved in this situation. You are right; I am wrong.’ That is the thing for which God has been working in your life and mine from the very moment of our conversion.” (Alan Redpath). Redpath further says: “How often the discovery of something new in the loveliness of the Lord Jesus has brought with it the discovery of some new corruption in our own hearts. God will never plant the seed of His life upon the soil of a hard, unbroken spirit. He will only plant that seed where the conviction of His Spirit has brought brokenness, where the soil has been watered with the tears of repentance as well as the tears of joy.” (Redpath).

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.

Verse 38. Conclusion: A point of decision.

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. God’s work in us often must come to a place of decision - where He wants us to make a stand for Him, and against some other things.

If *you* need a point of decision, Alan Redpath gave these self-examination questions, to give an idea how:

What about my relationship with men? Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I am a better man than I really am? Is there the least suspicion of hypocrisy in my life? Am I honest in all my words and acts? Do I exaggerate? Am I reliable? Can I be trusted? Do I confidentially pass on what was told to me in confidence? Do I grumble and complain in the church?

Am I jealous, impure, irritable, touchy, distrustful? Am I self-conscious, self-pitying, or self-justifying? Am I proud? Do I thank God I am not as other people? Is there anyone I fear, or dislike, or criticize, or resent? If so, what am I doing about it?

What about my devotion to God? Is the Bible alive to me? Do I give it time to speak to me? Do I go to bed in time and do I get up in time? Am I enjoying my prayer life today? Did I enjoy it this morning? When I am involved in a problem in life, do I talk about it or pray about it? Am I disobeying God in anything, or insisting upon doing something which my conscience is very uneasy about? When did I last speak to someone else with the object of trying to win him for Christ? Am I a slave to books, dress, friends, work, or what others think? How do I spend my spare time?