

Confession – The path of introspection.

Nehemiah 9:1-38

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



Here, in chapter nine, we are in the middle of a high point in the book of Nehemiah. Over the three chapters of 8, 9, & 10, we will see the people of Israel take specific steps to realize life as a restored covenant community.

1. Chapter 8 – Reading of God’s Word and Feast of Booths
2. Chapter 9 – Confession and Repentance
3. Chapter 10 – Recommitment to Covenant

Continuing on the path of right worship, they turn as a group and confess their sins. What is interesting in this chapter is that they don’t just confess their individual sins, but they also confess the sins of their fathers. That is, they confess personally and corporately, in the present and in the past. This should strike us as an important practice. So often, as modern people of faith, we see only ourselves, and that extends to the reality of sin. When we think of confession, we tend to think of confession as an individual action. But, what happens in their corporate practice of confession is that they get a right view of themselves, their current situation, their history, and ultimately of God. Then, they repent and walk in the ways of the Lord. Confession is the path of introspection that allows us to learn from the past so that we may have a healthier future with the Lord. The beautiful thing is that while confession and repentance often feel very heavy and vulnerable to us, and they can be, it leads us to humility with others and intimacy with God. **In other words, confession restores and builds trust.**

1. Sin – What is it?

- a. We are still in a larger 3-chapter section (8,9,10), all centered around the idea of obedience.
 - i. Nehemiah knew who he was because he knew whose he was.
 - ii. We’ve said this many times in this series, but all work is only the physical manifestation of the more important work that is going on... the reformation of the identity of God’s people.
 - iii. Here is how we will see that inner work be ordered over the next three chapters:
 1. **Chapter 8 – Reading of God’s Word and Feast of Booths**
 2. **Chapter 9 – Confession and Repentance**
 3. **Chapter 10 – Recommitment to Covenant**

- iv. **Reminder** – The people wept when they heard the Word of God read because it exposed the state of their rebellious nature and situation. (cf. 8:9)
 - 1. ⁹ **And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law.**
- v. **Key conviction - He (Nehemiah) belong to God** – I.e., His identity is wrapped up in belonging to God’s family.
 - 1. More than anything, this is the ultimate lens that influences Nehemiah’s worldview.
 - a. **I belong to God, and I am to honor God. Therefore, everything that I do must be filtered through that lens.**
- vi. Chapter 9 contains an overview of the redemptive record of God in the lives of his people. We see some beautiful things **about who God is and what he’s done—how he’s always been intervening and helping his people.**
 - 1. Why do the people need God’s intervention? → Their sin.
- b. **Three definitions of sin.**
 - i. **Actions** – Sin is any evil action or evil motive that is in opposition to God. Simply stated, sin is failure to let God be God and placing something or someone in God’s rightful place of supremacy.¹
 - ii. **Dominion** – Sin is a principle of captivity to a power that permeates and contaminates our human reality. *Sin* is the word Christians use to name not simply our failed acts but also our inner and outer captivity.”²
 - iii. **Deficiency** – The desire to overcome our limitations and finitude because of anxiety about our creaturely existence.³
 - 1. Each of these definitions gets at the full reality of sin.
 - a. Yes, it involves our wrong or broken actions, but it is more than that. Yes, it is a power that captivates our present reality, but it won’t always. Yes, it is part of a dysfunctional identity where we believe that we can overcome our finite limitations.
 - 2. Each of these definitions are seen in the original fall of Adam and Eve. (Gen. 3:1-13)
 - a. **Action** – They took and ate. (cf 3:6)
 - b. **Deficiency** – “God is holding back on you... you can be God.” (cf. 3:1-5)
 - i. I.e., There is some limitation to overcome.
 - ii. **The fundamental unbelief, distrust, and rejection of God and human displacement of God as the center of reality.** ⁴
 - c. **Dominion** – The resulting impact of their rebellious action is that of the dominion of sin. (cf. 3:7-13)

¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 513.

² Rich Villodas, *The Deeply Formed Life* (Waterbrook, 2020) 99.

³ Reinhold Niebuhr via Scazzero, Peter. *The Emotionally Healthy Leader. How Transforming Your Inner Life Will Deeply Transform Your Church, Team, and the World*, (2015), 185.

⁴ Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, [*Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*](#) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 107.

- i. Sin → Shame & Hiding → Pain → We want to find relief from the pain, so we often treat it with more sin. → Leads to more shame and pain, and the cycle continues.
 - ii. The gospel – Jesus came not only to interrupt that cycle but to lead us into healing and restoration.
 - 1. Rom 5:20,21 - ²⁰ Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, ²¹ so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.
- c. Sin in the Biblical perspective. → The Bible does not pull punches on the subject of sin.
 - i. Jesus has the authority to forgive sin. (Mark 2:9-10)
 - 1. Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk’? ¹⁰ But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”
 - ii. Sin causes shame and dysfunction. (Gen 3:1-13)
 - 1. See notes above.
 - iii. Sin leads to death. (James 1:15)
 - 1. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.
 - iv. Sin impacts all people (Rom 5:12)
 - 1. ¹² Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.
- d. The Apostle Paul on sin. → It’s a big deal!
 - i. There are more than thirty words in the NT that convey some notion of sin, and Paul employs at least twenty-four of them. He makes very little use of the “guilt” terminology in the psychological sense, but it may fairly be said that many of the things he says about sin include the thought that sinners are guilty people.⁵
 - ii. Paul presents a massive treatment of the problem of sin in his letter to the Romans, where he uses the noun for “sin” (*hamartia*) forty-eight times, the noun “trespass” (*paraptōma*) nine times, the verb “to sin” (*hamartanō*) seven times, “sinner” (*hamartōlos*) four times, “bad” (*kakos*) fifteen times, and “unrighteousness” (*adikia*) seven times.⁶
 - iii. Paul does not define sin, but clearly he does not see it as primarily an offense against other people; for him sin is primarily an offense against God (cf. Rom 8:7; 1 Cor 8:12). **The disruption of a right relationship with God has its results in hindering right relationships with people, but it is the offense against God that is primary.**⁷
 - 1. This is an important interpretive guide for us in relationship to Nehemiah and the people of Israel. → They too see sin (personal, corporate, & generational) as not just against another person, but primarily against God.

⁵ Leon Morris, “Sin, Guilt,” ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 877.

⁶ Leon Morris, “Sin, Guilt,” ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 877.

⁷ Leon Morris, “Sin, Guilt,” ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 877.

2. How do I see the primary reality of my sin? → Against others or rebellion against God?
 - a. How we answer that question will impact our perspective on the remediation of sin.
- e. Three expressions of sin.
 - i. **Personal (me)** – There are sins / expressions of my brokenness that I directly participate in and perpetuate.
 1. Example: I lie to someone in my family.
 - ii. **Corporate (we)** – There are sins / expressions of my brokenness that we directly participate in and perpetuate.
 1. Example: I know that something is wrong, but it is part of my larger culture, so I go along with it.
 2. I.e., **Competition**: “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet, but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight” (James 4:1–2).⁸
 - iii. **Generational / Historical (them)** – Sin has implications and impacts on future generations.
 1. I.e., Jesus is in my heart, but grandpa is in my bones.⁹
 - a. For an exercise in examining the generational/historical impact of sin on your life, look at the study questions for this week.
 - b. <https://ccames.org/2022/10/nehemiah-8-study-questions/>
 - iv. How do we see these expressions in the text?
 1. The opening to the chapter describes the confession of the people and their view of sin. (vv.1-2) → “**they confessed their sin and the iniquities of their fathers.**”
 2. The rest of the passage then flows in a breakdown of those generational/historical sins and the corresponding faithfulness of God.
 - a. vv. 6 : Creation
 - b. vv. 7–8 : Abraham
 - c. vv. 9–11 : Exodus
 - d. vv. 12–21 : Wilderness period
 - e. vv. 22–31 : The land.¹⁰
 - v. As we watch the profound and dramatic movement to confess and repent, we need to ask the question, what was their motivation?
 1. **We should not be surprised that it comes down to God’s grace that has been experienced over generations through his faithfulness.**

2. Confession – What is our motivation?

- a. The process of their confession – v.2
 - i. The repeated readings from the law were bearing fruit. The words *separated ... from all foreigners* reflect the emphasis of e.g. Leviticus 20:26, ‘I ... have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.’ The acceptance of this, in the straitened

⁸ Millard J. Erickson, [Christian Theology](#), 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 564.

⁹ I first heard this phrase in a sermon given by Pete Scazzero.

¹⁰ H. G. M. Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 307.

circumstances of the time, implied a spirit of dedication rather than arrogance, for the neighboring Gentiles were socially well worth cultivating (cf. 6:17f.). See also the comment on Ezra 6:21.¹¹

- ii. **Sackcloth is a normal sign of repentance** - See in part on Ezra 8:26. We have noted before the connection in biblical thought between mourning and confession; the same association is attested here (and see v 3 below); for sackcloth as a sign of repentance, cf. Dan 9:3; Jonah 3:5, 8; 1 Chr 21:16, and for earth on the head in a context of mourning, cf. 1 Sam 4:12; 2 Sam 1:2 and Job 2:12.¹²
 - 1. The reality is that they are uncomfortable in their sin. → Interesting question for us. → Does our sin make us uncomfortable?
- iii. **But when we truly confess, we are holding nothing and no one responsible except ourselves.** We are facing ourselves and how raggedy we are. This is not the time to ask for favor. We need to focus on the unfavourability of ourselves first.¹³
- b. **Grace** – God has always been faithful... whether they were faithful or not. (v.17)
 - i. The key verse in this entire chapter is verse 17. The entire motivation for the people's confession comes out of this verse, they can confess because they have confidence in how God will respond.
 - 1. Why? → Because they have a record of how he has responded.
 - a. vv. 6-15 – Creation & God's faithfulness.
 - b. vv. 16-25 – God is generous and patient.
 - c. vv. 26-31 – God warns and disciplines.
 - i. Why would God warn and discipline them through the period of the Judges if he didn't love them?
 - ii. We know that a lack of discipline is quite possibly the most unloving thing we could do as parents.
 - ii. **v.17 is the key statement in this section**, revealing a further aspect of the character of God over those already noted in the first three sections. **It is followed immediately with the words "you did not abandon them,"** unexplained at first, but recapitulated in v 19a as an introduction to the description of God's continuing mercy.¹⁴
 - 1. **The nature of confession is not just a mea culpa where we attempt to appease an angry and vengeful divine being, but one in which a loving God meets us with a renewed vision for the future.**
- c. **A vision for the future – i.e., What could be.**
 - i. **The process of confession – A right view of God is needed.** (v.6)
 - 1. The prayer is, like some of the Psalms (e.g. 78; 105; 106), an example of confession in both senses of the word: i.e. a confessing of God's glory and grace as well as man's ingratitude¹⁵
 - 2. Like the Bible itself, the prayer starts with an uncompromising acknowledgement of the uniqueness of God: **"You alone are the Lord."** This is explained by reference to creation—so that nothing in heaven or on earth can challenge God's

¹¹ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 120.

¹² H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 310.

¹³ Mason, Eric. *Nehemiah For You: Strength to Build for God (God's Word For You)* (p. 146). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

¹⁴ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 314.

¹⁵ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 122.

supremacy—and to the fact that “the host of heaven worships you.” Whether this refers to stars or to heavenly beings, both of which were objects of reverence in some of the surrounding cultures, they are here clearly subordinate to the one God¹⁶

3. As we gain / re-gain a right view of God, we begin to get a right view of our future.
- ii. **Personally (me)** – I know who I am and how I am to live, because I know whose I am.
 1. Nehemiah and the people were able to get a vision for their future by revisiting their past.
 - a. The high points & the low points.
 - i. Remember – They do not glamorize nor demonize the past.
 2. This clarity also comes for the reading and study of God’s Word.
 - a. **It shows a clear difference between their actions and God’s.**
 - b. v.26 - Here again, the sharp contrast between man and God stands out, marked (for us) by the words *Nevertheless they* ... in the opening verse of the paragraph (26) and *Nevertheless ... thou* at the close (31).¹⁷
 - c. ²⁶ **“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. → Wow! A powerful confession!!!**
- iii. **Corporately (others)** – It not only reminds me of a personal vision for the future, but it points to a corporate vision... I.e., How we are to live.
 1. We hear it in opening language... their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.
 2. This will be clearly shown in chapter 10 which 9:38 sets up.
 - a. **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.**
 3. Confession naturally leads us to repentance, how does it change anything?

3. Repentance – How does it change things?

- a. The close of chapter 9 and the entirety of chapter 10 is going to bring a close to the 3-chapter unit of spiritual and identity formation with the actions of repentance and recommitment to covenant.
 - i. We will dig into the reality of how repentance changes things more next week, but we need to both tie up the process of confess and look forward to how repentance changes things for you and me.
- b. **Reminds of our true allegiance. → We are foreigners in this age.**
 - i. This is an idea we have explored throughout this series. The people were foreigners and exiles in their own land.
 - ii. Remember it has been 500 years since their ancestors lived as a united nation /people.
 - iii. For the last 200 years the people of Israel have lived in some level of captivity and exile.
 1. They have become more and more like their captors than they are the people of God.

¹⁶ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 312.

¹⁷ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 123.

- iv. **vv. 36-37** – We are again greeted with the discomfort of being an exile in their homeland.
 - 1. Exile happened because of their sin.
 - 2. As exiles they do not see a physical kingdom as the ultimate solution.
 - 3. **This prayer is not breathing out rebellion, nor complaining of injustice (notice the phrase, *because of our sins*, 37, in line with 33ff.), but neither is it pretending that to serve and enrich a foreign régime is what was promised to Abraham and his seed. *The great distress which ends the prayer is a sign of life and of a vision that has not been tamely given up.*¹⁸**
- v. **Repentance resets our perspectives** → How we were living was not good, healthy, or Godly and we need to live in a new way.
 - 1. **The future might still be open, but in its own way the conclusion of the prayer breathes an atmosphere of strong faith and hope in spite of all the present, contradictory circumstances.**¹⁹
- c. Builds Christ-like humility.
 - i. **Pride** – A relentless pursuit of self.
 - 1. In this chapter we see the disastrous effects of pride. It has led the people astray and caused them personal and generational pain.
 - ii. **Humility** – Thinking of yourself less often... not, thinking less of yourself.
 - 1. When we come to the disciplines of confession and repentance, it brings us to a place of a right sized and right informed perspective of ourselves. → This is the lens of humility.
 - 2. We are able to have humility and not be crushed by the weight of our need for salvation because of grace.
 - a. This is why God meets them and us with grace first!
 - b. Rom 12:3 - ³ **For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.**
 - c. 1 Pet. 5:6-7 - ⁶ **Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, ⁷ casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.**
 - d. Col 3:12 - ¹² **Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience,**
 - e. Prov. 18:12 - ¹² **Before destruction a man's heart is haughty, but humility comes before honor.**
- d. **Fosters intimacy (understanding) with God not just familiarity.**
 - i. Intimacy builds trust. (v. 17)
 - ii. **Rules without relationship foster rebellion.**
 - 1. God does not ask us to obey him outside the context of relationship.
 - 2. Instead, he offers us restoration in relationship, and the resulting desire for you and me is that of obedience.

¹⁸ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 124.

¹⁹ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 319.

3. When we force ourselves to obey God outside of relationship, we begin to grow bitter and rebellious hearts.
 - iii. As they engage in this vulnerable process, they experience trust that is built between themselves as a community and with God.
- e. **Examine:**
- i. In what ways or patterns do I need to step off of the path of self and onto the path of Jesus?
 - ii. In what ways has my life begun to look more like the prevailing culture than it does the values of the kingdom?
 1. Often, we think because we are avoiding the “sins” of the other side, we do not smell of the culture... that is not the same thing as growing to be like Jesus.
 2. As spiritual exiles, we should be growing uncomfortable with both sides of the aisle.
 - iii. What is the better vision for my life as informed by the Bible?
 - iv. Does your confession tend to be along the lines of “Forgive my sins, dear Lord” rather than specifically naming your sins one by one before the face of God? What does the lack of specific confession do to self-awareness?
 - v. What experiences have affected your ability to give and receive forgiveness? Talk to God about what this means.
 - vi. When have you tasted the joy of forgiveness? What was that like for you?
 - vii. What is it like for you to confess your sins before a friend or confessor?
 - viii. Which of your sins hurts those closest to you?