

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: A Prayer Life...for ALL of life

(Learning prayer from Nehemiah)

The Liberating Way of Confession

(Nehemiah 9:1-37)

Study #3

Introduction: What if...?

The “*What if...*” game is fun...and it can be unnerving. For instance, *what if...*

...your mom had not agreed to go out on that first date with your dad? (Here, the implications for YOU are staggering.)

...you had chosen to attend a different college, away from home? (The formative experiences you had during those years didn’t happen. Who would you be today without those?)

Or, *what if* you had not made those choices that you now regret back in High School? *What if* you had not taken the wise advice of that friend when you faced a crisis of integrity?

The “*What if...*” game brings home the reality that our choices have consequences - and this reality applies to the matter of prayer.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that we are to ask, seek, and knock in prayer because ***[Matthew 7:7b] “...everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.***

The clear message is that God responds to our prayers. Sure, He sometimes says, “*Yes*” and sometimes, “*No*.” But things happen when we choose to pray that would not happen had we not chosen to pray.

When writing about prayer, James, the half-brother of Jesus tells us ***[James 4:2] You do not have because you do not ask.***

There, the point is that when we choose to not pray, God doesn’t do some things He would have done had we chosen to pray.

So, let’s play the “*What if...*” game with the story of Nehemiah we’ve seen so far.

What if, in response to the terrible news about the conditions back home in Jerusalem, Nehemiah had not chosen to pray and fast for five months?

Would he have been prepared with an answer to give to King Artaxerxes when the king asked him, ***[Nehemiah 2:4] “What would you request?”*** I suspect not.

What if, in response to the king’s question, Nehemiah had not, in the moment, ***[2:4] prayed to the God of heaven.***

Would he have had the presence of mind to speak as clearly and boldly as he did, telling the king exactly what he needed? Nope.

What if, when opposed by adversaries, Nehemiah and the people not prayed to God? (4:9)

Would they have had the creativity to put together a plan to guard the city while continuing with the work of rebuilding the walls? I don’t think so.

The overriding message about prayer from Nehemiah is that God sees to it that things happen when we pray that would not have happened had we not prayed. He also assures us that if we don’t pray things that would have happened had we prayed, don’t happen.

Let's keep that thought in mind today as we see the Jews at prayer, again. This time, their prayers take the form of confession of sin.

Confessing sin brings to minds here at Northwest our reflection on our sin each year on Good Friday evening when we nail our sins to a wooden cross to picture what happened when Jesus, the Lamb of God, took away our sin by offering Himself as a sacrifice on the cross.

Each year, that experience sensitizes us to the depth of our sin. It reminds us of the amazing grace of God. And it energizes us to live for the One who gave Himself for us.

We experience the liberation that the way of confession brings. It is a liberation to obedience and service and a vibrant life of faith.

Today, we watch all of that happen for the Jews as they confess their sin. God willing, all of that will happen for us today, too.

Setting the scene...

We catch up to the Jews in Jerusalem, late in the seventh month of the Jewish year, Tishri. (our September / October).

It has been a very busy month.

On the first two days of the month, the people stood and listened to the public reading of the Old Testament Law. (8:2, 13) They had not had this kind of exposure to the Law in a long time and they were deeply stirred by how far badly they had failed to obey God.

On the tenth day, they observed the Day of Atonement, as commanded by God in the Mosaic Law, complete with fasting.

A few days later, for the first time in many centuries, they moved into portable, homemade "booths", and lived in them from the fifteenth to the twenty-first to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.¹

¹ 8:17 - Nehemiah tells us that this hadn't been done since the days of Joshua.

As the chapter ends, the Feast of Tabernacles is coming to a close. But the action is far from over.

The wall has been rebuilt. Fastings and festivals have been observed. Now, the people have come back together again. There is a seriousness and gravity to the gathering.

Gathering to Confess (vv. 1-4)

Approaching God with Humility (vv. 1-2a)

[1] Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting,² in sackcloth, and with dirt upon them. [2a] The descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners...

The sackcloth³ and dirt on their bodies signaled humility. They have set themselves apart from all false worship and from all false worshipers. They have prepared for an important gathering. They are readying themselves to confess their sin to God.

It was always expected that Jews would confess their sins to God as a matter of course.

The Psalms and the historical books of the Old Testament are filled with examples of God's people confessing. They are agreeing with God, that when they have sinned, their sinful act was sinful.

Likewise, we Christians are also to confess our sins to God.

² Fasting is a time-honored spiritual discipline which God's people have practiced when facing a major life decision, been under unusual pressure, or sensed a need to turn to God. Believers in Old and New Testaments have fasted. Jesus assumed His followers would fast and we know that they did from Acts. Christians around the world fast and it is a spiritual discipline that can bring great benefits to us today.

³ Sackcloth was a strong, rough cloth woven from the long, dark hair of the goat or the camel. Over time, wearing it carried a message of repentance.

We are to say the same things about our sin that God says about them. *“What I did was wrong. What I said was ugly. I admit I sinned. I agree with You, God. I should not have done what I did, and I am sorry.”*⁴

It is right for God’s people to confess sin, and the stage is now set for the Jews to get honest with God.

Setting Aside Time to Get Honest with God (vv. 2b-3)

[2b]...and they stood and confessed their sins and the wrongdoings of their fathers.⁵ [3] While they stood in their place, they read from the book of the law of the Lord their God for a fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the Lord their God.

They spent three to four hours, listening to the reading of the Mosaic Law. That was followed by three or four more hours of sober confession of sin.

The religious leaders of the people, the Levites, led out as they were assigned to do. They called the people to pray.

Recalling the Grace and the Goodness of God (vv. 5-15)

Bless the Lord! (vv. 5-6)

[5] “Arise, bless the LORD your God forever and ever!

Then, to God,
***May Your glorious name be blessed
And exalted above all blessing and praise!***

From this point on, they rehearsed God’s special work of blessing the people of Israel, beginning at the beginning with Abraham.

⁴ Greek “confess” is *homologew* - to say the same thing. To agree with God that sin is sin.

⁵ To see the significance of this corporate confession of sin, we must understand the sense of historical continuity and solidarity that existed among the Jews. To confess the fathers’ sins was to confess their own.

Beginning with Abraham (vv. 7-8)

***[7] “You are the Lord God,
Who chose Abram
And brought him out from Ur of the Chaldees,
And gave him the name Abraham.***

God gave to Abraham a covenant with promises of a land, a nation, and descendants.⁶ God kept every one of those promises to Abraham.

God’s dealings with Abraham and his family continued long after Abraham died. And the story line moves to his descendants, who spent long centuries enslaved in Egypt.

Delivered from Egypt (vv. 9-11)

***[9] “You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt,
And heard their cry by the Red Sea.***

God noticed what was happening to His people. He saw Israel’s affliction in Egypt. He heard their cries for deliverance.

His noticing and seeing and hearing led to action. He rescued.

He opposed Pharaoh through the ten plagues against Egypt. And, finally, the plagues became so severe that Pharaoh let the Jews go free. He said, *“Good riddance!”* and off the Jews went out of Egypt.

But Pharaoh changed his mind and followed them as far as the Red Sea. It was there that God performed the benchmark miracle of the Old Testament.

With Israel caught between the Red Sea and the Egyptian army, God divided the Red Sea for Israel to cross over on dry ground.

⁶ The Abrahamic Covenant is found in several places in the book of Genesis, originally stated in chapter 12, and then restated in chapters 13, 15, 18, and 22.

This was the miracle to end all miracles. Did God love His people? Yes! Was God for His people? Yes!

The prayer continues and the scene shifts from the Red Sea to the wilderness.

Provision in the Wilderness (vv. 12-15)

God guided (v. 12)

**[12] “And with a pillar of cloud You led them by day,
And with a pillar of fire by night
To light for them the way
In which they were to go.**

God wanted His people to know the right way to travel. So, He led them by cloud and fire.

He also wanted His people to know the right way to live. So, He gave them the Law.

God gave the Law (vv. 13-14)

God met with Moses on Mount Sinai and gave a direct revelation of His moral will to His people. That was something that had never been done before for any people. God gave a written list of dos and don'ts so that the Jews would know how to live.

And that is not all.

God provided food and drink (v. 15a)

**[15] “You provided bread from heaven for them for their hunger,
You brought out water from a rock for them for their thirst**

God is not only a God who notices and who rescues. He is a God who provides. He gave them food and water.

And it was not as if God wanted His people to spend the rest of their national life in the wilderness, following a pillar of cloud and fire.

No, He provided a land for them to possess, the land He had promised Abraham. And He led them across the Jordan River and invited them to enter and take that good land.

So, there you are in the square in Jerusalem listening to the priests recount your national story in prayer to God.

Has the Lord been good to Israel? Has He provided, protected, guided, and delivered? Yes, He has.

If you and I were to go through such an exercise as the Jews have, we would have no trouble praising God for His provisions, protections, guidance, and deliverances.

We would think of forgiven sin and being children of God, the gift of prayer and the advocacy of Jesus. We would remember the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and His gifting us for service.

We would think of the beauty of the church, the guidance of Scripture, as well as the purpose and meaning God has given to our lives.

As God had been good to Israel, He has been so, so good to us!

Then, in what follows, there is a dramatic shift. After listing all that God had done for His people, the priests say, “**But...**” That word puts us on the alert.

An UGLY Response to the BEAUTY of Grace (vv. 16-31)

God was Gracious in the Wilderness (vv. 16-25)

BUT Israel immediately rebelled! (v. 16-18)

The first line summarizes the nation's behavior from the days of Abraham forward: **[16] “But they, our fathers acted arrogantly.”**

God called them to trust and to depend on Him. They chose pride and independence. We see that pride in their stubbornness. And we see their stubbornness in their refusal to listen.

When our kids were small, they could hear the intro to a favorite TV show coming on from the other end of the block. But they often couldn't hear, "*Clean up your room.*"

Just so, the Jews selectively chose to not hear God's commands.

Then, alongside their "*closed ear policy,*" they put in place a "*memory-loss program.*"

They refused to remember God's grace to them. Theirs was a willed forgetfulness and God held them guilty for it.

So, especially in light of the goodness He had lavished on Israel over the centuries, what do you think God did in the face of her forgetfulness and failure to listen?

Throw them out and start over? Give them up and choose another people?

That would make sense, but that is not what God did. He dealt with them graciously.

That is the kind of God the true God is. He is **[9:17] a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in mercy.**

God continued to forgive them - even after they made the golden calf. (Nehemiah 9:18)

Nehemiah mentioned the golden calf (recorded in Exodus 32) because it's kind of like the Exodus, in reverse. The golden calf incident is one of the benchmark sins of the Old Testament.

It happened while Moses was up on Mount Sinai receiving the Law from God.

The people gathered around the base of that mountain. They followed Aaron's lead in making a golden calf, and worshipped it. They called it their "god."

Occurring so quickly after their great deliverance from Egypt, this was a HUGE slap in God's face.

But, even after THIS sin, God did not leave them or forsake them. In fact, He continued to bless them throughout their forty years of wilderness wanderings.

2. AND God blessed them beyond measure! (vv. 19-25)

God blessed them with...

- ...the pillar of cloud and fire for guidance. (v. 19)
- ...the Holy Spirit's instruction. (v. 20)
- ...miraculous provisions of manna and water. (v. 20)
- ...clothing that didn't wear out. (v. 21)
- ...military victories over hostile enemies.⁷ (v. 22)
- ...population growth. (v. 23)
- ...the gift of a fully furnished land. (v. 24)

As time went on, God continued to deal graciously with Israel, despite their continued rebellion, as in the period of the Judges.

God was Gracious in the Time of the Judges (vv. 26-27)

***[26] But they became rebellious and revolted against You,
And threw Your law behind their backs
And killed Your prophets who had admonished them
In order to bring them back to You,
And they committed great blasphemies.***

During the years when judges ruled the people God did all kinds of favors for them - and they still rebelled.

And when they rebelled, God didn't sit passively on the sidelines, doing nothing.

He actively intervened by way of discipline to turn them back to His good ways. He even dealt with them severely, so that in their

⁷ Remember Jericho? It was the place of a great victory for the Jews. They won the victory by blowing trumpets and watching the walls fall down flat. It was God's work, start to finish.

suffering they would yelp for help. Then, He would deliver them one more time.

After the judges came the kings. The Jews didn't do any better when the kings reigned than they had when the judges judged.

God was Gracious in the Time of the Kings (vv. 28-31)

The Jews were like a boxer who catches his breath between rounds so that he can go on fighting for another three minutes.

Israel would use the time right after her deliverance to prepare for another round of rebellion against God.

And yet, even though the people's evil was directed against God, He kept on rescuing them.

[9:31] Nevertheless, in Your great compassion You did not make an end of them or forsake them, For You are a gracious and compassionate God.

The final section of this prayer of confession finds the Israelites again standing toe-to-toe with God, opposing Him, disobeying Him.

This recounting of the nation's failings includes a fascinating word picture. We are told that ***[9:29] "they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck."***

Back when I was in college, I spent some time on my school's wrestling team. I have no claims to fame from my time on the mat, but I thoroughly enjoyed wrestling.

During practices, our coach would instruct us, *"On your necks!"*

That was the command to roll over on to our backs and bridge up so that the only parts of our bodies touching the mat were our feet and our head.

The point of this awful exercise was to strengthen our necks so that if we were about to be pinned by an opponent, we could raise ourselves and our opponent off the mat with our neck muscles alone.

A good wrestler can sometimes avoid defeat if he has a strong neck. In wrestling, a strong, stiff neck is a good thing. It's hard to pin a wrestler with a strong neck.

To be a stiff-necked believer is not good. It is to be someone who never gives in to God - and that is disastrous.

For hundreds of years, God's people had been bridging up on their necks, refusing to allow Him to have His way, never obeying Him.

So finally, after eight hundred years of rebellion, God let His people suffer the consequences of their disobedience. He ***"gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands."***

That's right. Despite the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant, God expelled Israel from the land He had promised.⁸

So, does that mean that God gave up on Israel? Was this the end of their run as being God's chosen people? No.

God STILL didn't forsake Israel.

In fact, the reason He allowed them to be removed from the Promised Land was so that they would cry out to Him again for help. And cry out to Him they did.

They cried out to Him in the days of Zerubbabel when the first group of refugees returned from Babylon to rebuild the temple seventy years after its destruction. And God graciously gave them success.

Then, they cried out to God in the days of Ezra. Ezra was allowed to lead a group of five thousand Jews back to re-establish right worship in Jerusalem. And God granted them success.

⁸ The northern kingdom (Israel) was defeated by the Assyrians in 722 BC. The southern kingdom (Judah) was defeated and deported to Babylon in 586 BC.

At each step, when God's people confessed, He blessed, forgave, and restored.

And now we know why the Jews have gathered again in the days of Nehemiah to pray.

They have come to God again, asking Him to fix them again. They are confessing their sin again, hoping that He will restore them again to be at maximum for His kingdom purposes.

God, Let Us Behold Your Amazing Grace AGAIN! (vv. 32-37)

As the prayer wraps up, they admit to having sinned. But they also admit to their painful reality. Consequences are hard.

[33] "However, You are righteous in everything that has happened to us;

For You have dealt faithfully, but we have acted wickedly.

Those words are painfully honest: *"No excuses, Lord, We did it to ourselves. And now we are in a world of hurt."*

***[36] "Behold, we are slaves today,
And as for the land which You gave to our fathers to eat its fruit and its bounty,
Behold, we are slaves on it.***

***[37] and its abundant produce is for the kings
Whom You have set over us because of our sins;
They also rule over our bodies
And over our cattle as they please,
So we are in great distress."***

It is the temptation of every generation of God's people to think that life apart from submission to God brings liberty.

We can be just as deceived into thinking this as Israel was. But they found - and we have found - that sin's parties are BYOC - Bring Your Own Chains.

They had become slaves on the very land God had promised them. The bounty of that land went to their oppressors and foreign kings ruled over them.

Over the centuries, God has forgiven and restored the Jews after their confession hundreds of times.

So here, the unasked, but obvious question that lingers after all this confession is, *"Will God listen to one more confession, and forgive, cleanse, renew, and restore?"*

Isn't that a question most of us have asked? We have confessed this or that sin to God dozens or hundreds of times? We keep falling for the same temptation, failing in ways we have before.

What makes us think that He'll forgive and cleanse again? Won't He eventually tire of our confessions? Do we fear that He will finally say, *"No, not this time. Too many failures. Too many sins."*

Well, what if we played the *"What if..."* game again?

What if we were to go to God again and agree with Him that what we have done is wrong, again. We have sinned, again. We are sorry, again. We confess, again. What would God do IF we confessed, again?

The Apostle John tells us exactly what God will do if we do that.
Conclusion:

[1 John 1:9] If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous, so that He will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

The Jesus who told us to forgive each other seventy times seven (Matthew 18:22) doesn't put a limit on the number of times we can go to Him, confess our sins, and be cleansed and restored.

Nehemiah 9 is an Old Testament foreshadowing of the Apostle John's promise.

The prayer of confession of Nehemiah 9 ends at verse thirty-seven.

Then, we INSTANTLY read about roughly eighty political and religious leaders who drew up a document promising to change their ways. They resolved to obey God's commands and to honor God by their submission to Him. (10:1-27)

The signing of this document, with the commitment to turn from sin that it represented, was the fruit of their confession.

Now, "*What if...*" they had not confessed their sin? Would this godly resolve have occurred in the absence of confession? I suspect not.

But confession having brought forgiveness and cleansing, they rushed into obedience.

When we, today, who believe in Jesus, get honest with God and agree with God that we have sinned, God will deal with us in grace.

Here is God's gracious invitation to you and me, today:

If you have been bridging up on your neck, refusing to submit to the God who gave His Son to give you Life, your first move is not to resolve to do right. Your first move is to unstiffen your neck. Drop to the mat. Submit to God and agree with Him that you have sinned. Confess.

Borrowing from another passage (John 13) , allow Jesus to wash your feet. Accept His cleansing.

He will cleanse and renew and restore.

And from that cleansing will come the liberation into a life-changing experience of freedom, joy, peace, love, and service.