ONGOING REPENTANCE

Nehemiah 9:1-38

By

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Nehemiah Lesson 10

**Ongoing Repentance**  
Nehemiah 9:1-38

Thirty years ago this week, the U.S. Supreme Court made it legal to kill babies in the womb right up to the time of birth for just about any reason. Making it legal did not make it moral in the sight of God, the creator and sustainer of life. Forty million human lives have been snuffed out, mostly because it was inconvenient for the mother to have the child.

It is to our shame as Protestants that most of those working in the pro-life movement are from the Roman Catholic Church. God used the late Francis Schaeffer and Dr. C. Everett Koop to help call evangelicals into the battle in the late 1970’s with their “Whatever Happened to the Human Race?” seminars.

God has called us to differing ministries, so that not all of us can work for the pro-life cause. But it seems to me that there should be some in our congregation who sense the burden from God to work on behalf of justice for the unborn. Some need to devote themselves to helping women with difficult pregnancies to bring their babies into this world.

All of us, whether we are called to the ministry of the pro-life cause or not, should mourn the sin of abortion and demonstrate ongoing repentance before God for this and the many other grievous sins of our nation. We begin the Christian life through repentance and faith (Acts 11:18; 16:31). If we have not repented of our sins, we have not truly believed in Jesus Christ in a saving way. Colossians 2:6 instructs us, “Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him.” Since we received Him through repentance and faith, we should walk in repentance and faith. Ongoing repentance should mark believers in Christ.

Nehemiah 9 should be linked with Nehemiah 8, where the people heard God’s Word read and wept in repentance as they realized how seriously they and their forefathers had sinned. But it was a time for a feast and so Nehemiah and the other leaders ex-
horted the people not to weep, but to rejoice, adding, “for the joy of the Lord is your strength” (8:10).

But now, two days after the end of the Feast of Booths, the people gather again, this time with fasting, sackcloth, and dirt on them to express grief over their sins. Again the law of the Lord is read for several hours, and then the Levites, perhaps led by Ezra, pray in repentance, asking God to take note of their subservience to a foreign king (9:5-38). Along with Ezra 9 and Daniel 9, it is one of the great prayers of confession in the Bible. It is full of rich instruction about who God is, who we are, and how God has graciously worked on behalf of His people. It teaches us that...

**Because we are so prone to sin and because God is so rich in mercy, ongoing repentance should mark our lives.**

Before we look at the chapter in more detail, let me repeat what I said when we looked at Nehemiah 8:10, “the joy of the Lord is your strength.” Some of you by nature are more gloomy, whereas some by nature are more cheerful and upbeat. The more gloomy types will especially need to work at joy in the Lord, but even the upbeat types need to cultivate this quality, because it is not the joy of an upbeat personality, but the joy of the Lord that we need.

The same observation applies to Nehemiah 9. Some by nature tend to be more introspective and conscientious, always lamenting over their imperfections and sins. Others can commit serious sins with hardly a twinge of conscience and shrug it off with a glib, “We’re under grace!” If you are the gloomy type, you probably need to camp out in passages like Romans 8, which asks, “Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns?” “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus” (8:33, 34a; 1). If you are the glib type, who too easily shrugs off your sin, then you probably need to camp out in passages like Nehemiah 9, which confesses both personal and corporate sins. The chapter brings out three simple but important lessons:

1. **We are so prone to sin.**

   The chapter rehearses not just the sins of God’s chosen people, but worse, the sins of God’s chosen people in the face of His abundant mercy and grace. It is one thing to sin repeatedly if you
do not know God, but it is far worse to sin repeatedly when you have tasted of God’s grace and love. Derek Kidner (Ezra & Nehemiah, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries [IVP], p. 112) observes, “Sin abounds, grace superabounds…. Throughout this miraculous pilgrimage ‘they lacked nothing’ (21)—and appreciated nothing (17).”

It’s easy to read this account of Israel’s repeated sins in the face of God’s abundant mercy and think, “How could those Jews be so ungrateful? How could they be so hardhearted?” It’s also easy to read this account and think, “How can my mate be so prone to sin? He [she] reads the Bible and goes to church where the Bible is preached. What’s wrong with him [her]?“ Thus we fail to apply it to ourselves. We ought to read this chapter and realize that we’re looking in the mirror. It describes the propensity of my heart! “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it; prone to leave the God I love” (Robert Robinson, “Come Thou Fount”).

Keep in mind that this prayer of confession followed and flowed out of the extended reading of God’s Word (9:3). The Word of God reveals to us the true condition of our hearts. Sin deceives and blinds us to our true condition. We’re prone to compare ourselves to others, invariably to those who aren’t quite as godly as we are. We think, “I’m not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get” (Luke 18:11-12).

But “the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do” (Heb. 4:12-13). The Bible lays bare the true condition of our hearts before God.

John Calvin opens Book One, “The Knowledge of God the Creator,” of his Institutes of the Christian Religion [ed. by John T. McNeill, Westminster Press] by pointing out that as we gain some knowledge of God, we will see how corrupt we are and thus seek Him. Then he writes (1:1:2),
Again, it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself. For we always seem to ourselves righteous and upright and wise and holy—this pride is innate in all of us—unless by clear proofs we stand convinced of our own unrighteousness, foulness, folly, and impurity. Moreover, we are not thus convinced if we look merely to ourselves and not also to the Lord, who is the sole standard by which this judgment must be measured.

Work your way through Nehemiah 9 and see as in a mirror your own heart. God brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt through His mighty power. But as soon as they encountered trials in the wilderness, they wanted to go back to Egypt. Even so, even though we have experienced God’s salvation, we’re all prone when we encounter hardship to think, “If this is how God treats me, forget it! I was better off when I was in the world.”

The chapter goes on to describe the abundant blessings that God provided for His people. But in spite of all of His goodness, “they became disobedient and rebelled against [Him], and cast [His] law behind their backs and killed [His] prophets who had admonished them” (9:26). So God delivered them over to oppressors. When they cried out to Him, He mercifully delivered them, only for them again to do evil. This cycle was repeated many times (9:27-30). Again, read it and see your own heart in the mirror. In spite of God’s repeated and abundant compassion on me, the sinner, I am so prone to lust after the things of the world rather than to be satisfied with the supreme blessing of God Himself.

There is a paradox in the Christian life: the longer you walk with God, the more godly you become. And yet, the more godly you become, the more you are aware of the terrible depravity of your own heart. It was not at the beginning of Paul’s Christian life, but toward the end that he said, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all” (1 Tim. 1:15). He did not say, “among whom I used to be foremost of all,” but rather, “I am foremost of all.” The closer Paul walked with God and gazed upon His perfect righteousness, the more he was aware of his own sinfulness, even though in his daily walk he was growing
in holiness. Even so, the more that you come to know God and your own heart through His Word, the more you will realize how prone to sin you really are. This will keep you at the foot of the cross, trusting in God’s free grace. That leads to the second lesson:

2. **God is so rich in mercy.**

God’s abundant mercy is the dominant theme of this prayer. It begins by exalting God and His glorious name (9:5) and then it starts where the Bible does, with God as the almighty Creator of everything, who gives life to every living creature. All the angels bow before Him (9:6). God chose Abram, brought him out from Ur of the Chaldees, and gave him the name Abraham (9:7; the only Old Testament reference outside of Genesis to God’s changing Abram’s name). God made a covenant with Abraham to give him and his descendants the land of Canaan (9:8). God delivered His people from bondage in Egypt and provided for them in the wilderness (9:9-15). Note that God is the subject and the initiator throughout these verses.

Then, after recounting the arrogance and stubbornness of the people, they pray, “But You are a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness; and You did not forsake them” (9:17). Even when they made the golden calf, “You, in Your great compassion did not forsake them in the wilderness” (9:19). It continues to list the many gracious blessings that God conferred on His disobedient and ungrateful people (9:20-25). Yet in spite of their repeated rebellion, God’s compassion was greater (9:27, 28, 31).

This is the great news of the gospel, that no matter how awful and terrible and numerous your sins are, God’s grace is greater!

Marvelous grace of our loving Lord,
Grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt!
Yonder on Calvary’s mount outpoured,
There where the blood of the Lamb was spilt.

Grace, grace, God’s grace,
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within;
Grace, grace, God’s grace,
Grace that is greater than all our sin! [Julia H. Johnston]
You may think, “But you don’t know the extent of my sins!” That’s true, I don’t know, but God does and He reveals Himself as a “God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness” (9:17). You may still think, “But you don’t know how often I have sinned, even after coming to know Jesus Christ.” True, but God does know and He reveals Himself here as a God who keeps on forgiving, not because people deserve to be forgiven, but rather in spite of their not deserving to be forgiven. We need to understand two things here:

A. God’s abundant mercy is primarily so that He will be glorified and only secondarily for our benefit.

The prayer states that God performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and the Egyptians to make a name for Himself (9:10). This reflects Exodus 9:16, where the Lord says concerning Pharaoh, “For this reason I have allowed you to remain, in order to show you My power and in order to proclaim My name through all the earth.” Paul cites that verse in Romans 9:17 and then goes on to assert God’s sovereignty by saying, “So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.” He does not say, as many would like the verse to say, “He has mercy on whoever trusts in Christ, and He hardens all those who reject Christ.” Rather, Paul puts the reason for God’s giving or withholding mercy solely on God’s good pleasure, and not at all on anything in man.

He develops this further by stating that as the potter, God has the right to make one vessel for honorable use and another for common use. The reason God endures with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction is so that He could “make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory” (Rom. 9:21-23).

I am saying that salvation is not primarily man-centered; it is primarily God-centered. It is not mainly to make us feel good; it is mainly to make God look good. John Piper, who develops this theme at length in his excellent (although not easy!) God’s Passion for His Glory [Crossway Books], also touches on it in his book for pastors, Brothers, We are NOT Professionals [Broadman & Holman]. Piper says that he was raised with the verse, “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” But it was not until he was confronted with the writings of Jonathan Ed-
wards in seminary that he was hit with the biblical truth that God is the most God-centered person in the universe. “God’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy His glory forever.” Piper explains why this is important,

Because many people are willing to be God-centered as long as they feel that God is man-centered. It is a subtle danger. We may think we are centering our lives on God, when we are really making Him a means to self-esteem. Over against this danger I urge you to ponder the implications ... that God loves His glory more than He loves us and that this is the foundation of His love for us (pp. 6-7).

After several paragraphs of demonstrating from Scripture that “God performs salvation for His own sake” (italics his), Piper writes (pp. 7-8):

This is no isolated note in the symphony of redemptive history. It is the ever-recurring motif of the all-sufficient Composer. Why did God predestine us in love to be His sons? That the glory of His grace might be praised (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14). Why did God create a people for Himself? “I created [them] for my glory” (Isa. 43:7). Why did He make from one lump vessels of honor and vessels of dishonor? That He might show His wrath and make known His power and reveal the riches of His glory for the vessels of mercy (Rom. 9:22-23). Why did God raise up Pharaoh and harden his heart and deliver Israel with a mighty arm? That His wonders might be multiplied over Pharaoh (Exod. 14:4) and that His name might be declared in all the earth (Exod. 9:16).

Piper continues with more Scriptures to demonstrate the same truth, that “God’s most fundamental allegiance is to His own glory” (p. 9). Don’t get caught in the man-centeredness of our day by thinking that salvation is primarily for man. Salvation is primarily to glorify God.

B. God’s abundant mercy does not come to us through anything in us, but through His free grace in Christ.

This point flows out of the previous one and is just as practical. Many Christians think that God’s mercy and grace are contingent on our faith or (even worse) on our works, whereas Scripture
plainly declares that our faith and our works are contingent on God’s mercy and grace. In Ephesians 2, after stating that we were dead in our trespasses and sins (vv. 1-3), Paul states, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)” (vv. 4-5). Then (2:8-9) he repeats, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” Paul could not make it clearer, that it was when we were dead that God made us alive and saved us by His grace. He grants us repentance and saving faith as His gifts (Acts 11:18; Phil. 1:29). Salvation is totally by His grace, and not at all from ourselves.

This, too, has to do with God’s glory. If anything about our salvation was rooted in us, we could and would boast in what we contributed. But how much can dead people contribute to their resurrection? God did it all; He gets all the glory!

This prayer in Nehemiah 9 shows that we are so prone to sin, but God is so rich in mercy. Therefore,

3. Ongoing repentance should mark our lives.

Again, there is a paradox (or irony) in Scripture. Believers should rejoice always, and yet we should mourn over our sins. This mourning for sin should be both for our personal sins as well as for the corporate sins of God’s people.

James Boice (Nehemiah, Learning to Lead [Revell], p. 148) shows the progression of thought that flows from this prayer: First, “There can be no genuine forward moral progress for either a nation or an individual without an acknowledgment of, sorrow for, and a true turning from sin.” Second, “But there can be no true sense of what sin is or a knowledge of why it is sinful without a hearing of and response to the law of God.” Third, “Consequently, revival must be preceded by sound preaching of the whole counsels of God, particularly the Law of God, which we have violated.”

He goes on (pp. 148-149) to point out that what these people did in confessing the sins of their fathers (9:2) was the opposite of what most people do today. Today, if people refer to the sins of their parents at all, it is to excuse themselves by blaming their par-
ents, rather than to confess and mourn over the sins of their parents that have also tainted them.

Ongoing repentance takes sin seriously and takes the necessary steps to break from it. True repentance accepts responsibility for sin and does not blame God. As they prayed (9:33), “You are just in all that has come upon us; for You have dealt faithfully, but we have acted wickedly.” The chapter ends on what may seem like a down note, with the mention of the great distress of the nation. But as Kidner points out (p. 113), “The great distress which ends the prayer is a sign of life and of a vision that has not been tamely given up.” Because God is so rich in mercy toward sinners, whenever His word convicts us of sin or reveals the sins of our nation or our fathers, we should come before Him in repentance, appealing to His great compassion and grace.

Conclusion

It is my prayer that God would graciously use this message, in light of the infamous anniversary of legalized baby killing in America, to prompt some, through ongoing corporate repentance, to get involved in the pro-life movement. Not all will be so led, but just a few can make a huge difference. It should not be just women, but also men, who are moved by compassion for unborn children and compassion for misguided, confused, self-centered pregnant women, to get involved so that God would be glorified through the good deeds of His people.

I also pray that if anyone here is overwhelmed by guilt because of your sins (including, perhaps, the sin of abortion), you will realize that God is abundant in mercy toward sinners and that His great love will draw you to the cross of Christ for forgiveness and refuge. And I pray that all of us who have tasted God’s mercy will glorify Him through ongoing repentance and increasing godliness in our daily lives.
Discussion Questions

1. In what sense and to what degree should we confess the sins of our fathers (Neh. 9:2)? What does this mean?

2. One popular author argues that if we view ourselves as sinners, we will sin more. Why is he mistaken? Where is the right balance between seeing ourselves both as righteous in Christ and yet “the chief of sinners”?

3. Why is it important to see that God’s chief aim in salvation is His glory even above our well being?

4. Why does it matter that salvation is totally of God and not a joint endeavor between God and sinners?