

Nehemiah 9:1-38

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 10 January 2021

Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] To turn in Nehemiah chapter 9. I'll name my chapter 9. I was speaking with a couple once. I don't know how it really came about. They wanted the church to do something for them. I remember asking them, would you call yourself a Christian? It's easier to ask someone, isn't it? Would you call yourself a Christian? Then are you a Christian? I don't really understand why. But it's easier to do that. And they said, no, not really. And I asked them why. And they said to me, I'll never forget it. If we were God, we wouldn't want people to bow down and worship us. If we were God, we wouldn't want people to bow down and worship us. So we don't worship God. I remember thinking, I've got no answer. I'm for that. The problem was, isn't it, with those people is they thought that God was rather like us.

[1 : 10] They'd imagine God was rather like them. English, middle class, aspiring people. The psalmist says, isn't it, you thought that I was one such as you are.

But Nehemiah 9 tells a really different story, doesn't it? Because in Nehemiah chapter 9, the people of God suddenly recognize that God is not like us at all. And God really does want us to bow down and worship him and surrender to him because he is God.

Last time you remember, before Christmas, you probably don't remember, we looked at Nehemiah chapter 8. And we saw that God's people had been listening, hadn't they, for hours on end to the reading and the explaining and the preaching of God's word, the Bible.

They'd done so for an extended time and they'd had prolonged exposure to the word of God. And it led to a change in their lives, a transformed attitude for themselves, to God, to other people, to life itself.

It exposed their sin. God is different to us, they discovered. God is holy and we're not. And if we are going to be right in our relating to God, there's something that we need.

[2 : 26] We need his forgiveness. And so they began to weep and mourn. And their Bible study leaders, the Levites, said, no, this isn't a time for mourning just yet. It's a time for celebration.

And so they have a season of festivity and celebration. Because for the first time, they're beginning to understand the message of God's word. There's been a famine and now there's a feast.

And we join them at the beginning of chapter 9, at the end of these kind of festivities and celebration. But now, finally, the time for mourning has come. And God has been dealing with them as they listen to his word.

Chapter 8 and verse 18. They came back together for Bible study, for hearing Ezra the scribe read from the book of the law. They've constantly been exposed to God's word day after day.

And it had cut into their consciences. So that in response to that, they have another great assembly. And now they begin to repent of their sin. And so what you've got in chapter 9 is really the continuing work of transformation in the people of God.

[3 : 34] It began in chapter 8 with the preaching of the gospel. But here it takes the form of a season of careful, thoughtful, premeditated repentance.

Of getting right with God. And I want us to notice five aspects of this season of repentance.

Whenever I say that, I should never tell you, isn't it? I can feel the kind of heaviness descend on you.

Five points. On a Sunday evening. The first one is very long. That will cheer you up. And then the next four quicker. I want to see five things about repentance.

If you've got something to write it down. The first thing is repentance. First, it's necessary. Secondly, it's relational. It's believing. It's transparent. It's doxological.

First of all, repentance is necessary. And I simply want you to clock in your minds this. That the people here see repentance not as optional, not occasional, not peripheral.

[4 : 40] But necessary. And vital. And central. And that is what you do when you see that God is holy in his word. And when God's word shows you for what you really are.

And we noticed last time what's been happening in chapter 8. They saw this truth of who God is. And they saw the truth of themselves in the light of that.

That God is holy and we are sinners. And what they realized that if that is the situation, then we are doomed. That the situation is hopeless.

That God is going to destroy us forever. His eyes are too pure to even look upon evil. Unless God in his mercy forgives and cleanses us from our sin.

And so God appoints repentance, believing repentance, as the way that we turn from sin. And we rest on the mercy of God available to us in the gospel.

[5 : 45] And so that's why Nehemiah, there's so much attention given to repentance. It's the longest prayer in the Bible. That's why the people of Jerusalem take so much time over this.

Devoting themselves carefully, thoughtfully, deliberately to repentance. And so we need to realize, don't we, that repentance is not a get out of jail free card.

You know what it's like in the family, isn't it? Where you say you need to say sorry. And what happens? They say sorry. Not that. Really quickly. They say sorry.

Really quickly. But repentance isn't that. Repentance isn't saying sorry. It's not a quick sorry which kind of absolves your conscience. But it's often how we do it, isn't it?

They take sin very, very seriously, indeed. Now, let's just notice in the first couple of verses of chapter 9, there's some practical disciplines that they make use of.

[6 : 46] All right? So repentance is necessary. And yet some real practical things that they do to help them with their repentance. So look at verse 1. They fast. Do you see that in the Bible?

One of the reasons for fasting is to give expression to mourning. And if there ever was a reason to mourn, it's that you become aware of the depth and the reality of your heart.

And the sin in your heart. And so when you fast, like some of us did on Friday, what are we saying? What are we saying when we fast? By going without food for a time. We're saying, aren't we, oh God, for so long I've sought to satisfy my soul with junk.

With screens and with media. And with food. But you actually are the food that I long for.

When we fast, we're saying, man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. It's why it's such a helpful thing. We say when we fast, God, you are more necessary to my life than daily sustenance.

[7 : 55] I love you more than I love sausage roll from Greg's at 11 o'clock. I need you more than I need my lunch.

And so with every hunger pang that they feel. They remind themselves of their need for God. Their need for God's mercy is more important than their stomachs.

And their need for God's mercy is immediate and demanding and urgent. And as they feel that drive to eat and be satisfied, so they fast.

For years, I didn't think fasting was appropriate. I've changed my mind on that. You know that. John Piper's book on hunger for God is so, so helpful to us on this.

It's saying, isn't it, oh God, I need you. God, I want you. And so they fast in order to focus on feasting by faith in the grace of God.

[8 : 57] And they call out to him for mercy and cleansing. And then they put on sackcloth and they put dust on their heads. It's the mourner's uniform. In other words, what are they doing in verse 1?

They're not pretending that it's business as usual. They set things up so that they take this seriously. They're telling themselves, our sin is as serious as death.

It's like going to a funeral. They get dressed in the mourner's clothes. And it will be our funeral if God does not have mercy upon us. And then in verse 2, they separate themselves from foreigners.

That is, they step away from close relationships with people who don't worship their God. They take time apart from them to be alone and be with other believers and to call out to God without distraction.

And they also listen to the word of God. We'll think a little bit more about that. But I think it's helpful to see this list of disciplines. How they made use of the Bible. Verse 3, they read it.

[10 : 04] They stood in their place and read from the book of the law of the Lord their God for a quarter day. And for another quarter of it, they made confession and worshipped the Lord their God.

They put biblical truth before their eyes and in their minds and they meditate on God's word.

Because nothing awakens a desire for more of God and less of self. And that's repentance. More of God, less of self.

That's repentance. And nothing awakens a desire for more of God than prolonged exposure to God's truth. And so all of that gives a picture, doesn't it, of how detailed their repentance is.

How seriously they took it. How necessary a thing. How vital it is. So repentance is not something that you can do under your breath. In a cursory, off-the-cuff kind of way.

God has got no interest in your repentance if there's no investment of your heart and your mind and your will and your affections. Without the investment of time.

[11:15] And ideally with thought and with planning. And so I think we need to learn, don't we, from God's people here that repentance is a discipline of grace. As well as a saving grace that God has worked in us by his Holy Spirit.

It demands our attention. We should set apart time. Even maybe dedicate seasons in our lives where from time to time we will focus on God where we fast, where we turn to him and cry out to him for more of him in our lives.

Now I need to say a word of caution at this point. Because as soon as I say all of this, and as soon as I talk about disciplines, I'm aware of a danger in my own heart.

And you might not think this needs saying. You might be far more godly than I. But I know my own heart. And if you're anything like me, it really does need saying. Because going through the motions of the disciplines that these people made.

Is no help to them in their repentance. If it's not repentance. Let me try and explain that.

[12:23] So mourning, weeping, praying, Bible study, fasting. That is not repentance. You can do all that, can't you? You can take a day and go and hide in the woods with your Bible alone.

And fast and pray. And you can leave feeling much, much better about yourself in the end. And subtly convince yourself that you've twisted God's arm.

By the extraordinary lengths which you've gone to to show that your repentance is real. And you can tell yourself, well God is bound to have mercy on me now, isn't it? You can have a week of prayer as a church.

And at the end of the week of prayer, be so pleased that you've done that week of prayer. Well God is bound to bless us now, isn't he? Repentance is an attitude of the heart.

That God grants to us by the work of his Holy Spirit. So that we turn from sin and self to God and grace. That is repentance. The outward means, the disciplines that the people of God make use of, they can help.

[13:28] But they're not themselves repentants. And what matters is not the effort that you put in or the disciplines you make use of. What matters is the turning of our hearts to God in humble brokenness and genuine mourning for sin.

There's no substitute for that. And so when we say repentance is necessary, that is what we're talking about. Use the disciplines. But this is a work of the heart.

Repentance is necessary. Secondly, repentance is relational. Do you see the pattern that emerges in verses 1 to 3? Here's the pattern of what they do in verses 1 to 2. They assemble.

They begin to confess their sins. And then verse 3. Then they stood up in their place. They read from the book of the law of the Lord their God for a quarter of a day. For another quarter of it, they made confession and worshipped the Lord their God.

Do you see the pattern? And there's an alternating pattern. Back in chapter 8. They've been listening specifically to the word of God being read.

[14:32] And at the beginning of chapter 9, they respond. They confess. And then in verse 3, they listen to God's word. And then they return to confession. And worship and praise.

They listen. And they respond. It's not a one-sided thing. There's a dialogue. There's a conversation that goes on.

Between God and his people. That's what happens Sunday by Sunday in our worship. God speaks and we respond in confession. God speaks and we respond in worship.

And that structure should always be part of the people of God when they come together. Dialogue. And that dialogue structure is that pattern of our relationship with God.

This is what this is about. It's not about going through the motions because you've broken a kind of abstract set of rules. It's about living in an intimate relationship with God himself.

[15 : 40] And so when he speaks, you respond. Raymond Brown says this. The vital two-way relationship is inspired and encouraged throughout the Bible.

Listening to God by reading and responding to him in prayer are twin aspects of every believer's experience. There can be no spiritual growth or development in Christian maturity without the regular cultivation of this dual privilege and discipline.

It's a dialogue. We listen to God. We listen to God. He speaks. We respond. Because we're in a living relationship. And repentance is necessary.

It's relational. It expresses a relationship. And then thirdly, it's believing. It presupposes that relationship based on our faith in him.

There's no repentance without saving faith. Repentance confesses faith. It clings to the gospel. Repentance arms itself with the gospel story.

[16 : 48] And it strengthens itself with the memory of God's past acts. Of God's saving love. Of his mercy and his grace. On undeserving sinners. And it looks to God.

And in hope, repentance turns its back on sin. You see that really clearly in the prayer that we've got recorded. Down in verse 37.

From verse 5 to verse 37. So I called Nehemiah 9 a psalm of repentance, didn't I? A prayer of repentance.

But the first major section of Nehemiah 9 is not repentant. It's not penitential. It's saying, isn't it? Nehemiah 9. We confess our faith. Do you see that? So the bulk of this prayer is this wonderful recounting of God's glorious acts. Of how God has intervened in history.

[17 : 46] And only after those acts have been fixed in the memory of God's people. Only after the history of redemption has been spoken about.

Do they confess their sins specifically. They begin in verse 6. They think about God's wonderful work of creation. And they celebrate that. In verse 7 and 8. They talk about Abraham.

He's remembered. In verse 8. God is remembered as the one who keeps his promises. Verses 9 to 21. The mercy of God on Israel as they were slaves in Egypt.

And the exodus of Mount Sinai are remembered. And all the way through. They're concerned to know the way that God acted. And how Israel rebelled. How they hardened their heart against him. How they became stiff-necked. How they were arrogant. How they refused to listen and obey God's commands. And they cry out to God. And God has mercy upon them. And he doesn't desert them.

[18 : 48] And he doesn't forget them. He forgives them because he is a compassionate God. And again and again and again. They remember God's forgiving grace. Do you see what they were doing?

Before they come to confess their own sin. They confessed the gospel first. They're declaring their faith aren't they? In the grace of God. In a God who's acted in history to save them and rescue them and forgive them.

And then they rest on that platform in verses 32 to 37. And they deal with their own need for pardon. And that's our pattern isn't it? Our pattern must always be gospel first.

We look at God's saving act in history. Not in the Exodus. Not in the days of the judges. When God raised up his people to save his. Raised up leaders to save his people.

They were just pointers weren't they? They're just signposts. We go back to the ultimate act of God's redemption. The cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. And the empty tomb.

[19 : 56] And repentance starts with. A confession. Not of sin. But of faith in the gospel. Because if.

Unless we remember the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. As we begin to repent. We'll never be able to bear the guilt. The load of guilt. When we see the weight. Of the reality of our sin.

It'll be unbearable. And so we look at the cross of Christ. And we remember what he has done. To accomplish cleansing. And we remember how God has been gracious to sinners.

And nothing but that. Can encourage. A boldness. And a readiness. To come and say. Here's my sin. And so when we get to that point.

We come with great relief. Don't we? And we come with confidence. Not just with shame. Because we know that God. Our God is a merciful God.

[20 : 57] And repentance is necessary. And repentance is relational. And repentance is believing. The fourth thing. The fourth thing is. It's transparent. When they begin to confess.

In verses 32 to 37. They don't hold back. They don't make excuses. They're not pretending. There are no no-go areas. In their hearts. They are open books before God. Look at verse 34. Our kings. Our princes. Our priests. And our fathers. They've not kept your law. Nor paid attention to your commandments. And your warning that you gave them. And then verse 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. And its rich yield goes to the kings. Whom you've set over us. Because of our sins. It's no whole bars. They're really frank. They're frank about the sins of their fathers.

[21 : 52] They're frank about their own sins. And so repentance is not a convenient way. For you to feel better about your sin. Once you've done it. It's not a mechanism. For letting your conscience off the hook.

So that you can go on living a happy life. Repentance is about rooting out. And bringing it into the light. And acknowledging it is yours. And taking ownership of it. And in the light. Of the gospel. Looking to God for cleansing. Repentance is transparent. So children.

I. I. I think you may need to stop saying sorry. As much. As you do. Because.

The bible doesn't seem to me to speak about. Being sorry. The bible speaks about saying. I have sinned. Please forgive me.

[22 : 52] That's the language of the gospel. And seeing. Seeing. Your sin. In that light. Elton John sang. Sorry seems to be the hardest word. Not in our house.

Sorry is easy to say. Isn't it? But actually see the power of the gospel in here. Of owning up. Of coming to a God who is ready to forgive.

The last thing is. It's doxological. Which means it's full of praise. Repentance is doxological. Repentance is doxological. And that means this. This chapter is not about the people of Jerusalem. This chapter is about God. It's not about the people of Jerusalem. It's about God. And that. That means. That they're turning back against themselves.

To God. And they begin to. Pray. Verse five. With words of praise to God. Don't you love it? Stand up. And bless the Lord. From everlasting.

[23 : 51] To everlasting. Blessed. Be your glorious name. Which is exalted above all. Blessing and praise. And then when finally. They come. To repentance again. They begin again. Verse thirty two.

And they say. Thou therefore. Our God. The great. The mighty. And awesome. God. Who keeps his covenant. And steadfast love. And all the way through this prayer.

Up to this point. The subject has been God. And his character. His work. And his covenant. And his faithfulness. And his mercy. And his forgiveness. And his love. And so real repentance. Takes your eyes off yourself.

And real repentance. Focuses on God. And his glory. And that's what moves it along. That's what drives it forwards. My sin. Detracts from God's glory.

And our longing. Is for God's glory. To be seen. Because. Man's chief end. Is to. Glorify God.

[24 : 51] And enjoy him forever. And my repentance. Is simply. My coming again. To bow before his throne. And give the glory.

Where it belongs. Belongs. And so what is my sin. My sin. Is stealing. For myself. The glory. Which is God's. And as I bow.

Before him. And acknowledge. My guilt. I am giving glory. To whom it belongs. And that's so helpful to me. It's helpful to me. As I think about it.

Because I often think. Repentance is a rather. Morbid exercise. Don't you? Don't you? Where I dwell on my failures. And I end up feeling. Worse. And worse. And worse.

And worse. And I wallow in regret. And self-pity. And I plead with God. For forgiveness. But you see. That kind of repentance. Focuses not on God.

[25 : 46] But on me. And real repentance. Takes. The reality of my sin. In all its ugliness. And in all its horror. And it looks at God. And I'm horrified.

By my sin. Because it detracts. From the glory of God. And it asks. For the glory of God. To be displayed. In my life. By washing me clean. In his mercy.

Repentance. Exalts God. It is. Doxological. It is. All about. Praise. It is full of thoughts. About God's glory.

It aims at his. Exaltation. And so. Repentance is necessary. There are disciplines. That you and I can practice. That can help us. But repentance. Is from the heart. And repentance.

Is relational. And it's not about. Feeling bad. Because you've broken. Some abstract rules. It's about. A marred. Relationship with God. Put right through faith.

[26 : 46] In Jesus. It's believing. And clinging. And dwelling. On the cross. And the gospel of grace. Because as you dwell. On the gospel. Only that.

Can bear the weight. Of your guilt. In the sight of God. And it's transparent. Because the gospel. Is real. And because God. Is gracious.

And because of the cross. I don't need to hide. And I don't need to hide. Anything before God. I can take it all.

To God. In open confession. Trusting in his mercy. And repentance. Is doxological. Because it's. Not about me at all. It's all about him. And I give God.

All the glory. As I turn from my sin. And I suspect. Repentance is a bit. Of a lost art. For some of us. The extremes.

[27 : 42] Of wallowing. In self-pity. On the one hand. And a kind of casual. Flippant. Apology. Masquerading. As the real thing. On the other side. And Nehemiah 9.

Is a great summons. To the rich. And deeply. Satisfying. Vital. Godly. Discipline. Of real repentance. And may God help you.

And may God help me. Make this a cornerstone. Of our lives. And our church. Let's turn that into prayer.