

This morning, we are continuing our journey through the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah is the man primarily responsible for refounding the nation of Israel after their exile in Babylon. The story begins in 445 BC, and there is a lot to learn about leadership and about building up the church and the people of God. In ch. 1, Nehemiah hears about the devastating state of Jerusalem, and receives permission from King Artaxerxes of the Persian Empire to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall. In ch. 2 he surveys the scene and rallies the people together to the task. In 3-4 he assembles the people, builds the wall, and deals with some opposition. Chapters 5-6 were all about spiritual warfare as Nehemiah tries to finish the wall. In chs. 7-8, he begins to build up the community spiritually. They read the law, mourn, and then find joy in God's grace.

The two main points from last week were these: A proper understanding of God's law should cause mourning. A proper understanding of God's grace replaces our mourning with joy. As we see the high bar of God's law, we realize that we do not measure up and we deserve God's judgment. But as we see that in Jesus, God has not treated us as our sins deserve, but has forgiven us by His grace, our mourning is replaced with joy. Chs. 9-10, which we will be in this morning, show that there is more to that equation. **A proper understanding of God's law and grace leads to repentance and faith in action.**

So what happens in ch. 9?

*<sup>NIV</sup> Nehemiah 9:1 - On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads. <sup>2</sup> Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers. <sup>3</sup> 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*

They gather for a solemn assembly, a time of repentance. Sackcloth and dust signifies mourning and the frailty of mankind. They go through the history of the people, proclaiming what God has done and confessing the ways in which they and their ancestors have sinned.

<sup>4</sup> *Standing on the stairs were the Levites-- Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani and Kenani-- who called with loud voices to the LORD their God. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> "You are the LORD God, who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and named him Abraham. <sup>8</sup> You found his heart faithful to you, and you made a covenant with him to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Jebusites and Girgashites. You have kept your promise because you are righteous. <sup>9</sup> "You saw the suffering of our forefathers in Egypt; you heard their cry at the Red Sea. <sup>10</sup> You sent miraculous signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his officials and all the people of his land, for you knew how arrogantly the Egyptians treated them. You made a name for yourself, which remains to this day. <sup>11</sup> You divided the sea before them, so that they passed through it on dry ground, but you hurled their pursuers into the depths, like a stone into mighty waters. <sup>12</sup> By day you led them with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire to give them light on the way they were to take. <sup>13</sup> "You came down on Mount Sinai; you spoke to them from heaven. You gave them regulations and laws that are just and right, and decrees and commands that are good. <sup>14</sup> You made known to them your holy Sabbath and gave them commands, decrees and laws through your servant Moses. <sup>15</sup> In their hunger you gave them bread from heaven and in their thirst you brought them water from the rock; you told them to go in and take possession of the land you had sworn with uplifted hand to give them. <sup>16</sup> "But they, our forefathers, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and did not obey your commands. <sup>17</sup> 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 their slavery. **But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them,** <sup>18</sup> even when they cast for themselves an image of a calf and said, 'This is your god, who brought you up out of Egypt,' or when they committed awful blasphemies. <sup>19</sup> **"Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them in the desert.** By day the pillar of cloud did not cease to guide them on their path, nor the pillar of fire by night to shine on the way they were to take. <sup>20</sup> You gave your good Spirit to instruct them. You did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and you gave them water for their thirst. <sup>21</sup> For forty years you sustained them in the desert; they lacked nothing, their clothes did not wear out nor did their feet become swollen. <sup>22</sup> "You gave them kingdoms and nations, allotting to them even the remotest frontiers. They took over the country of Sihon king of Heshbon and the country of Og king of Bashan. <sup>23</sup> You made their sons as numerous as the stars in the sky, and you brought them into the land that you told their fathers to enter and possess. <sup>24</sup> Their

sons went in and took possession of the land. You subdued before them the Canaanites, who lived in the land; you handed the Canaanites over to them, along with their kings and the peoples of the land, to deal with them as they pleased. <sup>25</sup> They captured fortified cities and fertile land; they took possession of houses filled with all kinds of good things, wells already dug, vineyards, olive groves and fruit trees in abundance. They ate to the full and were well-nourished; they reveled in your great goodness. <sup>26</sup> "But they were disobedient and rebelled against you; they put your law behind their backs. They killed your prophets, who had admonished them in order to turn them back to you; they committed awful blasphemies. <sup>27</sup> So you handed them over to their enemies, who oppressed them. But when they were oppressed they cried out to you. From heaven you heard them, and in your great compassion you gave them deliverers, who rescued them from the hand of their enemies. <sup>28</sup> "But as soon as they were at rest, they again did what was evil in your sight. Then you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies so that they ruled over them. And when they cried out to you again, you heard from heaven, and in your compassion you delivered them time after time. <sup>29</sup> "You warned them to return to your law, but they became arrogant and disobeyed your commands. They sinned against your ordinances, by which a man will live if he obeys them. Stubbornly they turned their backs on you, became stiff-necked and refused to listen. <sup>30</sup> For many years you were patient with them. By your Spirit you admonished them through your prophets. Yet they paid no attention, so you handed them over to the neighboring peoples. <sup>31</sup> But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God. <sup>32</sup> "Now therefore, O our God, the great, mighty and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes-- the hardship that has come upon us, upon our kings and leaders, upon our priests and prophets, upon our fathers and all your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until today. <sup>33</sup> *In all that has happened to us, you have been just; you have acted faithfully, while we did wrong.* <sup>34</sup> Our kings, our leaders, our priests and our fathers did not follow your law; they did not pay attention to your commands or the warnings you gave them. <sup>35</sup> 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. <sup>36</sup> "But see, we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our forefathers so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces. <sup>37</sup> 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. <sup>38</sup> "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."

He goes through their nation's history. Creation. The covenant with Abraham. Egypt & Exodus. Being led through the desert. Laws and covenant at Mt. Sinai. Conquering the Promised Land. The unfaithfulness of Israel and God's patience in the holy land.

Their message is this: We have been arrogant and stiff-necked, rebellious, we did not remember your miracles, we killed your prophets. We did evil again and again.

But You are gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. You are merciful towards us. You did not desert us. You gave manna and water, kingdom and nations. You disciplined us but rescued us. You have acted justly and faithfully.

10:1-27 is a list of those who signed the agreement. And then they make specific commitments.

<sup>28</sup> *"The rest of the people-- priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, temple servants and all who separated themselves from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the Law of God, together with their wives and all their sons and daughters who are able to understand--* <sup>29</sup> *all these now join their brothers the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD our Lord.* <sup>30</sup> *"We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons.* <sup>31</sup> *"When the neighboring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts.* <sup>32</sup> *"We assume the responsibility for carrying out the commands to give a third of a shekel each year for the service of the house of our God: <sup>33</sup> for the bread set out on the table; for the regular grain offerings and burnt offerings; for the offerings on the Sabbaths, New Moon festivals and appointed feasts; for the holy offerings; for sin offerings to make atonement for Israel; and for all the duties of the house of our God.* <sup>34</sup> *"We-- the priests, the Levites and the people-- have cast lots to determine when each of our families is to bring to the house of our God at set times each year a contribution of wood to burn on the altar of the LORD our God, as it is written in the Law.* <sup>35</sup> *"We also assume responsibility for bringing to the house of the LORD each year the firstfruits of our crops and of every fruit tree.* <sup>36</sup> *"As it is also written in the Law, we will bring the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, of our herds and of our flocks to the house of our God, to the priests ministering there.* <sup>37</sup> *"Moreover, we will bring to the storerooms of the house of our God, to the priests, the first of our*

*ground meal, of our grain offerings, of the fruit of all our trees and of our new wine and oil. And we will bring a tithe of our crops to the Levites, for it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all the towns where we work. <sup>38</sup> A priest descended from Aaron is to accompany the Levites when they receive the tithes, and the Levites are to bring a tenth of the tithes up to the house of our God, to the storerooms of the treasury. <sup>39</sup> The people of Israel, including the Levites, are to bring their contributions of grain, new wine and oil to the storerooms where the articles for the sanctuary are kept and where the ministering priests, the gatekeepers and the singers stay. "We will not neglect the house of our God."*

Repentance and faith in action is the right response to a proper understanding of God's law and grace

Let me share four things about repentance and faith from this passage:

**1) Repentance is not to earn salvation but because we have been saved**

They have experienced God's grace and favor, and now they want to line up their lives with His will, with His law. In the same way, we know we are saved by grace, not by what we have done. And we know God is good. And so we want to know Him, honor Him, follow Him. It's not to earn God's favor, but because we trust Him more.

I have been saying "a proper understanding of law and grace." How can you misunderstand God's law and grace?

**1) You may think you have met the requirements of the law, so you don't need to repent**

**1 John 1:8-9** - *If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. <sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

**2) You may think salvation depends upon you obeying it, leading to great effort or despair, and failure either way**

**Galatians 2:15-16** - *We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' <sup>16</sup> know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.*

### 3) You may think the law is irrelevant because you are saved by grace through faith

The proper understanding is that God's law demands perfection, and shows us our need for a Savior. God's grace teaches us that Jesus lived that perfect life for us and died in our place on the cross, taking the penalty we deserved for our sin. God's grace shows us that God loves us, and that His law is good, and so we obey, not in order to be saved, but because we trust God's will and want to honor Him and love our neighbor. **And so we repent and obey in faith. Repentance is turning, a change of mind. Two sides of the same coin - You can't put your faith in Jesus without turning from sin and self-centeredness. And you can't repent without turning to Jesus in faith.**

**Mark 1:14-15** - *After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. <sup>15</sup> "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"*

**Acts 20:20-21** - *You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. <sup>21</sup> I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.*

And then we continue to live a life of repentance and faith, not in order to be saved but because we have been saved, we know and trust God, and we want to honor Him and live for Him.

### 2) Repentance and faith includes specific changes

They confess their sin. And then they outline specifically where they need to change and obey:

We will not intermarry – it corrupts the nation and pulls them away from God

We will not buy on the Sabbath from non-Israelites – keep that day holy

We will honor the Jubilee – act in love towards our brothers and sisters, protecting the poor

**Exodus 23:10-11** - *For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, <sup>11</sup> but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what they leave. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove.*

**Deuteronomy 15:1-3** - *At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts. <sup>2</sup> This is how it is to be done: Every creditor shall cancel the loan he has made to his fellow Israelite. He shall not require payment from his fellow Israelite or brother, because the LORD's time for canceling debts has been proclaimed. <sup>3</sup> You may require payment from a foreigner, but you must cancel any debt your brother owes you.*

We will give to the Lord – give sacrifices for the firstborn  
 We will tithe, supporting the temple services. Lots of sacrifices for an economically depressed community

What specifically do you need to repent of this morning?

### 3) Repentance is best done not in solitude but with the accountability of others

They do it together, confessing their sins.

**James 5:16** - *Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.*

Who knows your sin? To whom do you bring things into the light? You can experience the mercy and forgiveness of God through another person.

### 4) Repentance and faith develops a humble confidence

This is their message throughout the recount of their nation's history:

Everything that is good in us is a gift from God  
 Everything that is bad is from what we have done

Why confess? Is it just groveling? Why so focused on the negative? Why not recount the great things they have done?

If it's all a function of what we have done, that leads to either despair or pride. Either we are proud of ourselves – look at what we have done – or we hate ourselves and blame ourselves and condemn ourselves. Either we look down on others as not as good as us, or we look down on ourselves as not as good as others.

But if all that is good is a gift from God, it causes both humility and confidence at the same time. We know it is all a gift, undeserved. We know we have done nothing to deserve it. And yet we know that the God of the universe loves us so much that He has richly blessed us. And so we don't look down on others when we succeed, nor do we condemn ourselves when we fall short.

***Ephesians 2:8-9** For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- <sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast.*

The Israelites would continue to fall. They would continue to need a Savior. But God would send His Son to save them.

Where specifically do you need to repent?

Where specifically do you need to commit to obedience?