

X. Nehemiah in Biblical Perspective
The Memoirs of Nehemiah—Arise and Build
“Confession: Entering the Gospel No-Spin Zone”
Nehemiah 9
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October 30, 2011 – Morning Sermon

This is our tenth study in the book of Nehemiah and we are in Nehemiah 9. Initially I will read the first five verses and this is the Word of God. It’s the Truth. Nehemiah 9:1-5 says [1] *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. [2] And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. [3] 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. [4] 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. [5] 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.*

The grass withers, the flower fades, God’s Word abides forever, by His grace and mercy by this His Word be preached for you.

Before I give an introductory statement I want to make a request. I don’t know if you pray during sermons but I do. The most important time for you to pray is when I’m preaching. I ask you to pray for this one because I believe this one is absolutely crucial in more ways than I could possibly tell you. I cannot tell you the absolute inadequacy and inability that I sense to handle this subject in light of its importance in our lives for the work of the Gospel in this country and then from the church around the world. I know that I’m absolutely unequal to the task and I would ask that the Holy Spirit might enable you to go far beyond my ability today in this text. It’s a rather lengthy text but I can’t dismiss it. I’m not going to skip through because it has some things that are absolutely crucial for us so I want to get to it.

How many of you have heard we have been having some Presidential debates? I think there are 38 of them. When they are over what do they do? The news people go to this room and the candidates that have just debated send their representatives to the room. Do you know what they call that room? They call it the spin room. In other words, the representatives of the candidates go there to tell you that all the silly things you heard the candidates say they didn’t really say. Let me tell you something the rep said that was profound. He said “The mistakes they made weren’t really mistakes you just misheard them. Let me give you the true spin on this.” This is why they call it a spin room. Then there is a program on television that I’m sure some of you watch. The host of the program invites you into his program and he calls it the no spin zone. Are there any idiots that actually believe that is a no spin zone? You don’t think he’s spinning?

There is only one place I know and I desperately need to get there that is a no spin room/zone. Only the Gospel can get me there. Thankfully and finally Nehemiah’s heartbeat must be soaring for in Nehemiah 9 God’s people go into the room of confession

with no spin at all. I want you to see this text as it unfolds and I want to make sure you have it in its context because Nehemiah's memoir has been Holy Spirit blessed and thoughtfully enriched to give us this flow. The whole key to the book of Nehemiah is found in the two questions from Nehemiah 1; how are the people of God and how is the city of God. Hanani says "The city of God is in trouble for the walls are down, the gates are burned and the doors are down. The people are in distress, shame and reproach." Nehemiah understands that those two things are connected.

The reasons the walls are down is because the hand of God's judgment. The reason for God's judgment is because God has been faithful to His covenant to discipline His people because of their sin that has brought the shame and reproach. So Nehemiah says "Let's go to work on the wall in order not to just rebuild the wall but to rebuild the people." Nehemiah 1 through 6 is devoted to rebuilding the wall and the use of that to get to the lives of the people. Those first six chapters actually had two stories. As one preacher put it there is the 'happy story' in the first three chapters. Nehemiah prays, confesses and God's hand is upon them so they arise and build. Artaxerxes sends him, gives him resources, permission and protection. They have adversaries but they have the victory over the adversaries and in fifty two days they build the wall in front of their own home. It's not equal gifts but it is equal sacrifice. They all work together and this is given to us in the first three chapters.

Nehemiah 4 through 6 gives us the back story. They whole time they are under assault. There is spiritual warfare that is going on. There are enemies coming against them to try to stop them and intimidate them. They have seven tactics that they use but God gives the victory. At the end of Nehemiah 6 it is all built and God has the praise. Now the first day of the month has arrived which is the Feast of Trumpets so they blow the trumpet and gather for worship but not until Nehemiah 7 where they get new leadership in place. They identify and locate where the people are because now that the city has been built up now it's time to get it filled up. When God builds it up then God calls us by His grace to fill it up.

So in Nehemiah 8 the first thing they do is come together for worship in the Feast of Trumpets and the Bible is read for six hours. Ezra preaches from it and then they break out into small groups and teach them. Then they come back again and it goes on for the whole day. When they finish the leaders say "Go home rejoicing God's grace has fulfilled His promises, see there is the temple of God, the altar of God and the wall has been built around the city of God. Rejoice in the Lord!" They had the large group worship on the first day and the next day they come back and have small group Bible studies, particularly the Men of the Covenant gather, sound familiar?

At the end of Nehemiah 8 they are getting an in-depth Bible study and they discover that the Feast of Trumpets is supposed to be followed by the Feast of Booths, this eight day feast, which is supposed to be done until the Messiah comes. They hadn't done it since the days of Joshua. So they discover, they learn, they repent and so they do thirteen days of preparation and on the fifteenth day of the month they start the eight day Feast of Booths. For seven days they gather for worship and Bible reading. They get to the eighth day which is called in Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy the Solemn Assembly of Feasting and Celebration and that's where we are now in Nehemiah 9. They have come for the glorious concluding statement on the 24th day of the month of celebration and feasting, but they're not doing that are they?

They are not feasting and celebrating but they're fasting and confessing. For three and a half weeks they have been immersed in the Word of God. By the time they get to the 24th day of the month they have come with dirt on their heads, sackcloth, ashes, and confessing their sins. I have divided this up into three parts for you. They have this Solemn Assembly and they gather.

First of all they say for God's people to separate from all of those outside the covenant and come here. They come and God's Word is read and preached for three hours. Then they stand for another three hours and they worship and confess their sins. Who led them in worship? It's just like in Nehemiah 8. It is the leadership. Who leads them in confession? The same leaders that led them in celebration of worship in Nehemiah 8 now lead them on this Solemn Assembly in their confession of sins. There is one group of those leaders in particular that step up. It's the priests and Levites. They lead them in this prayer of confession that is unfolded in this text before us. They stand up and say "Bless the Lord, bless His holy name" and then they make an interesting statement that says "Bless His name above blessing." In other words, worship is not the objective. It's the instrument. It's the exaltation of God in worship that is the objective. "May His name be lifted up above our praise and our blessing." Then they lead them in this prayer.

I want to walk through this confession of God's people. There is the gathering of God's people in those opening verses now here is the confession in Nehemiah 9:6-37. It is lengthy but I will break it up a bit as it breaks itself up in the process. So first of all as God's people are confessing their sins how do they start? Nehemiah 9:6 says [6] "*You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you.*" They start with the adoration of God as the Creator and Sustainer. You're grace and mercy are flowing down to the earth but then they move from God as Creator and Sustainer to God as Redeemer and Provider. They selectively not exhaustively look back in the history of God's people beginning from their father Abraham.

Nehemiah 9:7-8 says [7] "*You are the LORD, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham.*" [8] "*You found his heart faithful before you, and made with him the covenant to give to his offspring the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite. And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous.*" Why do we have Abram as our father and why do we have God as our God? It is because You chose to save him. It wasn't because of Abram's choice. No, God found him. God's sovereign grace searched out a pagan Gentile idolater and brought him from death unto life as Savior and Redeemer. Then He made him a covenant. God said He would give him this land, this seed and He will be a God to him and to his seed after him. God will drive out all of his enemies to give him what He promised him. God is faithful and righteous but then where did they end up? They ended up in slavery in Egypt so what does God do then?

Nehemiah 9:9-15 says [9] "*And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea,*" [10] "*and performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants and all the people of his land, for you knew that they acted arrogantly against our fathers. And you made a name for yourself, as it is to this day.*"

[11] And you divided the sea before them, so that they went through the midst of the sea on dry land, and you cast their pursuers into the depths, as a stone into mighty waters. [12] By a pillar of cloud you led them in the day, and by a pillar of fire in the night to light for them the way in which they should go. [13] You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments, [14] and you made known to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses your servant. [15] You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger and brought water for them out of the rock for their thirst, and you told them to go in to possess the land that you had sworn to give them. That's what God did. What did they do?

Nehemiah 9:16-21 says [16] "But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments. [17] They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them, but they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. (Notice the insanity of sin.) But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them. [18] Even when they had made for themselves a golden calf and said, 'This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt,' and had committed great blasphemies, [19] you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness. The pillar of cloud to lead them in the way did not depart from them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night to light for them the way by which they should go. [20] You gave your good Spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst. [21] Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness, and they lacked nothing. Their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell.

What an amazing statement! You saved Abraham. You then brought us out of Egypt. You delivered us with Your strong hand. You brought judgment against those who would stop us. You gave us victories. You parted seas and gave us water. Nevertheless we said we didn't want You and Your leader. We want another leader to take us back to the paganism and idolatry and bondage that we were in. But You gave us a servant to lead us and we raised up a golden calf and said 'this inanimate nothing is what saved us.' We blasphemed Your holy name. Yet You were gracious with us. Then You even sustained us in the wilderness. Then what did He do?

Nehemiah 9:22-37 says [22] "And you gave them kingdoms and peoples and allotted to them every corner. So they took possession of the land of Sihon king of Heshbon and the land of Og king of Bashan. [23] You multiplied their children as the stars of heaven, and you brought them into the land that you had told their fathers to enter and possess. [24] So the descendants went in and possessed the land, and you subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gave them into their hand, with their kings and the peoples of the land, that they might do with them as they would. [25] And they captured fortified cities and a rich land, and took possession of houses full of all good things, cisterns already hewn, vineyards, olive orchards and fruit trees in abundance. So they ate and were filled and became fat and delighted themselves in your great goodness. [26] "Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies. [27] Therefore you gave them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer. And in the time of

their suffering they cried out to you and you heard them from heaven, and according to your great mercies you gave them saviors who saved them from the hand of their enemies. (He is describing the book of Judges here.) [28] But after they had rest they did evil again before you, and you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them. Yet when they turned and cried to you, you heard from heaven, and many times you delivered them according to your mercies. [29] And you warned them in order to turn them back to your law. Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your rules, which if a person does them, he shall live by them, and they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey. [30] Many years you bore with them and warned them by your Spirit through your prophets. Yet they would not give ear. Therefore you gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. [31] Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God. [32] “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. [33] Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly. [34] 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. [35] 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. [36] 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. [37] 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.

Do you see the flow that’s here? I know it’s a lengthy passage but don’t lose it because you have a history like this. This church has a history where God has been gracious upon grace upon mercy and we haven’t deserved it. He has saved men and women and redeemed them. He has brought boys and girls to Christ and yet we turn a stubborn shoulder, yet we stiffen our necks, yet we go after false gods, yet we even go after the good things of God and put those things in the place of God, nevertheless, God is gracious, relentless, pursuing, disciplining, bringing His faithful mercies from His covenant to His people.

Where are they going to end up? They will end up with a great commitment and we’ll look more at that next week. Nehemiah 9:38 says [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.* So here is this history and if you want to see the summation just look at Nehemiah 9:33; [33] *Yet you **have been righteous** in all that has come upon us, for you **have dealt faithfully** and we **have acted wickedly**.* Until we can say that and embrace that there will be no blessing.

Until we are able to confess our sins here is my simple takeaway. Our need is a Gospel Awakening. I keep saying it because I keep believing it. I want to make this clear. I don’t want to be misunderstood or discouraging to anyone. We need great Christian citizenship, we need great Christian leaders, we need great outcomes in elections, we need business men and women that understand how to do their business

Christianly but all of that is not our need. Our need to get those things in place for the glory of God and not for the glory of a nation, is a Gospel Awakening, a Gospel Awakening where sinners are saved, changed, forgiven, renewed, refreshed and turned for the glory and majesty of Christ and lose themselves in that. That is what is needed throughout the nation that I live in.

We need a Gospel Awakening but you cannot have a Gospel Awakening without God's chosen instrument being alive and that's His church. There will be no Gospel Awakening without a Gospel revival in the church of Jesus Christ. There will be no Gospel revival in the church until there is repentance. There will be no repentance until there is a God given no-spin zone where we go in and we own our sin, its absurdity, its consequences and that we have sinned against the Lord God Almighty. Until we own that we will not repent and until we repent we will not be alive. Unless Christ gives us that life through graciously giving us repentance by showing us our sin as we have sinned against Him through confession of sin and an act of repentance whereby we turn from our sin and put our trust in Christ alone, there will be no revival and if there is no revival there is no way that any nation can stand with a church that is dead in its midst.

This is ground zero for us. We will either leave here today saying "God show me my sin that I can own it" not someone else's or another church's or another denomination but show me my sin. Let me see my sin and as You let me see my sin, it's absurdity, it's insanity then give me a heart to confess it and turn from it to the God who has been so gracious to me and relentlessly loving me day after day after day. God, You are righteous. You are faithful. I am a sinner. I don't believe we believe that. I don't believe we believe we are sinners totally undone without Jesus. Then somehow we think when we come to Jesus that that mitigates how we ought to see the sin in our life. And somehow if we believe we have been saved by grace then sin is no big deal.

There are two things that can happen to us. One is when we begin to see our sin we get lost in the notion that if I don't do better God won't save me. God chooses to save His people by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone but there's another danger. The other danger is because I'm not saved by how I do and how well I do then somehow we think we're honoring the Lord by not dealing with the treachery of sin in our life. I heard someone preaching on it the other day. I think Ezra is probably the one who put this altogether for them. Do you think the Levites and Ezra are confessing/believing 'God You have been gracious but we've squandered Your grace'? Sure they said "You've been faithful we've been wicked." We haven't used Your grace to grow but as an excuse for wickedness. So this person who was preaching on it was half right when he said "When you squander God's grace with sin, God gives you more grace." If you read this that's true because God just kept bringing back works of grace to bring them back to Himself.

We squander God's grace with our sin and God chooses to keep sending grace to bring us back to Himself but what ought to also have been said was the squandering of grace with sin had a big price tag in the lives of men, women, boys and girls and families. Did Moses sin against God when he struck the rock? Absolutely, and did God forgive him? Was God's grace greater than Moses' sin? Yes sir but he still didn't get in the Promised Land. David was an adulterer and a murderer. Was God's grace bigger than that? Did God restore him back to right relationship with Him? Absolutely but David also buried a son. The sins that they are recounting in this text meant that Daniel,

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego didn't have a family from age 13 on to grow up with because they went away in exile. Did God forgive and restore the people when they sinned against Him in the wilderness? Yes He did but a generation died there.

We ought not to treat our sin lightly. When we do what we have done is denied the whole purpose of God's grace which isn't just to give us therapy to feel better but to bring us from sin to the pursuit of a Savior. He has relentlessly loved us and we ought not to reluctantly love Him. We ought to be ready to confess that. Where does this kind of confession come from? First of all it comes from a right view of God. It's no accident that this prayer starts off with "God as Creator, God as Sustainer, God as a sovereign Savior of sinners like Abraham our father that he was a pagan idolater and God chose to bring him from death unto life." They don't start off with sin but a right view of God. This is who God is – small God, small lives. With the right view of God we begin to see God and what sin is and that gives us a right view of sin.

What is sin? Sin is our traitorous, treasonous act against the gracious, glorious, majestic King who loves us and gave His Son for us. We have assassinated His worship by making worship a god. We have assassinated His glory and fellowship by counting how many times people say something to me instead of giving myself in the name of Christ to someone else. We assassinate the glory of God time and time again with our sin. It is treacherous what we do against God. Yet God stands ready to forgive, renew and to change us. He stands glorifyingly and powerfully committed to doing that in our life. When you get a right view of God you get a right view of sin which is cosmic treason against God who has given His Son to save us and bear that sin on a cross.

We also get a right view of ourselves. Have you ever noticed how we go into the spin room even when we're confessing? "Lord, I'm having a difficult time but Lord You know I had a dysfunctional parent." We are always looking for some biological reason for our sins or some environmental reason. It's nothing new. Adam did the same thing saying "God, I had a dysfunctional wife, that was my problem. By the way God I had a dysfunctional religion because You gave me her." Then it's the serpent but when the Gospel comes and you realize you're not saved by what you do and you're saved by God's grace then you're free to see what you do and see it for what it is and own it.

If we confess – agree with God about sin, its insanity, absurdity and its treacherousness – then God will forgive. How insane for me to sit and look in a computer and break apart my wife and my children for nothing that's real. How can I be that insane? I thank You that You are so understanding of me but thank You that You're not patient with sin. God, I don't want to assassinate Your glory. Help me be a sworn assassin against sin. I want to destroy sin because I have a Savior who has paid for all of my sins so that I'm free to go after my sin and I don't have to get in a spin room. Lord I slipped or fell into.... If you listen to some of my confessions you'd think it was gravity and not sin as if gravity pulled me over here.

Have you ever noticed celebrity confessions? I'd like to write a book on how not to confess. They say "If any of you were offended by what I said would you forgive me. If any of you took what I said the wrong way, would you forgive me?" You don't see the Levites doing that. They didn't say "God if You were offended by that little Baal deal..." No, they said "We took Your Law and hurled it behind our back, we put our shoulder against You, we stiffened our neck against You..." They are owning the commission, the absurdity, the treachery and the insanity of the sin. "We acted

wickedly!” They don’t spin it at all. It wasn’t gravity, an ism, a syndrome or my parents fault. It wasn’t that they didn’t have enough lights on the street which is why I stole things. “I have sinned against You!”

I have heard good news that when I own my sin and come to You, You save me from it. It’s a penalty and You’ll even begin to save me from its practice. I can have another life that is growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ. If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, repent and turn, confessing, humbling ourselves, not spinning blaming someone else or something else but saying “I have sinned against You” God will hear you and forgive you.

My favorite moment in that movie “Courageous” was when the guy is trying to share Christ with this fellow and the man said “I got a woman pregnant who had the child and I didn’t do anything for her or the child.” The other man said “I’m just going to get up because you’re making me feel guilty.” The greatest line in that entire movie was the next one, “You are guilty. Now come to Christ.” Christ takes away the condemnation and the guilt. Then He will move you and grow you by grace and knowledge to know Him.

I want to give you this last thought and then we’ll close. I think this is it. If we don’t get here we’re not going anywhere. We’ll be business as usual. Until we’re desperate to know and love Christ we won’t confess our sins, as long as it’s Christ plus everything else or as long as Christ is our guru in the sky that will do this or our tribal genie or someone that we rub to get things. Lord, without You we can do nothing. God, my sin is standing between me and You. Thank You for paying for it now help me confess it and repent of it. Allow me to do that.

I believe the untold story here is the 13 years that Ezra studied, practiced and preached the Word of God to this moment. I think the untold story is the three and a half weeks that they got into God’s Word, the protracted study of the Word that brought them to this point. Ezra had been preaching God’s Word. They had come to God’s Word. Nehemiah had led them to God’s Word and when they came to God’s Word they saw the God of the Word. Then they saw themselves and what God had done and they began to repent. Now the channels are being opened for a heaven sent, Spirit filled, Christ exalting, Gospel drenched, sinner saving, life changing revival. Now the doors are begin flung open. Now there is time for renewing the covenant. Now they are dealing with their sins in light of the grace and glory of God.

Where did they stand? They stood 2500 years ago standing on the top of Mount Sinai with types, shadows and laws looking at this and they understood they needed to repent. Where do you and I stand? We don’t stand on Mount Sinai, we stand on Mount Calvary. We are at that place. Christ was suspended between heaven and earth so that God could be gracious if we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us. Why? Christ has purchased the holiness of God to be satisfied with His death on the cross so that I could confess. God will forgive and cleanse because of what Christ has done. It is Christ who has opened the door for God’s relentless love to pursue me, change me, and move upon me. And until that happens to me it’s not going to happen in the church I pastor and if doesn’t happen in the church I pastor then it’s no accident that the leaders, the elders and deacons, are missing this entire movement here. Until that happens with us it won’t happen to His church. I pray it happens here.

God, don’t bypass us. Do something here, that it’s not church we’re doing and it’s not just being religious that we’re doing. We are owned by Christ and we love

Christ. We are the sworn assassins of sin because of the relentless love of Christ that pursued us from Mount Calvary. Look at the vantage point we have that we gaze upon God's grace. Will we not hate our sin because we love our Savior? Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together. Thank You for meeting with us. You may be reading this today and you may not realize there is a gracious God that gave you breath. He allowed you to hear that Jesus died for your sins, that sin destroys, that sin brings death, that sin is missing the glory of God, falling short of what God made you for. Confess, repent and trust in Him who came to save you from your sins. I think the time is short. God has been gracious to us. We have a history. We can't live in it. It's not about a preacher, it's not about a denomination and it's not even about a church. It's about a church making it all about Christ and confessing and turning from our sins. Examine yourselves. Come to the Table. The Lord is good. Sin is to be killed lest it kills others. I confess again my absolute inadequacies. Please overrule by Your Spirit. Cause these Your people to love You and hate sin. Cause us to own our sin, it's insanity, it's absurdity, its treachery. Grant us repentance through Christ and the glorious victory of the cross. Jesus be exalted I pray, in Your Name, Amen.