

**Let Us Arise and Build
Lessons from Nehemiah
Rebuilding God's People #3—Confessing Sin**

Intro: In our studies of Nehemiah we've seen how God's people joined together to rebuild the walls of the city of Jerusalem; but the book of Nehemiah also describes another great building project—rebuilding a people who would know and serve the Lord. As we look at Ezra and Nehemiah's efforts, we see four important aspects of that spiritual rebuilding.

It all begin with... reading the Law.

As the people listened to the word of God, they understood the need to...reinstate divinely-commanded worship.

But as they continued to read, they also saw their failure to keep the covenant of the Lord; and that led to confession of their sins.

Finally, the confession of sin led them to commit to personal holiness

Let's think about the third of these four great principles of spiritual revival—confessing sin.

Nehemiah records that the people gathered for the third time to listen as the Law of God was read.

In their first hearing of the word, they became of aware of their sins; and they wept at how disobedient they had been. But the priests encouraged them to rejoice at the prospects of their new awakening.

In response to the second reading, they rejoiced in worship as they observed the Feast of Booths and celebrated the Lord's blessing upon their harvest. But now that the celebration of the Feast of Booths has ended, the spirit of godly sorrow comes once more into the picture as they gather to read the Law for a third time. Let hear Nehemiah describe the scene:

*“NOW on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dirt upon them. And the descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. While they stood in their place, they read from the book of the law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God.”
(Nehemiah 9:1–3)*

Israel's response to their sins against the Lord

First, they assembled with the outward signs of inward distress and sorrow for their sins.

We have probably not our lifetime ever seen anything like the scene described here by Nehemiah. And if we did, we might think the people who acted in this way were a bit extreme at best or insane at worst. But God's people were genuinely disturbed by sinfulness and showed a penitential spirit by their actions:

Fasting—during this time they went without food
Wearing sackcloth—they wore a dark coarse cloth made from goat's hair; it was very uncomfortable as it rubbed upon the skin
Throwing dirt upon themselves—apparently they resorted to an ancient custom of throwing dust over their heads allowing it to land upon their heads.

These actions were a cultural way of giving expression to the distress and discomfort they experienced in their souls because of their sin against the Lord.

Second, they separated themselves from foreigners.

At this point, this would appear to be a deliberate denunciation of the connections that the people had sustained to the heathen and to their customs.

There was in this brief statement an indication that the people of Israel were declaring their intentions to live once more the distinctly holy life that the Lord had called upon them to live when He gave His law at Mt. Sinai.

Third, for about three hours, they read from the word of the Lord

Again the reading of the Lord's word was crucial to this assembly, since it provided the instruction in what changes need to be made and served as a basis for the confession of sins the people would make. As before, they people stood in reverence as the word of the Lord was read to them.

Fourth, for another three hours, they confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers and worshipped the Lord.

The reading of the word led the people to confess their sins before the Lord and to worship him.

What is generally described in v. 6 is amplified and explained in v. 7-37, namely, that the priests would lead the people in a general declaration of their unfaithfulness in contrast to the covenantal faithfulness of the Lord. Time will not allow me to give a complete discussion of this great psalm of confession and worship; but notice that it has these component elements.

The priest began their praise of the Lord by acknowledging that He, the Creator of heaven and earth, chose Abram and made a covenant with him to give the land of Canaan to his descendants, and that He had faithfully kept His promise (vv. 6-8). It was on the basis of the Lord's faithfulness to His people that Israel was to bless His glorious name.

The priest then detailed the story of the Lord's faithfulness by the reminding them of four important displays of the Lord's grace in their history

When God saw the affliction of His people in Egypt, He delivered them by great signs and wonders from the power of Pharaoh, gave them laws and judgments on

Sinai, miraculously provided them with food and water in the wilderness, and commanded them to take possession of the Promised Land (vv. 9–15).

Although their fathers rebelled against Him, even in the wilderness, God did not withdraw His mercy from them, but sustained them forty years, so that they lacked nothing; and subdued kings before them, so that they were able to conquer and possess the land (vv. 16–25).

After they were settled in the land they rebelled again, and God delivered them into the hand of their oppressors; but as often as they cried unto Him, He helped them again, till at length, because of their continued opposition, He gave them into the power of the people of the lands, yet because of His great mercy He did not wholly cast them off (vv. 26–31).

And now on the basis of the Lord's past dealings, the priests pray that the Lord would look upon the affliction of His people, as the God that keeps covenant and mercy, although they have deserved by their sins the troubles they are suffering (vv. 32–37). (Kiel)

The whole scene is an amazing display of honesty, humility, and contrition for their sinfulness against the Lord.

Our Response to Our Sins against the Lord

When we read the account of God's people in Nehemiah nine we should be challenged to think more soberly about our own transgressions against the Lord. The Lord has been good to us and has blessed us in so many ways; yet we often have ignored Him and His word.

If we marvel at the sinfulness of Israel in the face of such wonderful miracles and blessings, we might look more honestly at our own indifference to God and deliberate disobedience to His will.

Who among us can say that we have always honored God as we should? How often have we taken for granted God's goodness while returning to Him a nominal commitment of service?

Indeed the message of the gospel is clear on this point:

"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," (Romans 3:23)

In spite of our sinful condition, the Lord has shown an amazing grace to us through the sacrifice of His Son.

God's greatest act of grace in redemptive history took place when we were least deserving.

"For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." (Romans 5:6)

"For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life." (Romans 5:10)

The burden of our sin should create with us a comparable sense of godly sorrow and pain.

Jesus commended the man whose sense of guilt was so great that He could not even look up toward the holy place in the temple.

“But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’” (Luke 18:13)

That man, Jesus said, went home justified. Or as he would say in the Sermon on the Mount:

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” (Matthew 5:4)

The person who does not feel genuine sorrow for sin can hardly experience the joy of God’s forgiveness. If we do not feel the burden of sin, how can we appreciate the easy yoke of the Master?

Our sorrow and pain should lead us to seek His forgiveness and restoration of the Lord’s proper place in our lives.

The promise of God is that those who come to Jesus in humble penitence, obeying His terms of pardon, will know His forgiveness.

“Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. “Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and YOU SHALL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. “For My yoke is easy, and My load is light.”” (Matthew 11:28–30)

The people of Pentecost knew that pain when Peter told them they had crucified the Messiah.

“Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?” (Ac. 2:37)

But in that pain, they heard the good news of God’s pardon through the very one they had crucified:

And Peter said to them, “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38)

And so today, we too can receive His forgiveness and be restored to His fellowship.

Conclusion: Do you have the honesty and sensitivity of heart to admit your sins before God? Are you willing to accept His terms of pardon? If so, you can know the joy of His salvation and renewal.