

**“Return”**  
**Nehemiah 9**  
**Mercy Hill Church | September 24, 2023**

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. <sup>2</sup>And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup> “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. <sup>7</sup>You are the LORD, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham. <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup> “And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea, <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments, <sup>14</sup>and you made known to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses your servant. <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup> “But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments. <sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup> But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them. <sup>18</sup> 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, <sup>19</sup>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. <sup>20</sup>You gave your good Spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst. <sup>21</sup>Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness, and they lacked nothing. Their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell. <sup>22</sup> “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. <sup>23</sup>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. <sup>24</sup>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. <sup>25</sup>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. <sup>26</sup> “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. <sup>27</sup>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. <sup>28</sup> 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. <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup> 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. <sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God. <sup>32</sup> “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. <sup>33</sup> Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly. <sup>34</sup> 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. <sup>35</sup> 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. <sup>36</sup> 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. <sup>37</sup> 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. <sup>38</sup> “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.

**Big Idea:** *When we see God for who He truly is, we will not only feel conviction for our sins, but also be freed to confess our sins.*

**Theme of Nehemiah: “Rebuilding a City & People for God”**

- Nehemiah 1-7: Rebuilding the City of God (Walls of Jerusalem)
- Nehemiah 8-13: Rebuilding (Reforming) the People of God

**Previously...Nehemiah 8 (Recap):**

- 1. Read the Word of God (vv.1-8), 2. Responded to God’s Word (vv.9-12), and 3. Responded to God’s Word in Obedience (vv.13-18) (cf. celebrated the Feast of Booths)
  - “...with mourning and weeping” (v.9) due to their conviction of sin and guilt
  - However, it was not the time for grief but rather rejoicing and celebrating since the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month was supposed to be a holy convocation and day of rest which was started with a trumpet blast to remind people to prepare for the holiest month of the year (i.e. Feast of Trumpets, Day of Atonement and Feast of Booths).

**Outline of Nehemiah 9**

1. The Setting (vv.1-6)
2. Prayer of Praise & Confession (vv.6-38)

**1. The Setting (vv.1-5)**

- When? 24<sup>th</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month – after celebrating the Feast of Booths
- Who? People of God (Israel) – separated from others, assembled together w/ the Levites
- Where? Jerusalem
- What? Worshiping, fasting and confessing their sins -- and the sins of their fathers
  - Fasting – abstaining from food
  - Sackcloth – made of goat’s hair, rough and uncomfortable to wear; a symbol of mourning, grief, and humiliation (cf. Jonah 3:5-7, 2 Samuel 3:31)
  - Earth (or dirt) on their heads – most likely reference to dust or ashes (Cf. Daniel 9:3-5, Job 42:6 – “...repent in dust and ashes”); another symbol of mourning, grief and humility
- Why? In response to the Word of God (cf. Nehemiah 8), the people of God were convicted of their sin and disobedience

**2. Prayer of Praise & Confession (vv.6-38)**

- Acknowledging and remembering who God is (attributes of God) and what God has done (accomplishments of God) in their history
- **Praise: Who God is (v.6)**
  - The LORD: “Yahweh”
  - The one true God – no other gods
  - Creator of heaven and earth (and everything in it)
    - *Merism*: pair of contrasting words used together to refer to a totality, entirety or completeness (e.g. “searched high and low,” “...for better or for worse, for richer and poorer, in sick and in health,” “God is the alpha and omega”)
  - Sustainer (“preserve”) of all creation
  - Worthy of worship
- **Praise: What God has done (vv.7-15)**

- vv.7-8 God had chosen, called and blessed Abraham – made a covenant with Abraham to bless his offspring with the Promised Land
  - God’s faithfulness; not a promise-breaker but a promise-keeper (cf. Genesis 12:1-3)
- vv.9-15 God heard the cries of the Jewish people as they were slaves under the oppressive rule and reign of Pharaoh and Egypt and (cf. book of Exodus)
  - God demonstrated His sovereign power over nature (and different Egyptians gods and goddesses) with the plagues and the parting of the Red Sea (vv.10-11)
  - God not only freed the Israelites from Egypt, He also led and guided them with a pillar of cloud by day, and pillar of fire by night through the wilderness (v.12)
    - God also revealed Himself to them and guided them by giving the 10 commandments and instructing them how they ought to live for their blessing and God’s glory (vv.13-14)
    - God also miraculously provided manna (food) and water daily to His people (v.15)
- **Confession of the Past (vv.16-31)**
- v.16 Turning Point: From Praise to Confession
- Repentance/confession is always in response to who God is
  - v.16 is the general acknowledgement and confession (of sin)
    - “Acted presumptuously” (v.29) – *arrogantly, proudly* (cf. Deut 1:43 – “So I spoke to you, and you would not listen; but you rebelled against the command of the LORD and presumptuously went up into the hill country.”)
      - Ironically, same word is used in v.10 to describe Pharaoh’s arrogance or presumption against the people of Israel (and God) in thinking that Pharaoh himself was the ultimate king and had the final say – not God.
      - In the middle of sin is the letter “I” and not a coincidence “I” is also at the center of pride.
        - “One of the problems with pride is that we can see it in others but not in ourselves...”
      - Sin is placing ourselves at the drivers seat, not God. Sin is listening to our own voice and not the voice of God. Sin is lov
    - “Stiffened their neck” (vv.17, 29) – *stubborn, hardened* – an animal term; won’t listen, set in their ways, not open to instruction, correction or advice (cf. Exodus 32:9, Judges 2:19, Proverbs 28:14, Ezekiel 3:7, Jeremiah 17:23)
    - “Did not obey God’s commandments” (vv.17, 26, 29)
      - Disobedience is the inevitable result of anyone who is presumptuous (arrogant) and stiff-necked (stubborn) towards God and His Word.
- **Summary of the entire Old Testament story of God and His people in 6 Pairs (of Responses)**
  - v.6 reference to book of Genesis (God as creator, sustainer and God calling Abraham and blessing him and making him into a great nation)
  - In the following verses (pairs) we the sin of God’s people contrasted with God’s mercy, grace, faithfulness and perseverance (adapted from John Piper):
  - Pair #1 (vv.16-17) Exodus
    - In v.17a more detail that despite God’s goodness to the people of God, they did not keep in mind (remember) all that God miraculously did, but in fact were so twisted up in their sin they wanted to go back Egypt and be slaves again!

- However, despite Israel’s forgetfulness, rebellion and disobedience, we see who God is and what God did: “ready to forgive,” “gracious and merciful,” “slow to anger,” “abounding in steadfast love,” “did not forsake (abandon or leave) them.” (v.17b) (cf. book of Exodus)
- Pair #2 (vv.18-25) Sin of the Golden Calf
  - Even as the Israelites made an idol, a calf made out of gold, and calling it “God” (v.18), God continued to lead and guide them (pillars of cloud and fire, His Spirit) and continued to provide for them (manna and water) for 40 (!) years! (vv.19-21)
  - Not only that God led them to the Promised Land, gave them impossible victory after victory over their enemies, and God established them as a thriving, prospering nation (vv.22-25) (cf. book of Joshua)
- Pair #3 (vv.26-27) Period of Judges (or Kings)
  - “Nevertheless...” people of God continued to disobey and rebel against God – ignoring/disregarding God’s law and even killing God’s prophets (cf. 1 Kings 19:1 -- King Ahab & Jezebel)
  - God gave them over to their enemies and in their crying out to God, God in His great mercy rescues them through different “saviors” (judges, kings)
- Pair #4 (vv.28-29a) Period of the Kings
  - They did evil (sin) again – and again God leaves to the hands of their enemies – and yet again when they turned back to God, God in His mercy rescues them again and again and again – and continues to warn them (v.29a)
- Pair #5 (vv.29b-30a) Period of the Kings & Prophets
  - “Acted presumptuously, did not obey...stiffened their necks” – same ol’ song and dance (cf. v.16)
  - God “bore with them” (re: His preserving faithfulness, steadfast love) and continues to warn them through His prophets (cf. Prophetic Books – major and minor prophets)
- Pair #6 (vv.30b-31) Period of the King to Exile
  - Despite sending prophet after prophet to caution and warn the people of God, they would not “give ear” (listen). God consequently gives them over to the kingdoms and powers
  - But again, in God’s great mercy and grace, He did not (completely) abandon them
- Prayer is steeped and rooted in OT Scripture and OT prayers
  - Several examples:
    - v.11 “...and you cast their pursuers into the depths, as a stone into mighty waters” (cf. Exodus 15:5 – “they went down into the depths like a stone”)
    - v.15 “...you told them to go in to possess the land that you had sworn to them” (cf. Exodus 6:8, Numbers 14:30)
    - v.17 (cf. Exodus 34:6 – “The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness...”)
- Despite common misconceptions of God as being an angry God in the Old Testament and becoming merciful and loving in the New Testament, we see God’s (covenant of) grace clearly throughout the OT!
- John Piper Quote: “Biblical stories are no more ends in themselves than history is an end in itself, or the universe is an end in itself. The universe is telling the glory of God. And the history of the world is what it is, to show that God is who he is. God writes the story of history to reveal who he is—what he is like, his character, his name.”

- **Confession of the Present (vv.32-37)**

- “Now...” (v.32) bring us to the present moment for the people of God as they’re in exile under Persian rule...
- The holiness of God highlights our sin, the mercy of God draws us to repentance (vv.6 & 32)
- Confession of sin in the light of God’s goodness (vv.33b-35)
  - “us,” “our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers...” “We have acted wickedly...” (v.33b) – not just their fathers...
  - Specific in their confession: “...have not kept your law or paid attention to your commandment and your warnings” || Presumptuous, stiff-necked, and disobedient (v.34)
  - Quote: “A generalized confession may save us from humiliation and shame, but it will not ignite inner healing. The people who came to Jesus came with obvious, specific sins, and they were forgiven for each one. It is far too easy to avoid our real guilt in a general confession.” Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*
  - Tim Keller Quote: “Life changing repentance starts where blame-shifting ends. Blame shifting might make you feel good but it won’t change you.”
- The people of God are in their present situation due their sin; they were under the rule of Assyria, Babylon and now Persia because of their sin – their neglect and disobedience of God’s Word. In wanting freedom from God they ended up back in slavery.
  - Ironical that the Israelites started as slaves in Exodus and hundreds of years later, are back to square one as slaves (v.36) due to their sin & disobedience
- Their confession and repentance is based on an appeal to who God is (vv.32-33a) and His past faithfulness, mercy and grace for forgiveness
  - “Our” God – personal, covenant God
  - “Great, mighty, and awesome”
  - “Keeps covenant” (faithful), “steadfast love”
  - “Righteous” and “faithful”
- In light of all this, the people of God are ready to return to God – in the form of renewing/making a covenant with God (more to come in Nehemiah 10)

### Christ/Gospel Connection

- This is the “front end of the gospel story” culminating in the coming of Jesus and the Spirit of God (cf. Acts) coming upon and into the hearts of God’s people as we see God’s mercy, love and faithfulness fully revealed.
- As we consider Jesus, His life, his sacrificial death on the cross for our sins – how we could not be convicted of our sins – but also turn to him in confession of our sins – as we consider how God has revealed His mercy, grace and love to us in and through Jesus? And unlike the Israelites who were stuck in this circle of sin, as Christians we have the Spirit of God in us who empowers us and transforms us into His likeness!

**Big Idea:** *When we see God for who He truly is – and what He has done, we will not only feel conviction for our sins, but also be freed to confess our sins to Him – and find forgiveness in and through Jesus Christ.*

### Recommended Resources

- *God is: A Devotional Guide to the Attributes of God* by Mark Jones

- *Respectable Sins: Confronting the Sins We Tolerate* by Jerry Bridges
- *Perfect Sinners: See Yourself as God Sees You* by Matt Fuller

### **Application & Reflection**

- How would you respond if someone asked you to describe who God is?
- How does learning about the history of Israel's sins help you to consider your own sin (i.e. stubbornness, arrogance and disobedience towards God)? How does learning about God's continual faithfulness, mercy and love to Israel encourage you?
  - How have you seen God's continued mercy in your life – and in the lives of those around you – whether presently or in the past?
- When was a time you were really convicted by God of a sin in your life? How did you respond?
- What hinders or prevents you from acknowledging & confessing your sins to God and finding forgiveness in Jesus today?
- **Parent Corner:** What are some ways you can help your child(ren) know who God is -- and what He has done -- both from Scripture and your personal/family history? Does your child know the stories of God's work in your life and in your family's history?