

Series Title / Holy Discontent: Lessons from Ezra and Nehemiah
The courage to change what needs to change when God says it's time to change
June 17th // Our Great Mighty and Awesome God // Nehemiah chapter 9

9:5-37 - NIV version (edited for congregational reading)

Holy Discontent - and Renewal of God's People Ezra - was not content with the way things were - "he set his heart to study the law of the Lord, to do it, and to teach it in Israel" Nehemiah - was not content with the way things were - He "wept and mourned, fasted and prayed" and then he acted.

This holy discontent which the Spirit of God aroused in the hearts of these two leaders was the spark that ignited the blaze of revival in the nation of Israel, God's people.

Ezra 1-6 Rebuild Temple

Ezra 6-10 Renewal of the Community

Nehemiah 1-6 Rebuild Wall

Nehemiah 7-13 Renewal of the Community

In these books and especially in those portions concerned with Renewal of the spiritual life of the Israel, we are impressed with the critical, central importance of God's Word.

In **Nehemiah chapter 7**, God's Word is read and Sabbath observance is restored as well as the priesthood and the financial support of the temple.

In **chapter 8**, God's Word is read and the sacred calendar is re-established as the people celebrate the feast of booths - a joyful celebration during which the people constructed temporary shelters and lived outdoors to remind them of God's goodness in providing for them in the wilderness.

In **chapter 9**, our passage for this morning - The people once again have again gathered in the square in front of the temple. For a quarter of the day - perhaps three hours - God's Word is read aloud. Keenly aware of God's faithful goodness, they feel the terrible weight of their sins. They are ready to unburden themselves, to be done, to confess their sins together before their God. The priests, who are standing on that platform in the squares invite the people to "stand up and bless the Lord your God" and lead them in a prayer of confession.

The priests apparently prayed this prayer together - perhaps reading it from a written copy or having memorized it. It is possible that the people also voiced the prayer, repeating each phrase or line aloud after the priests. We can be sure in any case that

the people joined in - if not with their mouths, at least with their hearts. They had been fasting and wore sackcloth, indicating their earnest and deep sorrow. This is certainly a prayer of Holy Discontent. It is not the prayer of the Pharisee "I thank you God that I am not like other men . . ." It is the prayer of the tax collector, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

In order familiarize ourselves with the text and enter into the experience of those people so long ago, I'd like us to stand, as they did, and read this prayer together. It will take us about three minutes to read a shortened version. That may feel like a long time as we read. Keep in mind that they stood and prayed that morning for as much as three hours.

Blessed be Your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. You alone are the Lord. You made the highest heavens and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes in heaven worship you.

You chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and named him Abraham. You made a covenant with him to give to his descendants the land of Canaan. You have kept your promise because you are righteous.

You saw the suffering of our forefathers in Egypt. You heard their cry at the Red Sea. You sent miraculous signs and wonders against Pharaoh. You made a name for Yourself. You divided the sea before them, so that they passed through it on dry ground, but you hurled their pursuers into the depths. By day You led them with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire.

You came down on Mount Sinai. You spoke to them from heaven. You Gave them regulations and laws that are just and commands that are good through your servant Moses. In their hunger you gave them bread from heaven and in their thirst you brought them water from the rock.

But they, our forefathers, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and did not obey your commands. They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. But You are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore, you did not desert them, even when they made for themselves an image of a calf and said, "This is your god who brought you up out of Egypt." Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them. For forty years you sustained them in the desert.

You gave them kingdoms and nations. You made their sons as numerous as the stars in the sky and you brought them into the land that you told their fathers to enter and possess. You subdued before them the Canaanites and their kings. They took possession of houses filled with all kinds of good things, wells already dug, vineyards, olive groves, and fruit trees in abundance. They ate to the full and reveled in your great goodness.

But they were disobedient and rebelled against you. They turned their backs on your law. They killed your prophets. They committed awful blasphemies. So you handed them over to their enemies who oppressed them. But when they were oppressed they cried out to you. You heard them from heaven and in your great compassion you gave them deliverers who rescued them from the hand of their enemies.

But as soon as they were at rest they again did what was evil in your sight. You warned them to return to your law, but they became arrogant and disobeyed your commands. They stubbornly turned their backs on you, became stiff-necked and refused to listen. For many years you were patient with them and admonished them through your prophets. Yet they paid no attention, so you handed them over to the neighboring peoples.

But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God. You are our God. You are great, mighty, and awesome. You keep your covenant of love. In all that has happened to us, you have been just and have acted faithfully. We are slaves today and the harvest of the land goes to the foreign kings who rule over us. We are in great distress. Please hear our cry for help.
<slides off>

Pray: Oh God, you are our God, gracious, merciful, great, mighty and awesome. We ask that your Spirit would use your word to straighten our thinking, heal our emotions, strengthen our wills so that we might be more pleasing and useful to you. Amen.

Thank you. Please be seated.

I'd like us to focus on two prominent features of this prayer which are so entwined as to be inseparable: confession of sin and praise of God. These are two things that we may not readily associate with one another. Perhaps you are like me - When I confess my sins, I tend to think about how miserable I am, how guilty or embarrassed I feel, what a poor specimen of a Christian I am and these thoughts and feelings seem to crowd out any praise of God. I fear that my confession of sin at times slumps into a very self-centered exercise - I want to feel better now, I want to feel forgiven, and confession is the way to get that result. On the other hand, when I worship, when I am caught up in praise with you as we sing or pray, I feel wonder, awe, joy; I feel expansive, right, I feel "good." I don't often think of or confess my sin at those times. But I don't think this kind of bifurcation in my soul is right. On the contrary, I think Scripture tells me that . . .

At my very best, at my most pious, obedient, worshipping, best - I am a sinner who needs, more than ever, the cross of Christ and the forgiveness of God. At my worst - in my guilt and sin, rebellion and misery, when I cry out with Paul "Who shall set me free from this body of death?" Even then, it is still true that "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

I think that the prayer we've just read provides a needed corrective for this tendency of spirit. It provides a wonderful model of how confession of sin and praise of God belong together - as two inseparable sides of a coin. <slide on > **The Main Idea: As we confess our sins in faith, believing that God forgives us, we also confess that our God is "a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love."**

There are at least three ways in which this chapter demonstrates the close connection between confession of sin and praise of our Merciful God.

Confession of sin and praise of our Merciful God belong together:

- 1) **The Hebrew word for "confess" is "yadah"** used twice, in verses 2 & 3. It is, in fact, the only Hebrew term translated by the English word "confess" in the King James Version when "confession of sin" is in view. It is used 15 times in this way. But here is where it gets interesting. This Hebrew word "yadah" is used another 99 times in the OT, very often in Psalms. In these instances, it is translated "to praise" or "to thank." So the very word for confession, demonstrates that in the Hebrew mind "to confess my sin" is "to praise my God." The two concepts are bound together. The story of Achan illustrates this. Achan sinned and so caused the defeat of Israel's army. When his sin is uncovered Joshua pleads with him, "My son, honor the LORD God of Israel and give him praise! Tell me what you did."
- 2) **The invitation of the priests.** The priests had read the word for a quarter of the day and the people had been fasted and were dressed in sackcloth and had already been confessing their sins. Then the priests call out an instruction, "Stand up and bless the Lord your God!" Then they lead the people in what is clearly a confession of their sins.
- 3) **Then there is the prayer itself.** It beautifully weaves together the elements of confession and praise. **Because God is their Creator** they owe Him alone their obedience, and therefore, their confession for disobedience. **Because God sovereignly chose Abram** and brought them into a special relationship with Himself, Israel owes their God a debt of love. It is one thing to lie to a stranger; it is quite another to lie to one's spouse. It is no accident that the image of an unfaithful spouse is used repeatedly in the Old Testament for Israel. **God's faithfulness** in keeping His promises is in stark contrast with Israel's unfaithfulness. **His persistent, enduring, patient, pursuing love** shines the spotlight on the ugliness of their treachery and disobedience - their willful ignorance of his commands. The more they remembered and praised the greatness of God's love and magnitude of His mercy, the deeper their contrition and sorrow. Their confession was not an easy presumption on the patience of God; it was a deep wound which led them to plead for his healing touch. But there something else here in their praise of God's enduring, persistent

goodness and mercy - The more they praised God's past faithfulness and mercy; the more their hope grew that God would once again prove Himself to be **"a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love."** As they praised God they dared to hope that God once more would hear their confession and forgive them - that His incomparably great mercy would triumph over and wash away the dark stain of their sin. "Grace that is greater than all my sin."

It is not difficult to transfer the lessons of this prayer to us who follow Jesus Christ.

The Main Idea: As we confess our sins in faith, believing that God forgives us, we also confess that our God is "a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love."

These Israelites knew God as creator through Moses' account in Genesis; We know the Creator Himself in Christ. John tells us "all things were created through Him." Hebrews says that it was through the Son that God created the universe. And that Jesus "sustains all things through the word of His power." **We owe God** our obedience in Christ and our confession when we disobey.

If **the Jews** in Nehemiah's day could treasure the fact that God had called them into a covenant relationship with Himself through Abraham and Moses; **how much more are we** loved and privileged? Through his incarnation and death Jesus has become our faithful and merciful high priest. In Him God has claimed us as His own children, his own household. Israel was God's spouse; but we are the bride of Christ. We are even said to share Jesus' very life, as part of His own body. God's love for us is so great that the Father gave His only begotten Son to die for us, for our sins, in our place. His desire for us was so great that the Son of God became sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God.

If **those worshippers** in that city square felt the weight of their sins; How much more **should our** wonderfully privileged and intimate relationship with God in Christ make us feel the terrible treachery and evil of our sin. Our sorrow for sin ought to be weighed against the pain that that our Lord suffered on the cross. In turning from our sin, in confessing our sin, we ought to measure our sincerity against His divine steadfastness of purpose setting his face like flint toward Calvary.

Surely our sins are no less than theirs. And yet, hasn't God been exceedingly patient and provided for us, protected us, and sustained us in spite of our presuming upon His grace, our lack of thankfulness, our willful disobedience? God's unfailing love and mercy toward us, may make us feel shame, but it should also give us hope that He will still forgive, even now. If they had reason to hope for God forgiveness - we have more. They had shadows and figures - the Passover lamb, the day of atonement, the red heifer, the bronze serpent lifted up in the desert. We have the reality. It was not a sign or symbol that died on the cross, during the reign of Pilate, outside the

gates of Jerusalem. It was the very God-man Himself, the one mediator between God and sinners - our Lord Jesus Christ. They might have dared to believe; We can come before the throne of grace in our time of need with confidence. Jesus our high priest knows our weaknesses; He knows what it means to be tempted. He came to call sinners, He came to call us, not the righteous, to repentance. **And when we confess our sins to him, believing that we are forgiven, we confess, we proclaim, that our God is the God who forgives, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.**

Still working on the following but there will be no slides after this point.

It is really not surprising that we sinners sin. What is surprising. What is remarkable, amazing, rare and precious is the knowledge that God forgives sinners. In confessing our sins and understanding by faith that God forgives, we come to know by personal experience that our God is “a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.” Our friends, our neighbors, or co-workers and relatives need to hear this very good news. Let’s tell them - let’s exalt Christ together, by telling anyone who will listen that in Christ we know God to be the one true God, who hears our confession and forgives our sin.