

Praying History

Jason Abbott

If you recall last week, the Israelites came together to worship God and meet with God. They gathered around the reading of Scripture and learned in community. And as they learned, they were heartbroken. Do you remember how they were crying because they realized they had neglected the commands of God? Their leaders had to comfort and direct them to celebrate the Feast of Booths—which they’d just read about in the text—rather than lament having forgotten it for so long.

The people felt convicted because they’d forsaken the commands of the Lord. They felt their need to repent and their need to confess. They felt their faithlessness before God deeply. And, though it was the time for celebrating God’s saving works, when he rescued them out of slavery in Egypt (that’s what the Feast of Booths was), the people didn’t lose sight of their need to confess their sins corporately and repent of them as a nation. In the midst of all their celebrations—the drinking and eating and rejoicing—the people of God kept their sights on publicly recognizing their sins and turning to God for forgiveness and rescue from them.

That’s what we’re going to look at today. That’s what Nehemiah chapter nine is about. It is a detailed and lengthy prayer of confession which the people of Israel—as they are led by the Levites—bring before the Lord. It’s chalked full of the history of Israel’s sin and God’s faithfulness.

Let’s read the beginning and ending of this prayer.

Nehemiah 9

9 On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads. ² Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors. ³ They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the Lord their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshiping the Lord their God. ⁴ Standing on the stairs of the Levites were Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani and Kenani. They cried out with loud voices to the Lord their God. ⁵ And the Levites—Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah,

Shebaniah and Pethahiah—said: “Stand up and praise the Lord your God, who is from everlasting to everlasting.”

“Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. ⁶ You alone are the Lord. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.

[What follows this statement, about the Lord’s holy character, is a history of Israel’s historic *faithlessness* and God’s *faithfulness* in response.]

³² “Now therefore, our God, the great God, mighty and awesome, who keeps his covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes—the hardship that has come on us, on our kings and leaders, on our priests and prophets, on our ancestors and all your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until today. ³³ In all that has happened to us, you have remained righteous; you have acted faithfully, while we acted wickedly. ³⁴ Our kings, our leaders, our priests and our ancestors did not follow your law; they did not pay attention to your commands or the statutes you warned them to keep. ³⁵ Even while they were in their kingdom, enjoying your great goodness to them in the spacious and fertile land you gave them, they did not serve you or turn from their evil ways.

³⁶ “But see, we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our ancestors so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces. ³⁷ Because of our sins, its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress.

³⁸ “In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it.”

In the most basic sense, this chapter is really about two things. (1st) It’s about **what we do**. It’s all about the history of Israel and how the people of God have acted and continue to act. (2nd) It’s about **what God does**. It’s all about how God responds to his people—how he does relationship with us. So, let’s look at each of these and see what God has to teach us.

1. What we do.

If you were asked to describe yourself to someone, you would likely talk a lot about what you do. “I do this job. I do these hobbies. I’ve gone on these vacations.” You’d start with you. That makes sense. We think in individual terms; *don’t we?*

In a similar fashion, if I asked you to confess your sins, you’d likely begin with something you’re struggling with currently—maybe being harsh with your kids or being selfish with your time or, perhaps, cheating on your taxes. You would begin with the sins you have personally committed. You’d mainly think individualistically about your sins. And, it isn’t wrong to do so, but the Bible doesn’t describe our sins in merely individualistic ways. It paints a far broader picture of our guilt.

In this prayer of repentance, the Israelites begin their confession by going back to the beginning of their history. They view sin through a corporate and historic lens. Just consider their prayer.

- They begin with the Lord God’s gracious call to Abraham and his promise to his descendants (vv. 7-8).
- Next, they move to how God saved Abraham’s descendants out of slavery in Egypt—another act of God’s grace to his people (vv. 9-12).
- Then, they detail how God poured out grace upon grace on the Israelites—giving them his good laws, bread and water in the wilderness, and a land as their inheritance (vv. 13-15).

How did those Israelites respond to all this unmerited love from the Lord God? The details are right here in this prayer of confession.

...they, our ancestors, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and they did not obey your commands. They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to slavery (vv. 16-17).

Friends, this prayer of confession is being offered up around a thousand years after these sins took place. Why are they going back so far? What is this all about? What’s the point here?

It’s simply this. They are confessing to a history of sins. They are identifying with their ancestors. And, as a gathered people—a unified people, one before God—

they are declaring “solidarity with the history of unfaithfulness” of their forefathers and foremothers.¹ They are recognizing a history of evil that is their history.

Now, we don’t quickly accept this lesson in our fiercely individualistic times. You may tend to think that how your mother or father or great grandparents sinned has nothing to do with you. This view, however, is more in line with human wisdom than with biblical wisdom. And, we see it here because it’s not simply that the people admit to the sins of their ancestors. They own them. Look at the text again.

...therefore, our God...do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes—the hardship that has come on us, on our kings and leaders, on our priests and prophets, on our ancestors and all your people In all that has happened to us, you have remained righteous...while we acted wickedly (vv. 32-33).

And again, they own those sins just a few verses later.

*...we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our ancestors.... **Because of our sins**, its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please* (vv. 36-37).

Now, this kind of confession needs explanation in our day. If you’re like me, you want to know why you should own and confess the sins of your ancestral history. Well, here’s why. Here are two biblical rationales. **First**, sins don’t simply go away. The sins of our fathers and mothers as well as the historic sins in our nation’s history, don’t just disappear. They have lingering and damaging consequences that carry on. And, our God is the God of restoration who calls each of his children to participate in that ministry. One scholar puts it this way.

*...sometimes the Bible suggests we have to repent of the guilt of our ancestors because we have inherited the obligation to fix their mistakes. That they’re dead does not change the fact that the debt remains outstanding. The Year of Jubilee teaches us that to continually refuse to repair our ancestors’ sins is to make them our own.*²

Brothers and sisters, if you follow Jesus, you are responsible to own the sins of your ancestors and your nation as if they were your own. You are called to work

¹ F. C. Fensham, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, 228.

² Michael Rhodes, *The Biblical Mind: “Should We Repent of Our Grandparents’ Racism? Scripture on Intergenerational Sin”*, June 19, 2020. You can read the whole article [here](#).

for reconciliation and restoration. Even as Jesus owned our sins and crucified them on the cross, we must be willing to own the corporate sins of our family and nation in order to work for justice and bring our God glory. *Amen!*

Here's the **second** biblical rationale. No human being emerges from the womb as a blank slate; rather, we come forth as “sinners [who are] shaped by the sinfulness of those who've come before us.”³ In good ways, we stand on the shoulders of giants. We've gained so much from those who've gone before us. However, on the flipside, we stand on the shoulders of *sinful* giants. Thus, we've been formed in negative ways by them. We have inherited their blind spots. We have inherited their prejudices. We've inherited many of their sinful tendencies. This is the biblical view.

We cannot look back on our history with arrogance—as if we now see clearly what they should have seen. Rather, in humility, we should recognize that vestiges of their sins doubtlessly linger in us. And, if we'd been placed in the same situation as they were, we would very likely have committed the exact same sins as they did. We must not in arrogance assume a hypothetical righteousness which we don't have and wouldn't have had in a different historical context.

Friends, do you recognize this about yourself? If so, don't be crushed by it because it isn't our perfection that saves us. That's not the gospel hope that we have. Rather, as Michael Rhodes explains:

*...the good news of God's kingdom isn't that we escape this task of repenting of and recovering from our intergenerational sins.... [It's] that we've been forgiven for failing in this task, are...empowered by the Spirit to embrace it, and can look forward to the day when the King will return and finish it.*⁴

Amen. Praise God for our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ!

2. What God does.

It's fascinating to consider the many unwarranted expressions of God's grace with which the people begin this prayer of confession. We're halfway thru the prayer before we get to all of Israel's sinfulness and rebellion. The people begin with God. They begin this confession by acknowledging the Lord's unparalleled reign.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

You alone are the Lord. You made the heavens...the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you (v. 6).

God is the only King of all things. He has complete sovereignty over all things. Friends, this isn't a negotiation. The people throw themselves on the mercy of God. They confess the Lord's holy righteousness as well as their sinfulness and rebellion. The people make no excuses. They admit their guilt. And, they do this unabashedly because of their history of rebellion, because of what it has revealed about their God. He is faithful in his love. He is merciful with repentant people.

Listen to their pleas. Listen to what they confess from their history.

- We were stiff-necked and obstinate “but you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore, you did not desert [us]...” (v. 17).
- We were thankless and rebelled, yet “...because of your great compassion you did not abandon [us] in the wilderness...” (v. 19).
- Though we were punished because of our sins, when we cried to the Lord for rescue from our oppressors, you heard “and in your great compassion you gave us deliverers, who rescued [us]...” (v. 27).

Friends, many of you came to worship this morning feeling low and worthless. I am certain this is the case. Many of you came wondering how God could love you, wondering how God could embrace you in all of your repetitive sin and faithlessness. You wonder how God could forgive you. You wonder why he doesn't abandon you. And, you even wonder if he wants you at all—if he would want to rescue you at all. I know many of you feel this way right now, and I know that everyone feels this way at various times in this fallen world.

But, if you are there and when you are there, let this prayer in Nehemiah nine sink into your soul. God does not negotiate with repentant sinners. *He saves them.* God does not abandon repentant sinners. *He rescues them.* God doesn't hate people who turn to him for care. *He loves them.*

It is his character—“The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God. He is slow to anger, and he abounds in both love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6). “Turn to God, and he will turn to you”—the prophet Zechariah says (Zechariah 1:3). The apostle James says something similar—“Draw near to God, and he’ll draw near to you” (James 4:8). Simply put: *This is what God does! Trust him for it!*