

Repentance – Nehemiah 9:1-38

Scripture Reading: Nehemiah 9:1-5

Introduction

The events in our passage this morning occur after the observance of the Feast of Booths that took place in chapter 8. In fact, the last verse of chapter 8 (Neh. 8:18b) says the Judeans kept the feast for the prescribed seven days from the 15th day of the month to the 21st and Ezra read to them from the Book of the Law each of those seven days.

Then on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly according to the rule found in **Leviticus 23:39** –

What is described in chapter 9 takes place then three days after the Feast of Booths and two days after the solemn assembly on the 24th of the month.

You will remember how last week we saw the people begin to weep over their sin when confronted by God's Word and how Nehemiah corrected them because the Feast of Booths was to be a time of rejoicing.

Nehemiah's correction wasn't because mourning over sin is a wrong response – in fact it's the typically proper response – it's just that the occasion called for rejoicing over the memory of God's deliverance during the Exodus.

But now, with the feast completed, the people gather for a time of sober self-judgment and they show up to once again hear God's Word while wearing sackcloth and ashes in the classic posture of mourning and repentance.

And once more we see the commitment of the people as they stood to listen to God's Word for "a quarter of the day" which likely means for 3 hours because the Hebrews reckoned a day to be 12 hours long and a night to be 12 hours long.

Then they spent another 3 hours confessing their sins and worshipped the Lord meaning that they bowed before the Lord.

And during this time we see two groups of people described who stood on the steps of the Levites.

The first group of five led the people in crying out to the Lord and the second group led the people in praising God.

What follows this introductory material is the longest recorded prayer in the Bible that runs from verse 6 through the end of the chapter.

I would imagine we all have that uncle who we hoped wouldn't be called on to ask the blessing on a holiday meal because they prayed so long the food started getting cold.

The story is told about D.L. Moody who once asked a certain brother to pray at a service in the Chicago Church.

The man began to pray and was still droning on after 10 minutes had gone by with no signs of nearing the end.

Finally, Moody stood up and said, "While our dear brother is finishing his prayer, let's turn to hymn #342 and sing it together!"

The prayer in Nehemiah 9 is long but not quite that long and it's a great model prayer with much to teach us.

There are many ways to approach the prayer and many lessons to be learned if only we had the time to explore them all.

But this morning we are going to be looking at three characteristics found first in a person that immersed in God's Word and then we will look at the three characteristics found in a person that is impacted by God's Word.

So those are your two main points if you are taking notes.

Roman numeral one is a person immersed in God's Word and Roman numeral two is a person impacted by God's Word and there will be three sub-points under each.

We aren't told who offered up the prayer before and on behalf of the people but, for the sake of being able to speak of the speaker; Nehemiah, the Levites, or Ezra but I'm going to presume it was Ezra who spoke the words aloud before the people.

While I can't say for certain that it was Ezra it makes some amount of sense that it would have been and just for practical purposes, I need so attribute it to someone as we talk about it.

I. A Person Immersed in God's Word

The prayer before us is a prayer of confession and it is very similar to prayers found elsewhere in the Old Testament as we see in Ps 78; Ps 105; Ps 106; Ps 135; and Ps 136

But what is most prominent is what is revealed about God – in fact, the prayer begins in **verse 6** by emphasizing the Lord's uniqueness *"You are the Lord, you alone"*

As you read through the prayer you will see that it is an historical prayer that mentions Abraham, Moses, and the Prophets in general

It speaks of Abraham's journey to Canaan, the Covenant, the Exodus and the wandering in the wilderness, the golden calf, and the captivity

In fact, the prayer notes **31 specific things** God had done for his people

So that the prayer specifically relates a great deal about God and his nature and his relationship with his children that we discover when we spend time in God's Word

And the first thing the person that is immersed in God's Word recognizes is God's **faithfulness**

A. Recognizes God's Faithfulness

As the prayer opens in verses 6-8 we see **three truths** about God revealed in rapid-fire succession

In fact, they come so quickly and are so familiar that we could easily read right past them without giving them the attention and reflection they deserve

Notice that Ezra first praises God as **Creator of the universe** and everything in it in **verse 6**

Contrary to what many want to believe today, we and our surroundings are not the result of time and chance

God gave us life and a place to live it and we are dependent on him every moment – we dare not forget that

Then in verse 7 Ezra acknowledges that God is **the caller and chooser of men** – God determines who he will use and for what purposes

That one might seem particularly restrictive to us as we have been steeped in independence and autonomy but we need to recognize that God is in charge and praise him for his loving oversight

In fact, the New Testament tells us clearly that no one would even seek God if he wasn't first seeking us and it's he who awakens in us the feelings and desires that draw us near to him (**John 6:44**)

And we read in Romans 12 and 1Corinthians 12 that it is God who distributes spiritual gifts to each believer for use in the church as he sees fit – God is clearly the caller and chooser of men

The third thing that comes out in these first verses that open the prayer is that God is **covenant maker**

It was God who originated and took upon himself the terms of his covenant with Abraham and God continues to be the maker and keeper of promises with his children

Then, at the end of **verse 8**, we see Ezra confirm God's faithfulness in all things throughout the history of the Jewish people with these words, *"And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous"*

When we spend time in God's Word we can't help but be confronted by God's continual faithfulness to his children

But, as we see as the prayer progresses, God is not only faithful to do what he has said he will do, he is also merciful when we fail to live up to our part of the bargain

B. Acknowledges God's Mercy

And failure was the pattern of God's people in the Old Testament

Starting in verse 9 and going through verse 15, Ezra gives a thumbnail sketch of God's intervention to see the Israelites released from captivity in Egypt along with his continual provision and guidance leading to his instruction to enter and possess the land that he was giving them

And then we come to **verse 16** and the words “*But they...*” and we see the first of a cycle of rebellion on the part of God’s people in spite of God’s goodness and God’s demonstrated patience and mercy in each case

In verses 16-17 (**Neh. 9:16-17**) we see the Israelites “*acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey*” in fact “*they refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders [God] performed among them*” and even sought to return to Egypt

Then in the last half of verse 17 we see Ezra turn to consider God’s reaction to all this when he says, “*But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them*”

Even when they made and worshipped the golden calf God not only didn’t wipe them off the face of the earth, or withhold his blessings, God continued to bless and sustain them as he said he would

He even went ahead and gave them the land as he had promised as he helped them subdue the more powerful nations that inhabited the land ahead of them

Then in verses 26-31 we see Ezra relate three cycles of sin that led to judgment which caused the people to cry out in pain so that God heard them and had mercy on them to deliver them

But we need to note that no matter what, God did not abandon his people nor did he deal with them as they deserved God was merciful and when we spend time in God’s Word we can’t help but recognize that fact

The third thing we want to note that the prayer reveals is that reading God’s Word results in us accepting God’s judgment because we see that it is righteous

C. Accepts God’s Judgment

Look with me at verses 32-37 (**Neh. 9:32-37**)

*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. **Yet you have been righteous** in all that has come upon us, for **you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly**. Our 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. Even in their own kingdom, and amid 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. Behold, 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. And 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.*

In a day when everything that goes wrong is someone else’s fault and no one seems to ever take full responsibility the words and sentiment in those verses is quite refreshing

Even in the midst of suffering that has not yet been fully eliminated, Ezra is able to say, “We deserve it. You have been faithful and we have acted wickedly and have only done what is righteous according to our sins.”

Spending time in God’s Word, being immersed in God’s thoughts and learning about God, will lead us to see God’s faithfulness and mercy in light of our sin and we will come to understand and accept his judgments as righteous

But those who spend time in and under God’s Word will also learn a great deal about themselves and what they learn about themselves will have a profound impact

So let’s turn next to look at the three things that will happen to the person who is impacted by God’s Word

II. A Person Impacted by God’s Word

Clearly, the people of Nehemiah’s day were profoundly affected by hearing God’s Word read aloud to them

On the first occasion, in chapter 8, they fell under conviction of their sin and just how far they had strayed from God and they broke out in spontaneous weeping and mourning

And now, they arrived dressed in rough clothing with dust on their heads as a sign of contrition and sorrow over their sinful state

And what they heard had a profound impact on them as they listened to the historical account of God's faithfulness and blessing being answered by the rebellion of the people – over and over again

Surely they could only look at their own lives and how they had ignored God and failed to properly honor him in spite of his many and continual blessings to them

Whenever we look at God's holiness it can only serve to expose and highlight our own sinfulness and rebellion

So the first thing a person who has truly been impacted by God's Word does is confess their sin

A. Confesses Their Sin

By and large, I believe the church today suffers from a deficit in understanding when it comes to sin

We prefer a kind of moral relativism and tend to want to compare ourselves to our neighbor and we always seem to come out on top because at least, we reason, we aren't as bad as they are

And we tend to want to rationalize that, yes, technically what we are doing may in fact be sin but God really isn't all that bothered by it – I mean it's not like we killed anyone

But when we compare ourselves to God we can't help but be convicted of our sin and true conviction of sin should lead to confession of sin

Ezra has already confessed the national and historical sins of his people and now in verse 33 he shows us how to confess our sins

Look with me at verse 33 (**Neh. 9:33**) which says:

... you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly.

Notice that there is no sugar coating to what they say; it's very specific – We did wickedly; period

And he amplified and expanded the confession a bit in verses 34-35 by saying “we paid no attention to your commandments and warnings” and “we did not serve you or turn from our wicked works”

Again, no varnish on it just “we did wrong”

Compare that to how we are more likely to confess: “Lord, if I have done something amiss, if I have violated your holy standard in some small way; please forgive me”

We need to recognize that there is no “if” in true confession

You have to say, “Lord, I did this. I failed to live up to your standard. I went my own way ignoring your Word. I need forgiveness.”

It's then that God hears, forgives, and restores according to his nature as we have just seen it revealed

The person who is truly impacted by God's Word confesses their sin and then they submit to God's plan

B. Submits to God's Plan

Look with me at verses 36-37 (**Neh. 9:36-37**) which says:

Behold, 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. And 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.

What we see here is the understanding on the part of the Judeans that they are in the state they are because of their sin that they have already acknowledged and confessed

Yes, they are calling God's attention to their current state and, in doing so they are somewhat obliquely asking for him to deliver them as he has done so many times before in the case of their ancestors

But there is no complaint here against God or charge of unfairness

The Judeans understand they are in a situation of their own making and that God is doing a work in them and when their suffering has produced the work in them that God desires, then they are confident he will release them from it

But they are content to remain there until that time because they trust in God's intrinsic goodness and love for them

Perhaps they considered **Proverbs 3:11-12** which are cited in **Hebrews 12:5-6** –

My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.

And we read in **Hebrews 12:11** – *For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.*

Far too often our first instinct – which we follow – is to pray for God to remove us from painful situations that he is using for our own good

And when he doesn't, we can begin to look for ways to get ourselves out from under it to our detriment

The person who is truly impacted by God's Word will yield to God's plan and to submit to the work he is doing in their life when things get difficult without fear or anxiety knowing that God has proven himself faithful

In any event, the Judeans, having been deeply affected by what they had heard from God's Word confessed their sins before the Lord and submitted to his plans and then they committed to obeying God going forward

C. Commits to Obedience

Look with me at verse 38 (**Neh. 9:38**)

Because of all this we make a firm covenant in writing; on the sealed document are the names of our princes, our Levites, and our priests.

Because the community recognizes their history of sin and God's history of faithfulness and mercy toward them, they commit to the pattern of obedience that follows in chapter 10 which we will look at next week

This was a binding agreement made on behalf of the whole community and therefore bound the whole community to obedience

The Hebrew word used for establishing this agreement was typically used for entering into a covenant but this was likely more like a solemn promise or unilateral agreement than a covenant that typically put obligations on both sides

Basically, the people made a written promise before God that they would henceforth follow God's Law and it was signed by their leaders and the Levites and officially sealed with a wax or clay seal making it official and binding on all

What they seem to have seen from their exposure to God's Word is that, because of God's mercy and grace, no matter where they are spiritually, each day is an opportunity for a new beginning

We need to hasten to understand that they weren't taking advantage of God's mercy and grace – they were committing to future obedience on the basis of past mercy – not the other way around

Because God had been so good to them personally and as an historical people they saw the only reasonable response was to commit to future obedience

Conclusion

If I had to name the number one deficiency in the church today I would most likely say it is the lack of a true sense of and conviction for sin in our own lives that prevails among Christ-followers and likely comes from a failure to be in God's Word

By and large we presume upon God's mercy and grace as we live lives that are virtually indistinguishable from the lives of the unbelieving world around us

Christ-followers today seem to have lost something of the knowledge of holiness and otherness of God as we have turned Jesus into a buddy and God the Father into a kind of benevolent, tolerant grandfather figure who always forgives

Being immersed in God's Word cannot help but have an impact on our understanding of the seriousness of sin and how God looks at it as it makes us more aware of the nature of sin and our relationship to it which should lead us to the same realizations that the people came to during Nehemiah's day

As **Hebrews 4:12** tells us: *...the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*

At the time of our passage this morning, the people of Jerusalem had been under the daily reading of God's Word for a little less than a month and God's Word had done a tremendous work on their hearts

When they first gathered on the first of the month and demanded to hear God's Word read they had been pretty much living without much, if any, concern for the things of the Lord

And we saw how hearing God's Word convicted them of their sins to the point of weeping and now after just under a month of exposure to God's Word they were entering into a solemn promise of obedience to it

They were a changed people because of their immersion in God's Word

Our world today is a mess – I doubt anyone would deny it

Like the Judeans of Nehemiah's day we are kind of like captives in a pagan world

I find myself more and more often saying, "It's their world we're just living in it" when I read of the latest atrocity that the culture around us is trying to normalize

And while we may have a somewhat limited ability to have an impact when it comes to reforming our society, we can have a huge impact on reforming ourselves

And being in God's Word daily is the key to the reform that we need

Let me encourage you to pick up one of our Bible Reading Plans that we have available or to come and see me if you need a place to start

There are so many ways to begin but the important thing is to begin

They say it takes 21 days to make a habit so, if you start today and are faithful to reading at least some of God's Word each day at the same time of day it should become a part of your normal routine

But the important thing is to start

Let's pray

Nehemiah 9:1-5 (page 404)

Now 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. And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. And 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. On 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. Then 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.