

The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

Lesson 11: Confession and a Renewed Covenant -- Nehemiah 9:1–10:39

Picture the scene. The festival of booths is barely over, the joy of the reading of the Law still ringing in the air, and now, on the twenty-fourth day of the month, the people of Israel gather again. This time there is no feasting. They come in sackcloth, with dust on their heads, fasting, weeping, and reading the Law of the LORD for a quarter of the day and confessing for another quarter. They have separated themselves from everything that is foreign, and they stand in their place and tell the truth about themselves. It is one of the most honest moments in all of Scripture. You can almost feel the weight of it, a whole nation kneeling under the gaze of a holy God and saying, in effect, you have been right and we have been wrong.

We do not often see worship like this anymore. We are good at celebration and sometimes good at request, but we are not always good at confession. We tend to rush past our sin the way we rush past a stain we hope no one notices. Yet here is a people who set aside a whole day to look honestly at the gap between who God is and who they have been, and instead of being crushed by it, they are healed by it. There is something profoundly freeing about telling the truth in the presence of mercy. That is what this chapter offers us, a model of repentance that does not begin with how bad we are but with how good and faithful God has been.

The heart of Nehemiah 9 is a sweeping prayer led by the Levites, and it is essentially a retelling of the whole story of God with His people. They go all the way back to creation, then to Abraham, then down into Egypt and through the sea, up to Sinai, into the wilderness, across into the land, and through the long, painful cycle of rebellion and rescue. And the refrain that runs underneath it all is this: God kept being faithful even when His people kept being faithless. He was, in their own words, ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Genuine repentance, it turns out, is born not by staring at our failure but by remembering His character.

Then in chapter 10 the people do something brave. They make it binding. They write it down, they seal it, and the leaders sign their names to a covenant to walk in God's law, to keep their families holy, to honor the day of rest, and to provide for the house of God. Confession that does not change anything is just emotion. These people refuse to let their tears evaporate into nothing. They turn sorrow into specific, concrete commitment. As we walk through these two chapters, we will ask what it means for us, on this side of the cross, to repent honestly, to rest in God's mercy, and to give Him not just our feelings but our wholehearted, daily obedience.

Group Discussion: When was the last time your group, your family, or your congregation set aside real time simply to confess sin together rather than to ask, celebrate, or plan? What do you think we lose when confession disappears from our worship, and what might we gain if we recovered it?

Personal Reflection: The Levites' prayer in Nehemiah 9 retells God's faithfulness from creation forward before it ever confesses Israel's failure. Spend a few minutes writing your own short history of God's faithfulness to you, the specific times He kept His promises when you did not keep yours. How does remembering His faithfulness change the way you approach your own confession?

Read Nehemiah 9:1–10:39

Study Questions

1. In Nehemiah 9:5–6, the Levites begin their prayer by exalting God as the sole Creator who made heaven, earth, the seas, and all that is in them, and who gives life to everything. Why is it significant that genuine confession begins by lifting our eyes to who God is rather than by cataloging what we have done, and how does a right view of God's greatness shape true repentance?
2. The people fasted, wore sackcloth, and separated themselves before they confessed (9:1–2). Without copying the outward customs, what would it look like for you to take confession seriously enough to set aside real time and create real space for it in your own life?
3. Verses 9:7–15 retell God's covenant with Abraham, the deliverance from Egypt, the parting of the sea, the giving of the Law at Sinai, and the provision of manna and water in the wilderness. What does this deliberate retelling of redemptive history teach us about how God wants His people to remember, and why is remembering His past faithfulness essential to present obedience?
4. Nehemiah 9:16–17 says that even after such mercies, the fathers acted presumptuously, stiffened their necks, and even appointed a leader to return to slavery in Egypt. Where do you find yourself tempted to turn back toward an old bondage that God has already delivered you from, and what does that backward pull reveal about your heart?

5. At the center of the prayer stands the great confession of God's character in 9:17, that He is a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, who did not forsake His people even when they made a golden calf. How do these descriptions of God hold together His justice and His mercy, and how does the cross of Christ show us that God forgives without ever excusing sin?
6. In 9:26–31 the prayer traces a painful cycle: the people rebelled, God disciplined them, they cried out, He delivered them, and then they rebelled again. Can you trace a similar cycle anywhere in your own walk with God, and what would it take, with His help, to finally break the pattern rather than repeat it?
7. The Levites confess in 9:33, you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly. Why is it spiritually healthy and even necessary for God's people to acknowledge that God is just in His dealings with them, and how does owning our own guilt without blaming God open the door to real restoration?
8. In chapter 10 the people did not stop at feeling sorry; they made a binding written covenant, sealed and signed, committing to concrete obedience in their marriages, their worship, and their giving (10:28–39). What is one area where God may be calling you to move past good intentions and make a definite, binding commitment to obey Him?
9. The renewed covenant of Nehemiah 9–10 rests entirely on the character of God revealed in the prayer, righteous, faithful, merciful, and ready to forgive, and it calls the people to wholehearted repentance and obedience. Trace how this same covenant-keeping God brings His promises to their full and final fulfillment in the New Covenant in Christ. How does the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus secure the forgiveness these people longed for, why does this New Covenant call us to genuine repentance rather than mere remorse, and how

do the specific Old Covenant stipulations they bound on themselves, such as Sabbath-keeping and the temple tax, differ from the way Christians now live out covenant faithfulness?

10. Name one specific way the Lord Jesus is shaping you through this study of Nehemiah 9–10, one concrete habit of honest confession, one settled trust in His mercy, or one definite act of wholehearted obedience that you will begin this week so that your repentance becomes more than a feeling.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Psalm 51:1–17, David's model of honest confession resting on God's steadfast love and mercy; Hebrews 8:6–13, the New Covenant in Christ that fulfills and surpasses the old; 1 John 1:7–9, the cleansing and faithful forgiveness available now in Christ; 2 Corinthians 7:9–11, godly grief that produces genuine repentance rather than mere regret; Colossians 2:13–17, freedom from the Old Covenant shadows now fulfilled in Christ

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