

From Conviction to Christ // Nehemiah 9-10

v.1 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.

God has brought the exiles back to their land. In Ezra we saw the community being reestablished, the building of the temple, then in Nehemiah the building of the walls of Jerusalem. And now is the last piece to the puzzle, God is establishing the Word of God as their central rallying point. Ezra gets up on a platform and begins reading the Law of God to all the people, and what happens? the people begin to weep (v.9). the Word of God penetrated their hearts and they realized they were in great sin. But they found a problem their grieving, the Law also stated that there was a festival that they were to participate in, so the leaders pressed pause on their tears, and told them to rejoice instead.

When we come to chapter 9 verse 1 the festival is over, now they can press unpause on those tears and deal with their sin.

What is going on here? Woah. Essentially you have the whole community realizing they have blown it. Their response, a little outside our context... first they quit eating. they fast. Sorrow for sin leads them to think, how could we eat right now? that would be so inappropriate. Secondly they wear sackcloth- and uncomfortable garment made out of goat's hair- how could they dress nicely? that would be so inappropriate. and then they put earth on their heads. Dirt. That puts you in your place real quick. What's appropriate is dirt on my head.

The point is these are all signs of absolute humiliation and sorrow before God. Physical demonstration to a spiritual reality.

The picture here is that the Word of God has convicted the people of God, and they are overwhelmed with their guilt. They are as Ezra 9:3, "guilt has risen above their heads." (check)

What should they do? (And what should *we* do when *our* guilt overwhelms us? The following response is a model for us.)

I am going to read it in it's entirety, it's longest recorded prayer in the bible, because I want you to feel the weight and punch of the prayer, one that I believe is lost if we chop it up. So I'm going to read it all, and then we will come back through. In honor of this passage, would you please stand while I read...

And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. 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.

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. 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.

"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. You are the LORD, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham. 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.

"And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea, 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. 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. 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. You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments, and you made known to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses your servant. 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.

“But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments. 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. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them. 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, 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. You gave your good Spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst. Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness, and they lacked nothing. Their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell.

“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. 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. 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. 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.

“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. 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. 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. 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. 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. Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.

“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. Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly. 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. 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. 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. 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.

Why do the people have dirt on their heads? This is why.

1. Praise God for who He is and what He has done

The Levites begin at the end of v.5 praising God as the **Sovereign Creator God**

You are from everlasting to everlasting. There is no beginning and there is no end to you, God. Your name is glorious, holy, and it's exalted above all blessing and praise. Get this, what it's saying is our praise is unable to do justice to who God is, our praise does not correlate rightly with God, it does not, and cannot rightly value Him and Esteem Him. It can't touch Him. Now that does not make us praise Him less, that makes us praise Him more. You cannot over magnify or over esteem His worth, and so you praise Him more.

v.6 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.

God, sovereign, above all. God, creator of all. And in the heavens, angels upon angels worship and bow before you.

This is who you are God. You are transcendent. Absolutely other. Uncreated and unapproachable light, infinite, omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, never changing, self-existing, self-sufficient, utterly incomprehensible and awesome.

When you sin, do you begin your prayer like this?

He then moves to God as working throughout history.

The calling of Abraham: The God who enters into covenant

v.7 You are the Lord, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham. You found his heart faithful before you and made with him the covenant to give to his offspring the land... and you have kept your promise, for you are righteous.

The sovereign God of the universe has just entered into history with man, and even more so, into covenant with man. God chooses Abraham, apart from anything Abraham could do, even here, faithful means believing God, and promises that through Abraham and his offspring God will bless the world.

God's grace and benevolence is being recalled... God chose Abra, then God gave him the name Abraham "father of many nations", interesting the word give appears 15 times in this prayer. God is a giving God.

EXodus: God who hears, God who delivers

Here the Israelites remember their time in Egypt, enslaved. God heard their cries and delivered them.

God who guides with pillar of cloud and fire

God who speaks with the people on Mount Sinai

God who gives His Word v.13

God who gives His Spirit v.20

v.17b But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love

God who sustains and provides, miracles

“lacked nothing” v.21

The PROMISE LAND: God who fulfills promise by giving them the land, and multiplying their children as the stars of heaven v.23, direct fulfillment to Abraham’s promise.

God who delights and satisfies, v.25 so they ate and were filled and became fat and delighted themselves in your great goodness.

JUDGES: v.26-31 God who is patient, who disciplines and warns, v.31 “in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.

God who is just, v.33 “Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly.”

The absolute focus of this prayer is God and God’s gracious, merciful dealings with Israel. What I find breathtaking here, is that people of God are heavily convicted of their sin, and what do they do... 30 verses they praise God for who He is and affirm His acts in history. 1 verse is given as a plea, v. 32. That’s incredible. Does that sound like your prayers? Is that the first thing that is on your mind when you sin... God you are awesome, gracious, and merciful.

Adam - we hide from God. We will believe 1. wrongly about God 2. wrongly about ourselves.

2. Confess your sin

We have to find ourselves in this story. We must identify with sin as they are. Reading history is not the same as letting history read us. This is our story. We cannot throw stones at the Israelites here, because this is us. As long as we see them has more sinful than we are, we have not arrived at the truth.

This is us... v.16, acting presumptuously and stiffening our necks and not obeying God. Stiff neck refers to an animal refusing to receive a yoke that would be placed on it’s neck, fighting against it. v.17, not mindful of the wonders that God has performed. choosing slavery in Egypt over freedom in the promise land. Worshiping idols, spurning the goodness and deliverance of God, refusing to worship God for all His many gifts, having lacked nothing, we spit in God’s face, we hated Him. When corrected we hate him the more, we only cry out to Him when things get really bad, but as soon as things get better we forget him. We doubt him and disobey. We have murder in our hearts, killing His word, blaspheme God’s name. In light of God’s great goodness we continue to perform evil deeds. We don’t listen to God, not “give ear to the Lord.”

We are dogs returning to our vomit, over and over and over again. Willingly. That’s what makes it so awful. When you dig down into your heart to find out why you sinned, it wasn’t for lack of knowledge, it wasn’t an accident. It was willing rebellion.

Do you find yourself here? When you are overwhelmed with guilt, identify your sin and confess it. Give voice to your sin. It needs to be identified to come into the light. As God’s goodness is magnified, so our sin is magnified. the more glorious He is, the more hideous we become.

That rubs against the grain of our pride doesn't it. Hideous. that's too strong of language. If you are thinking, "that's not me," than you aren't reading the story right. We all have to find ourselves here.

"Who will rescue me from this body of death." you got to be there. but you can't stay there, as Paul goes on.. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

After we confess, we must move on...

3. Look to Christ

The Israelites are bringing their sin to God trusting God to take care of their sin. This is what the Israelites were banking on. The grace and mercy of God.

It's fascinating in the last section, v.26 on, there are 3 cycles of 4 steps. 1. people are disobedient. 2. God judges them. 3. people cry for mercy, 4. God delivers.

This happens three times, but what's fascinating is the 3rd cycle is incomplete, they are in the 3rd step crying out for mercy. The implication is that they are anticipating full deliverance based upon God's past grace and mercy. In v.32, you see the acknowledgement, "our God" this is covenantal language, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love.

They call out to God on the basis of the covenant that God has already entered into with them. The covenant with Abraham drives this whole passage.

God made a covenant to Abraham, that God would bless Abraham and Abraham's family would bless all the nations. In making a covenant, what people would do, is it's called "cutting" a covenant. Where two parties would come together and they would cut several animals in half and spread them apart. Then each party of the covenant would walk between the animals. What this symbolized was that, you were in effect saying, should I break my part of the covenant, I will be like these animals. There was a curse and blessing to the covenant. Curse for breaking it, and blessing for keeping it.

What is breathtaking about the covenant God makes with Abraham, is that God is the only one to pass between the animals. He was in effect saying, I am covenanting with myself. I am going to be both the one to make the promise, and I will be the one responsible for keeping it. Abraham was asleep during the whole thing. This was God's doing, from beginning to end.

- 1. How will man be punished?**
- 2. How will man fulfill the law?**

You might say, how does all that work. Well this foreshadows the work of Christ. Christ is one who fulfills our side of the covenant. We are powerless to keep it. That is evident throughout history. We are morally helpless. God knew if he entered into covenant with man, sinful man would sin and be condemned. So Christ becomes a man, and takes on the curse for us. He bears the curse of the broken covenant, and at the same time fulfills the covenant for us.

He's our representative. Man's righteous representative. Our first man Adam failed. Jesus the Christ is victorious.

God the Father and God the Son in the power Holy Spirit, swore by His own name. The guarantee was Himself. The eternal covenant was made, and God cannot be divided, He cannot turn away from Himself.

We get into the covenant by faith, not by works. We see Christ in our place, standing for our sin and we see Christ in our place, as our righteous representative, and we say, with everything we are, Yes, and Amen.

They are banking on it....

Although their picture of God's covenant is amazing, we have the fulfillment of the covenant. You might be wondering, how could God be just if he never punishes them.

Romans 3, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

This is why God has been so merciful, so steadfast in love, and how He upholds His justice.

The man we look to for our salvation is the man we are guilty of killing. PAID in full. Declared Righteous before God.

In sinning, we are tempted to wallow in ourselves. We are not made more holy by wallowing in self-pity and self condemnation. That does you NO good. You stop there, Satan wins. Who will rescue me from this body of death. you stop there, you die. Christ will rescue you. Christ has rescued you. Believe in Christ.

covenant love is the basis on which people's God approach Him. Hebrews throne of grace.

4. Walk in Righteousness

The people of God have been forgiven and cleansed. They have received mercy and grace. Now they must respond in repentance, in walking out righteousness. It is very clear in the Bible that obedience follows grace, obedience does not merit grace, but it certainly follows and is sustained by grace.

V.38 "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."

In writing signifies greater desire and earnestness. This isn't merely, we said we'd obey. We signed our names and sealed it. We make a firm covenant in writing. Their commitment to God on full display.

What this is as one scholar has made known, this is the people of God covenanting to keep the covenant. The covenant is what they realized that they have failed miserably in keeping. God entered into covenant with them, their job was to obey it, and as long as they obeyed, God would pour out blessing on them and not curse them. They have sinned in not keeping their side of the equation, and here is the full measure of repentance. They are returning to the covenant, v.29 all who have knowledge and understanding, join with their brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God's Law that was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord and His rules and His statutes.

In other words, what does this sound like? They are promising to obey the Law of God. They are choosing to submit to God's law as their authority and priority in life. God's law is the locus of their focus, placing the Word of God back at the center.

This isn't legalism, as has been made clear. Mercy and Grace have been lavished. The Law of God is good, holy, and pleasing. Grace trains us for righteousness. Mercy wins our heart for God's commands. The Law is about knowing God and enjoying His wonderful presence.

So they enter into a curse, and the implication is, if I disobey, let me be cursed, and an oath, I promise.

Where do you need to repent? What does walking in righteous look like for you?

For the Israelites, there were three main areas where they needed to repent.

1. They will not intermarry.

v.30, "We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons."

This was about religion, not race. About worship, not ethnicity. The people of God were called to be separate so that worship would be preserved. The problem with intermarriage is the Israelites were taking on other religious practices.

God was in favor of others converting to worship of Yahweh. We see that throughout Scripture. Even in v.28, the rest of the people, includes non-ethnic Israelites who have separated themselves to worship Yahweh.

2. They will honor the Sabbath day and the Sabbath year.

v.31 And if the peoples of the land bring in goods or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on a holy day. And we will forego the crops of the seventh year and the exaction of every debt."

The purpose of the Sabbath was to worship God as the provider, it was a day of rest and year of rest, to not do work in order for God to showcase His provision for them.

3. They will support Temple worship.

We will not neglect the house of our God." House of God is mentioned 9x in these 8 verses.

We don't have a Temple in our day, what we have is the New Testament parallel as the church. We will not neglect the church of Christ. We are a temple of the Holy Spirit with Christ as the cornerstone.

We must note here that, however earnest and repentful the Israelites are in this chapter, and you can just hear their resolve right? All it's going to take is two chapters and they have totally failed their promise to God again.

What do we learn? We are ever in need of mercy. We never outgrow our need for grace. The focus never belongs on ourselves. It belongs on Christ. If we obey, it's grace in us. We don't rest on our promises to God. We rest on God's promise to us.

We continue to see Christ doing for us what we cannot do ourselves, and this chapter shows us Christ fulfilling the law for us. Teaching us that returning to God's Word is a return to Christ. He is the Word made flesh. 1. as for intermarriage, Christ has given Himself wholly to His bride, the church. Marriage exists to display this glory. 2. As for honoring the Sabbath, Christ is our sabbath rest, where we rest from works of the law, rest in his provision of grace, and 3. In supporting the Temple, Christ becomes the Temple, He is God's presence to us, and the slain lamb to which the temple points that allows us to enter His presence.

It's all about Christ. Christ was their at creation, in the covenant with Abraham, in Egypt, dying to set us free, dwelling with us in the wilderness, the Word made flesh, He was the manna from heaven and the water from the rock, it was Him patiently enduring us.

As glorious as the story of Ezra and Nehemiah is, the fulfillment of God's promise, the exiles returning, the Word being placed at the center of the community, within the Temple, and surrounded by a rebuilt Jerusalem, we see in all this glory the hope a far-surpassing glory, fulfilled in Christ. The Word would be disobeyed and disregarded, the Temple would come crumbling down, and Jerusalem would be run by foreigners. We look forward to the Jerusalem to come, when all enemies will have been put away, all threat extinguished, in a New heavens and New Earth where righteousness dwells, and at the center of the redeemed people of God is the Word made flesh, Jesus Himself, as the slain Lamb for the salvation of the world. Our final resting place is with God, and confession of sin will no longer be necessary.

You've got dirt on your head, Stand up and bless the Lord who is from everlasting to everlasting, look to Him who came out of the dirt for you.

quote:

"Consecutive reading of Biblical books forces everyone who wants to hear to put himself, or to allow himself to be found, where God has acted once and for all for the salvation of men. We become a part of what once took place for our salvation. Forgetting and losing ourselves, we too pass through the Red Sea, through the desert, across the Jordan into the promised land. With Israel we fall into doubt and unbelief and through punishment and repentance experience again God's help and faithfulness... We are torn out of our own existence and set down in the midst of the holy history of God on earth. There God dealt with us, and there he still deals with us, our needs and our sins, in judgment and grace. It is not that God is the spectator and sharer of our present life, howsoever important that is; but rather that we are the reverent listeners and participants in God's action in the sacred story, the history of the Christ on earth. And only in so far as we are there, is God with us today also."