

Confession

Nehemiah 9:1-6

Nehemiah 9:1-6 - *“Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads. ² Then those of Israelite lineage separated themselves from all foreigners; and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. ³ And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the Lord their God for one-fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the Lord their God.*

⁴ Then Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, and Chenani stood on the stairs of the Levites and cried out with a loud voice to the Lord their God. ⁵ And the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabniah, Sherebiah, Hodijah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah, said: “Stand up and bless the Lord your God forever and ever!

“Blessed be Your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise!

⁶ You alone are the Lord. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and everything on it, the seas and all that is in them, and You preserve them all. The host of heaven worships You.”

Background Notes

The focus of Nehemiah 8 was Scripture. In Nehemiah 8, the revival that followed the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem was centered in the Word of God. In fact, every revival and renewal must - and will - be centered in the Word of God!

The focus of Nehemiah 9 is prayer. In Nehemiah 9 we learn that prayer is another a vital ingredient for revival, renewal, and blessing. This can be applied to our personal lives as individuals, and it can be applied to our families and our churches.

The year was 445BC, and the date was the 24th day of the Hebrew month Tishrei (v1). As we saw in Nehemiah 8, Tishrei is the seventh month in Israel's religious calendar, and the first month in the civil calendar.

There are three “Feasts of the Lord” during this month. The Feast of Trumpets is on the first day of the month. This is also the first day of the Jewish civil year. Today it is called Rosh Hashanah – “New Year’s Day” in the Jewish calendar.

The tenth day of Tishrei is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement – the most solemn day in the Jewish year. The third festival is the Feast of Tabernacles, celebrated from the 15th to the 21st of Tishrei. This festival is also called Sukkot.

Nehemiah 9:1 tells us that on the 24th day of Tishrei (which was not a feast day), the people came together to confess their sins (v1). Notice that they didn't confess to Ezra, or to another priest, or to the Levites, or even to one another. No. **They confessed their sin to the Lord.** They confessed their sins as a group of the Lord's people, before the Lord. They recognized their sinful condition as a nation, and the fact that as individuals they were part of the problem.

They read the Word for three hours, and then they confessed their sins for three hours (v3)! Did you catch that? The Bible study and prayer time continued on for **six hours!** When was the last time we gathered together as a church and spent three hours in Bible study - then three hours in prayers of confession for the sinful condition of our nation, or the sad condition of some of our families? Some churches need to do this. Read about the Laodicean church in Revelation 3:14-22. That church needed to spend hours in prayers of confession.

Notice that the people were dressed in sackcloth, and put dust on their heads (v1). Think of wearing burlap today. I think you get the idea. They weren't wearing tuxedos or comfortable clothing. No. Sackcloth. And they actually put dust on their heads, as an outward sign of their inward repentance and mourning for their sins.

This doesn't mean that we have to wear burlap or put dirt on our heads if we want to confess our sins today. Those outward signs were part of the culture in that day.

In addition, the people were fasting. There's often a question today about whether or not we should fast to confess our sins (or fast or at any time). There's a lot that could be said here, and we could go off on a long tangent about fasting. The Bible doesn't say it's right or wrong to fast. I would just say that there's a time and place for fasting. I would further say that some of us should fast from TV (or other types of entertainment), rather than just fasting from food.

In any case, the people of Jerusalem confessed their sins, using the outward symbols of sorrow and mourning. This was their cultural way to show their true and right attitude of their hearts before the Lord.

Doctrinal Points

1. Confession of sin must precede worship.

You can't worship the Lord if you know there is sin in your life. And you can't worship the Lord if you are unwilling to confess your sins. Confession must come before worship.

In Matthew 5:23-24 our Lord said, *"If you are offering your gift [worshiping] at the altar and remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift."*

Notice that our Lord didn't only say "if you have something against your brother." No. He actually carried it to the point of "if you know your brother has something against you"! Even if you feel you are totally in the right, and your brother in the wrong, you should still get this problem settled. Get it straightened out before the Lord, and reconcile with anyone you have wronged, or who may have wronged you. Confession and reconciliation must precede worship.

In connection with participating in communion, or the Lord's Supper, 1 Corinthians 11:28 says, *"But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep."* "Examining ourselves" before we worship the Lord at the Lord's Supper certainly involves confession of sin. Some of the believers in the Corinthian church had not been doing this, and for this reason the Lord had allowed disciplinary sickness - and even death - in the congregation. Confession of sin must always precede worship.

2. Worship is the acknowledgement of who God is and what God does, addressed to God Himself.

After confession of sin, the people moved into their prayer of worship. *"Blessed be Your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise! You alone are the Lord"* (v5-6).

Notice that their prayer didn't begin with requests – it began with worship! It began with an acknowledgement of who God is *"...the Lord your God forever and ever! ...Your glorious name... is exalted above all blessing and praise!"* (v5). In addition, *"The host of heaven worships You"* (v6).

Then they moved on into an acknowledgement of what God does. They acknowledged Him as the Creator and the Preserver of all that has been created: *"You alone are the Lord. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and everything on it, the seas and all that is in them, and You preserve them all. The host of heaven worships You"* (v6).

Worship is the acknowledgement of who God is and what God does, addressed to God Himself. Are our prayers characterized by worship?

Practical Applications

1. Remember to include worship in your prayers.

I don't think we have a problem with including worship in our prayers in church. There our prayers tend to be more formal, and we don't forget to acknowledge who God is and what God does. But what about our private prayers?

So often in our private prayers we jump right in with requests! “Lord, may we have good weather for our vacation week.” “Help me get through this problem at work.” “Please let me get a good grade on that exam!” “Lord may I please get that raise...” These requests are not wrong, but let’s not forget to include worship in our prayers.

Think of “The Lord’s Prayer” - the model prayer our Lord gave us. Before the request for bread, there is worship. *“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.”* That’s an acknowledgement of who God is – His character and His holiness. *“Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.”* That’s acknowledging what God does – He rules over everything. Worship should be included in our prayers.

2. Don’t forget to thank God for the basics!

“You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and everything on it, the seas and all that is in them, and You preserve them all. The host of heaven worships You” (v6).

The people of Jerusalem acknowledged God as the Creator, and they thanked God for being the Creator. That’s pretty basic - but sometimes we forget the basic things! When was the last time you thanked God for creating the sun and the sky? When was the last time you thanked God for the fish in the sea, and for preserving them? Let’s not forget to thank God for the basics!

Some years ago I led a youth group. When we prayed together, some of the group would always thank God for basic things, like the warm sunshine and the green grass. And I often felt like we should move on past this fundamental stuff. I would try to set the model by beginning to pray for the salvation of our friends.

But I think God was using us to teach each other lessons in prayer. I know for sure that God was teaching me a lesson! Yes, there is a time to move on and pray for the salvation of friends - but I was forgetting to thank God for the basics. We need to acknowledge that God is the Creator. He has given us the warm sunshine and the green grass. He’s the Giver of all good things!

So let’s never forget to thank God for the basics!