

A CONFESSING COMMUNITY

+ **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

We are to confess our sin so that we might be restored with God.

+ **BACKGROUND PASSAGE:**

Nehemiah 9–10

+ **SETTING:**

In Nehemiah 8, we saw that God's people had begun to weep as they heard the words of the law, obviously realizing the gravity of their sins. But Ezra interrupted their time of consideration of sin because it was actually a time of festivity: time to celebrate God! And because God's Word is supreme, they obeyed. But when the festival was over and the booths had been put away, the tug of conviction was still strong. The people still needed to repent of their sin, and they did through a prayer recounting the mighty and gracious works of the Lord in contrast to the sinful works of His people, both past and present.

DAY 1

READ:

Nehemiah 9

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Nehemiah 9:1-2

NOTES

I've always lived in a small town in the south, and though it's not politically correct to make sweeping statements about a group of people, I will say this is a general truth: we small-town southerners love football. On Friday nights, the whole town heads to the local high school, ready to cheer on the team, whether or not you actually know anyone playing. Then on Saturdays, those with college ties or bequeathed season tickets gear up and head to their favorite team's weekly game, usually arriving hours before kickoff to tailgate, which is more of a celebration before the game just in case the result isn't good at the end.

It's easy to spot who's on your team at a tailgate: Who is wearing the gear that goes with your team? Gear might include a simple jersey or jacket, or the intense fan may have also added face paint and perhaps some colored hair. Either way, I can identify your team from a mile away because of what you've done on the outside to reflect the team you support with all your heart.

Similarly, the Jews revealed what was in their hearts through what they did in the opening lines of Nehemiah 9 with their fasting, wearing sackcloth, and putting dust on their heads. This wasn't one person or one family; it was something they had all chosen to do. On top of that, they all stood, listened to the Word, and confessed their sins and worshiped. When we feel passionately about something, we allow our visible, outward expressions to reveal our hearts.

It's a blessing to worship with other worshipers, to confess with other confessors, and to give thanks with others who are thankful. I am blessed when my congregation and my brothers and sisters in Christ let their hearts overflow into a visible expression of their faith.

How can others see your heart for God and your choice to worship Him?

DAY 2

READ:

Nehemiah 9:5-8

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Nehemiah 9:6

NOTES

A year ago, against my better judgment, our family got a puppy. And though I expected the blessings of his cuteness and excitement and love, I've received another blessing from an unexpected place: I've begun spending more time in the earliest and latest moments of the day walking this puppy and enjoying God's creation. I can tell my heart is soft and receptive to the Lord when His creation leads me to worship. The opposite is also true; when I'm distracted and unfocused because of the busyness of my daily life, I miss all the beauty of nature and God's fingerprints in it.

It's a holy time for me, honestly. That puppy wakes up with the sun and begins whimpering for me to take him out just as I slide out of bed. And though I'd rather enjoy a cup of coffee before our early-morning walk, I slide on shoes and put him on his leash. It's silent and peaceful, and in those moments, I am able to see more clearly than at any other point in the day. I consider the beauty of each blade of grass, outlined in the frosty morning. I hear squirrels chittering, acorns crashing to the ground, and footsteps of invisible creatures scurrying into the underbrush. I see rays of sunlight highlighting one small circle of my yard, and I take a moment to consider the colors and smells of that spot.

Then at night, one last time before I go to bed, I walk the puppy again in holy solitude. This time, the darkness creates an entirely different setting: I see the glowing eyes of miniscule spiders in the grass and see the pinpoints of light in the sky. And like the Levites and worshipers in Nehemiah 9:6, my heart swells as I consider God's creativity and attention to detail.

How often do you intentionally spend personal worship time outside in God's creation? How does that soften your heart?

VOICES from THE CHURCH

"Our response to the awesome revelation of God's character should be to hate sin with complete hatred, with every fiber of our being, and to petition God to commit it to total destruction . . . Search me. Try me. Expose me. Lead me. Awe begets humility, confession, and submission."¹

—Jen Wilkin

DAY 3

READ:

Nehemiah 9:9-15

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Nehemiah 9:9-15

NOTES

If you've ever been to an animal shelter and visited the dogs, you've seen their desire to be seen and touched. They jump on the doors, bark, wag, drool, and do anything they can think of to catch your eye. We humans feel so much superior to our canine friends, but deep down we also want to be seen, heard, touched, and loved.

The Levites sang that God saw the oppression of their ancestors in Egypt (Nehemiah 9:9). Through COVID and before and after, one of the major struggles people face is isolation and the sense of feeling alone, unseen, and forgotten.

There are several people in Scripture who felt forgotten, but one comes to mind first: Hagar. An Egyptian slave of Abram and Sarai, she had been impregnated (perhaps against her will) and mistreated for the contempt she had shown to her mistress. She ran away—pregnant, unwanted, and all alone. When the angel of the Lord came to her in the wilderness, revealing that God Himself knew exactly who she was and where she was, she acknowledged that God sees her (Genesis 16).

But God didn't just see Hagar; He stepped into her life and took action. God didn't just see the Israelites when they were enslaved in Egypt; He stepped in and took action. And when the Jews took time to reflect on His actions on their behalf, they praised Him. Even though the Israelites walking away from Egypt saw God's intervention as heavy-handed and demanding, their descendants saw that He is full of mercy and compassion.

God sees you, and God acts on your behalf as well. If it doesn't seem like it right now, take time to think back on His seeing and acting five, ten, or twenty years ago. Praise Him for the blessing of looking back at His faithfulness.

How might your own story read in psalm form, similar to Nehemiah 9:9-15?

DAY 4

READ:

Nehemiah 9:16-31

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Nehemiah 9:16-31

NOTES



ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #67: REPENTANCE

Repentance is a response to God's gracious call to salvation. It includes a genuine sorrow for one's sin (Luke 5:1-11), a turning away from one's sin toward Christ (Acts 26:15-20), and a life that reflects lasting change and transformation (Psalm 119:57-60). It is the human counterpart to God's work of regeneration; in other words, the human side of our conversion.

In these verses, the word "abandon" or "forsake" appears four times: Verses 17,19,31 point out that God did not abandon or forsake His people. Verse 28 does say that God abandoned them to their enemies, but when they cried out to God, He heard and rescued them.

Over and over, God's people acted as though they weren't rescued. Over and over, they disobeyed and chose to worship idols and feed their own selfishness. Over and over, God led them, provided for them, helped them, and heard them.

We had a dog that probably felt abandoned one time. Kip was a great dog, loving and loved. When we went on vacation one year, we left a familiar neighbor in charge of coming to take care of him. She called one day and said, "Kip hasn't eaten his food from yesterday, or the day before." We knew something had gone wrong. Kip had walked out of our yard and journeyed down a big hill and across a wide creek, seeking human companionship. He found it in the form of a kind family with a young girl.

But as soon as we got home from our vacation, we started looking. We searched the road and the internet, finally finding him on a local lost pet website. We were thrilled to drive to the house and call his name. We always wondered if Kip thought we abandoned him. That wasn't the case, but it may have seemed it at the time. And we had worried ourselves sick to find him.

God, likewise, may abandon us to our sinful hearts and idolatry, but He waits to run back to us when we cry out to Him. The bond between us and God is never severed, and even when we turn our backs on Him, He is still providing, still helping, and still leading.

Do you feel abandoned by God? Can you look back and trace where you might have strayed from His guidance and authority?

DAY 5

READ:

Nehemiah 9:32–10:39

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Nehemiah 9:36-37

NOTES

Ecclesiastes 3:12-13 expresses the idea that rejoicing and enjoying eating, drinking, and the fruits of our work is a gift from God. The daily blessings of getting to eat, drink, and enjoy our work with freedom is sometimes taken for granted. When these are taken away from us, we feel that harsh reality.

We feel these sentiments in Nehemiah 9:32-37.

The people had confessed their sins and looked clearly at the sin of their ancestors. They saw their own wickedness in the light of God's faithfulness, realizing they hadn't listened to His law, commands, or warnings. And now, as a result of that habitual generational sin, they lived as slaves without complete freedom.

Generations before, the Assyrians had conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel, then the Babylonians conquered Judah and Jerusalem. They, in turn, were overthrown by the Medo-Persians. And though these new Persian rulers had allowed the Jews to return home, God's people still answered to a crown that was not of their people. Though the king allowed them to return to the land, they were still under a foreign leader and paid high taxes for it. They were still slaves in that sense.

We feel the gut-wrenching pain in verses 36-37 as they expressed how they lived as slaves, realizing it was because of their sin. These returned exiles would have given anything to eat and drink and enjoy their efforts with freedom, but instead, they were in "great distress."

What are you taking for granted in your normal life that others would cherish? What gifts of life will you praise the Lord for, seeing them as a blessing?

GROUP

NOTES

VOICES from THE CHURCH

“He will always be I AM WHO I AM, which means He won’t necessarily be who we want Him to be. God exists within Himself. We have zero ability to define Him or shove Him into a box of our choosing . . . When you approach God on the basis of who He says He is, you’re ready to see Him as I AM WHO I AM—[Yahweh], the Relational God. And you don’t want to miss [Yahweh]. He offers a relationship that’s both powerful and deeply personal.”²

—Tony Evans

POINT 1: Confession begins with a proper view of God (Neh. 9:5-8).

As they began their confession, the Levites led the people into an act of _____ that began with a focused and accurate _____ at God Almighty.

? **Who has God shown Himself to be thus far in our study of the storyline of the Bible?**

As God’s people looked back at God’s _____ in their lives and in their family story, they saw that He is _____ faithful.

? **Looking back at your own life, in the good and the bad, what are some reasons you can say, “God is faithful”?**

POINT 2: Confession acknowledges the reality of sin (Neh. 9:16-21).

The Lord had rescued His people from slavery, provided for them, and blessed them with His guidance and law, but they _____ the Lord as God in favor of their own sin, and this is the _____ of all sin— _____ from God.

? **How should we view our sin in light of the character and actions of God?**

As we acknowledge and confess our sin against the _____ God, we must take time to remember God’s unfailing love, _____, and mercy.

POINT 3: Confession humbly seeks pardon and restoration (Neh. 9:32-35).

Confession requires a humble _____ on our part that we have sinned and _____ God's righteous discipline and judgment.



How do humbling circumstances serve the purpose of bringing God's people to confession of sin?

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #67: REPENTANCE

Repentance is a response to God's gracious call to salvation. It includes a genuine _____ for one's sin (Luke 5:1-11), a _____ away from one's sin toward Christ (Acts 26:15-20), and a life that reflects lasting change and transformation (Psalm 119:57-60). It is the human counterpart to God's work of regeneration; in other words, the human side of our _____ .

MY RESPONSE

Because all sin is a reproach to God and harms us and others, we confess our sin on a regular basis, knowing and trusting that we are completely forgiven in Christ.

- **HEAD:** How are you getting to know God better through your study of God's Word?
- **HEART:** What sins do you need to confess to the Lord, knowing there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus?
- **HANDS:** How will you help others find the freedom to confess their sins and be healed? How will you find others to hear your own confessions regarding sin and temptation?

NOTES

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"In return for the love which brought the Son of Man down from heaven, in return for the love which led Him to die for us on the Cross, we cannot give Him holy lives, for our lives are not holy; we cannot give Him pure souls, for our souls are not pure; but this one thing we can give, and this is what He asks, hearts that shall never cease from this day forward, till we reach the grave, to strive to be more like Him; to come nearer to Him; to root out from within us the sin that keeps us from Him. To such a battle, brethren, I call you in His name."³

—Frederick Temple (1821-1902)