

Title: Nehemiah 9
Date: November 5, 2023
Subject: Sin is to be confessed – admitted and repented from and turning to God
Scripture: Nehemiah 9

Jump into our text for the morning.

Read 9:32-37.

This was the end of a prayer that began in V. 5. The last section details the need of the hour.

I. The need of the hour

A. How they got to this point. The preceding parts detailed how they got to their current situation. It briefly traces significant moments in the history of the Jewish people, beginning with God's promise made to Abram extending through the Exodus from Egypt, wilderness wanderings, conquest of the promised land, the era of the judges all the up to Nehemiah's time.

Several elements are traced. One of them is the condition of the people.

B. The condition of the people. Vv. 16 – 18 are representative of the total. READ vv. 16 - 18.

This account is associated with the 12 spies who were sent into the promised land. The reaction of the people to hearing the land was filled with giants was they became arrogant and stiff-necked, didn't obey God's commands, didn't remember the miracles God performed, we're stiff-necked (again with the portrayal), rebellious and committed awful blasphemies by having Aaron craft a golden calf to worship as their God.

Yikes! Pretty brutal. The assessment is repeated throughout the passage. They were like little children who wanted to do their own thing without being told “no” so they covered their ears so they didn't have to hear what they were being told. They put God's law behind their backs and went so far as killing God's messengers who were sent to admonish them and turn them back to the Lord. They were a bunch of sinners.

God judges them through famine, war and exile. When the people spiritually woke up from their slumber, they cried out to God and he delivered them - time after time after time. That frequently happened during the period of the judges - Gideon, Sampson, Ehud. The people sinned, the Lord judged, the people repented, after a while, then God would send a deliverer...only to have the process begin again.

The people had momentary spiritual upticks. After they got into the promised land it's noted in v. 25 that the people reveled in God's great goodness as they had eaten to the full and were well nourished. Things were going well and they were beyond content. However, it also became a trap door as they looked to their own strength and abilities and away from God's.

II. The faithfulness of God

There's a second element running throughout the prayer. V. 17. “You are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them...”

These characteristics of God run throughout the prayer. They're also brought together throughout Scripture. David does this at least three times in the Psalms (86:15, 103:8, 145:8). The Lord said this about himself as he proclaimed his name "the Lord" to Moses when Moses needed to get a second set of the 10 Commandments (Exodus 34:6, 7). The prophet Joel brought them together when he was encouraging people to rend their hearts before God (Joel 2:13). The wayward prophet Jonah uttered them when he was displeased and angry with God, saying he knew God was like that and that was the reason he didn't want to go preach to the people of Nineveh whom he considered his enemies (Jonah 4:2).

In the opening part of the prayer, they praised and exalted God as the one who is from everlasting to everlasting, who has the glorious name that is above all names, the only Lord, the creator, the life giver, promise keeper and the one who is righteous.

The characteristics of God are visible in the historical recap of Nehemiah 9. He set his plan into motion of bringing the Messiah into the world when he chose Abraham and made a covenant with him (vv. 8, 9). This included fulfilling the promise of giving the land to Abraham's descendants. God kept his promise. The Lord was aware of the suffering of the people while in slavery in Egypt. He brought them out performing miracles such as leading them with a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire (vv. 9 - 12). He revealed his will through laws and commands given to Moses on Mount Sinai and performed more miracles by providing bread from heaven and water from the rock (vv. 13 - 15).

The most amazing thing is the way the Lord acted towards people who turned their backs on him, who committed awful blasphemies, who basically told him to "bug off." As we read earlier in v. 17: God didn't desert them even when they began worshipping the false god of the golden calf almost immediately after they'd gotten out of Egypt. The people excitedly left and were grateful to God. They sang his praises when he opened up the Red Sea for them to cross and then closed it back on the Egyptian army to wipe them out. Yet they quickly said, "Let's find different gods and give them the credit for getting us out of Egypt."

Shockingly, God didn't desert them. It's a routine fact of life that when people turn their backs on someone and are repeatedly disobedient and rebellious that the aggrieved party would drop the other like a hot potato - desert and abandon, figuring it's not worth the effort.

That's not what the Lord did. Because of his great compassion he didn't desert them in the desert. He stuck with them. He gave the good Spirit to instruct them. He didn't stop sending manna but sent it every day and gave them water by miraculous methods. They didn't lack anything. Their clothes didn't wear out. We might not consider it a good thing to have the same clothes for 40 years. Their feet didn't become swollen from all the walking they did. He brought them into the promised land and gave them stunning military victory after military victory after military victory, including walking around a walled city and then yelling and the walls came tumbling down. He made the people numerous as the stars in the sky according to the promise made to Abraham. He brought them into the promised land where there was abundance of food so they could eat to the full and be well nourished. He sent deliverer after deliverer after deliverer to rescue them from their enemies.

All the good things God did didn't mean he didn't care when the people sinned, that he just gave it a wink and said, "boys will be boys." He desperately desired for them to return to him. He warned them of the consequences of their sin and rebellion. He judged them by allowing their enemies to rule over them. And ultimately, he allowed them to be taken into captivity to Assyria and Babylon. But as noted in v. 31 -- read v. 31.

But the Lord God didn't abandon them. He didn't put an end to them as he had threatened to several times when he talked to Moses. It's credited to God's mercy and grace and patience.

Isn't that how the Lord works with us? He is incredibly patient, gracious and merciful. He's patient in that he does not want anyone to perish. He is merciful in that he doesn't treat us in the way our sins deserve. He's gracious in that he treats us in ways we don't deserve.

This not only involves when we first come to Christ as our Savior when we place our trust in him because we know we're sinners, can't get to heaven by ourselves and need someone else to pay the price we couldn't pay for the penalty for our sins. We place our trust in Jesus Christ as the one who is our Deliverer, our Savior, our Redeemer.

It continues as we follow Christ. We know we're prone to wander and the so-called delights of the world are tempting in that we sometimes give in to the desires of our sinful nature. We have these reassuring words: "But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense - Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:1, 2). He is faithful and just.

TobyMac's oldest son battled addictions and it seemed like he had turned a corner until he died of an accidental overdose. He also has a son with muscular dystrophy. One of the songs he wrote after his son's death is Faithfully: "It's been a long year, it almost took me down, I swear. Life was so good. I'm not so sure we knew what we had. I'll never be the same man. I'll never feel like I felt before... I've had a hard time Findin' the blue in the skies above me. And if I'm keepin' it real, I've been half-faking the happy they see. I may look like the same man But I'm half the man I was... In my darkest hour, You met me So quietly, so gently. You said you'd never leave. And You stood by Your word So quietly, so gently. In all my pain, You met me. You said You'd never leave. And You stood by Your word. 'Cause when my world broke into pieces You were there faithfully. When I cried out to You, Jesus, You made a way for me. I may never be the same man But I'm a man who still believes. When I cried out to You, Jesus You were there faithfully."

That kind of understanding.....

Because God is faithful, we can trust him to forgive and be with us in our time of need.

III. the plea

vv. 1 – 4 inform us the people gathered a few days after they completed the Feast of Tabernacles. It was no longer a festive experience, one filled with joy and choice food prepared with lots of fat and sweet drinks. It wasn't a celebration.

They gathered in humility to confess their sins, realign themselves with God and express their dedication to God. The seriousness of their sorrow was indicated by fasting - not eating, wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads. They also separated themselves from people who weren't God worshippers. They read God's word for 1/4 of the day and confessed their sins for 1/4 of the day which included worship. They were encouraged to praise the Lord God.

This brings us back to the end of the prayer at the end of the chapter (vv. 32 – 37). The people affirmed their belief in a personal God, addressed him as “our God... a great, mighty and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love.” They further stated that God had been just and acted faithfully all the time. They expressed their dependence upon the one in whom they had placed their trust. They acknowledged the sin that plagued their ancestors in the past and those of the present. It was a confession of the nation's sins. No matter how good God had been to them, they didn't follow his law or pay attention to his commands or warnings. They didn't serve God or turn from their evil ways. They admitted they were the ones that did wrong even while they were enjoying the great goodness of God.

They had returned from exile in Babylon and were facing difficulties. Because they were his people, they prayed God wouldn't ignore them and all the hardships they were facing. They were encountering great distress, serving as slaves and it was all because of their sins. They were repenting, admitting that what they had done was wrong, were serious and confessed this before God.

Someone has said, “Sinfulness is a negative approach to life, rejection of all that's good. Repentance occurs when a person realizes that and wants to escape the clutches of sin in order to enjoy the pleasures of righteousness.”

Sin is something that needs to be constantly dealt with. A. W. Tozer. “Every farmer knows the hunger of the wilderness. That hunger which no modern farm machinery, no improved agricultural methods can quite destroy. No matter how well-prepared the soil, how well-kept the fences, how carefully painted the buildings, let the owner neglect for a while his prized and valued acres and they will revert again to the wilds and be swallowed by the jungle or the wasteland. The bias of nature is toward the wilderness, never toward the fruitful field” (The Root of the Righteous).

We need to take care of the farm – keep getting rid of the pesky weeds that pop through the soil, keep the machinery well oiled, keep on fighting against the wilderness of sin that tries to creep in and invade our souls.

Another scripture speaks to this: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul” (1 Peter 2:9-11).

Followers of Jesus Christ have been changed from the moment they put their trust in Jesus as their Savior. We are people chosen by God and belong to him as the people of God. We're to live lives that demonstrate the change by abstaining from sinful desires. Part of that is to be careful about how, where and with whom or what we spend our time. We are warned that "bad company corrupts good character" (1 Corinthians 15:33).

Some of you are in an environment where people swear and use foul language at the drop of a hat, or wrench, and they couldn't care less about your view on morality and right living. Their words and their stories enter the brain, but there's no need to let them take up residence. We need to fight them by thinking on the things that are good, perfect, true and beautiful.

God is faithful even when we aren't. He provides through Jesus what we need to be in a right relationship with him. The death and resurrection of Jesus aren't stories of heroism but God's love reaching out to us. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

It's easy to see the sins of our nation. Arrogant, self-dependent, stiff-necked, rebellious, committing awful blasphemies, turned back on God and his commands.

It gets a little bit harder and closer to home when we think of those of Christianity at large. There are some of the same attitudes and actions.

What about ourselves? There are times when we get rebellious and want to be in charge of our lives. We sin. What are we to do? Turn back to God. Confess. Admit. Repent.

God is a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.