

**The Amazing Grace of God!**  
**Nehemiah chapter 9**  
**Building for God's Glory!**  
**April 14th 2024**  
**Preacher: Pastor Roy Summers**

Nehemiah chapter 9 is solemn Scripture. So today's talk is a serious sermon. But since the Gospel is Good News and because we read that "where sin abounds, grace does more abound" (Romans 5:20) and since the promise of God for all who believe is "I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow" (Jeremiah 31:13) the trajectory of this sermon is towards joy and hope.

The people of God in Nehemiah chapter 9 were smarting under the chastening hand of God. Many decades earlier their forefathers had turned away from God and out of love, to discipline them, God had allowed first the Babylonians, then the Assyrians and now the Persians to oppress them - to destroy their city and drag them away to a foreign land. God promised that he would allow them to return after 70 years. And that return had begun! The walls had been rebuilt, Jerusalem was now secure again, the people had just experienced mountain-top moments of joy. Remember the 6 hour Bible-thon on Day 1? The intense Bible study on Day 2? The seven day Feast of Tabernacles that ran from the 15th to the 21<sup>st</sup>?

But, do you also remember the simmering sorrow that had bubbled up on Day 1 which the leaders had to temporarily calm? "The Levites calmed all the people saying "Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve." (8:11)? As the Bible was read the people had become aware of two things their wrongdoing, the Holy Spirit convicted them of their evil thoughts, their foolish words and their wicked actions. And the consequences of their sin. They realised that as wonderful as it was to have Jerusalem secure again, they were still in a bad way: "... we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave to our forefather so that they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces. Because of our sins, its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress.." (verse 38) Although they had returned from exile to their land, they were still smarting under the consequences of their own sin and the sin of their forefathers: they were still under the thumb of foreign powers. This pent up sorrow begins to pour out, "On the

24th day of the same month (just a few days after the Feast of Tabernacles), the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads. Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers.”

That day, the 24th of the month, just a few days after the 7 day Feast of Tabernacles, the people spent 3 hours hearing the Bible read followed by 3 hours worshipping God and confessing their sin.

Let’s fast-forward 2500 years from Jerusalem of 500 BC to ourselves in 2024. God’s redeemed people should not sin, “I write this to you so that you will not sin,” (1 John 2:1). But lamentably they do, “if we claim to without sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” (1 John 1:8). “If we claim we have not sinned we make God out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.” (1 John 1:10). And when God’s people sin they may have to face the earthly consequences sin. If a believer steals they may have to face the courts. If they tell lies, “A false witness will not go unpunished, and whoever pours out lies will not go free.” (Proverbs 19:5). If they commit adultery, the bomb they have placed in a safe place will explode. If they spend their money in wasteful or sinful practices, they may have to suffer the consequences of poverty. If a Christian indulges in pornography, there may be consequences in their marriage; and that unrepentant sin will war against the soul. Believers are not exempt from the earthly consequences of their sins. God allows these hardships to bring us back to himself.

And what is true of individuals can also be true collectively, communally, of Christian churches. The New Testament mentions a church in Corinth which was filled with sinful strife and selfishness. As a result God allowed sickness and death into the church: “many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep” (2 Cor 11:30)

What should a believer - or a Christian community— do if they find themselves smarting under the chastening hand of God? (At some point in the Christian journey every believer will experience the chastening hand of God.)

## (1) We should Lament our sins

There is a place, we evangelical Christians have forgotten, for lament, for sorrow, for contrition, for penitence. Not a quick “Lord forgive my sins” that’s my sins dealt, let’s move on, but with but a prolonged season of weeping and mourning for our sin. That’s what we have here: “the Israelites gathered together fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads.” (9:1)

**Fasting** - saying no to the noisy demands of our bodies so that we can tend to the quiet matters of the soul.

**Wearing sackcloth**— the opposite of silk pyjamas, right? A constant irritable reminder of our sin.

**Dust on your heads**— dust on our heads is so uncomfortable, irritating, we naturally want to wash it off, but no, it stays there as a raw reminder of what we have done wrong.

For three hours, verse 3, they confessed their sins—and their long prayer reveals that they itemised them, listed them, named them one by one:

- “We’ve been **arrogant**”
- “We’ve been **stiff-necked**”
- “We did **not obey your commands**”
- “We refused to **listen to you**”
- “We failed to **remember your miracles.**”
- We committed **aweful blasphemies.**”
- And so on and so forth,

I’m not saying that NT believers are called to put on sackcloth, fast and pour dust on our heads, but we are called to sorrow for our sins. The apostle Paul says there is such a thing as “godly sorrow” - as well as a thing called worldly sorrow. Worldly sorrow is “Oops I’ve got caught, O no, my name will be in the papers, O no, I’ll lose my job” - worldly sorrow is shallow and ineffective. But Godly sorrow runs deep, “Against you and you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.” (Psalm 51:4)

“Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.” (2 Corinthians 7:10)

There’s a time for lament, for sadness, for sorrow.

Our modern churches don’t do contrition well do we? In olden times, and especially in times of revival, people would openly weep over their sins.

In the American revival of the 1700s called the Great Awakening an outside observer wrote, *“before the sermon was done there was great moaning and crying out throughout the whole house.”*

We tend to think every meeting should be uplifting, cheery, festive, jubilant. But we learn from Nehemiah chapter 9 that there is a time for godly sorrow.

Can I ask you a question? When was the last time you mourned over your sin?

## **(2) We should pray for forgiveness**

Secondly, when we sin, we should confess our sins and ask for forgiveness. “The people confessed their sins.” (verse 2) How did Jesus encourage us to pray every day? –“Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” (Matthew 6) “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9)

“Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.” (Proverbs 28:13) When we sin we need to admit our sins to the Lord, not deny, excuse or cover them up, “I’m guilty, I did it” and the Lord promises to forgive them.

And now, the clouds are beginning to roll away, the sun is beginning to shine, there’s a rainbow of hope in the sky! “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgression's from us.” (Psalm 103) “You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the

sea.” (Micah 7:19) (And as one commentator added “God has placed a sign, no fishing!”)

The reason God can forgive our sins is because they have been paid in full by the suffering and death of the Lord Jesus: “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.” (1 Peter 3:18)

My sins, my sins, my Saviour!  
 They take such hold on me,  
 I am not able to look up,  
 save only, Christ, to thee;  
 in thee is all forgiveness,  
 in thee abundant grace,  
 my shadow and my sunshine  
 the brightness of thy face.

My sins, my sins, my Savior!  
 Their guilt I never knew '   
 til with thee in the desert  
 I near thy passion drew;  
 'til with thee in the garden  
 I heard thy pleading prayer,  
 and saw the sweat-drops bloody  
 that told thy sorrow there.

Therefore my songs, my Savior,  
 e'en in this time of woe,  
 shall tell of all thy goodness  
 to suffering man below;  
 thy goodness and thy favor,  
 whose presence from above  
 rejoice those hearts, my Savior,  
 that live in thee and love.

### **(3) We should remember the Lord**

That's what God's people do here: the longest part of this prayer, from verse 5 to verse 31 looks upwards to God, and remembers his greatness and his goodness and his grace! This is so important! Satan wants us to focus on our sin, he wants us to wallow in past failure, but Scripture urges us to move on to the future, to God's greatness, goodness and grace. "You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. Lord my God, I will praise you forever." (Psalm 30:11)

#### ***Remember the Greatness of God (verses 5-6)***

God's people turn their eyes from their failure to the greatness of God. Bringing to mind how great God is, inspires hope that he will be able to do mighty things for us in our present distress!

#### ***Remember the Goodness of God (verses 7– 15)***

Next, they brought to mind the goodness of God. Can we not each of us do that? Reflect on the goodness of God in our lives! How God called us to himself when we were far off, how he saved us from slavery to sin and Satan, how he gave us a new life in a new loving community of God's people!

*Now thank we all our God,  
With heart and hands and voices,  
Who wondrous things has done,  
In whom this world rejoices;  
Who from our mothers' arms  
Has blessed us on our way  
With countless gifts of love,  
And still is ours today.*

But most of all, in their present distress, the people of God...

#### ***Remember the Grace of God (verses 16-38)***

The longest part of their prayer is a reflection on how God had loved and cared for

them in the past in spite of their failure and sin! God had been patient and gracious to his people in the past, again and again and again! He did not cut them off, he did not abandon them!

Is that not our testimony too? If you have been following Jesus for 1, 5, 10, 20, 30 years, you will be able to trace his amazing grace in your story, short or long! How often we have gone astray, but he has continued to love you and care for you and provide for you and protect you!

*The King of love my shepherd is,  
whose goodness faileth never.  
I nothing lack if I am his,  
and he is mine forever.*

*Perverse and foolish, oft I strayed,  
but yet in love he sought me;  
and on his shoulder gently laid,  
and home, rejoicing, brought me.*

**(4) We should call out for help! (verses 32-37)** “Lord, don’t overlook the hardship and distress we are passing through—even though it is a result of our sin.”

### **Concluding Remarks**

We should stop here.

There is a time and place, brothers and sisters, for true believers to lament and sorrow, mourn and bewail our shortcomings. “How could I have done such a wicked thing and sinned against God?”

But we must not tarry long in the valley of mourning. We must move on to confession assured by the promise that God will forgive us! And then turn our eyes to the hills of God’s greatness, and his goodness and his amazing grace! And fortified by this renewed vision of the Lord, call out to him for help in our present need.