

I would invite you to turn with me to the book of Nehemiah, chapter 1, verses 1 through 17. Well, as we come to the book of Nehemiah, it is helpful that we know that originally the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were one book in the Hebrew Bible. And it was later on in history that they were divided up into two books. And it's helpful for us to know as we come this evening to Nehemiah, because what we'll see happening in Nehemiah is building off of what we've just seen happening in Ezra. So it's good we understand that as we come to the book of Nehemiah, continuing on that same story that had begun back in the book of Ezra. Well, what if we were to zoom out for a moment and just try to summarize both of these books as we understand them as two separate books in our Bible today? Here's a really helpful way of summarizing both books.

In the book of Ezra, you have the rebuilding of the temple and then the rebuilding of the people. The rebuilding of the temple in Ezra 1 through 6. And then now that they've gotten the temple built, you see something of what we might say the rebuilding of the people that began in Ezra chapter 7 when Ezra returns and begins to bring the law to bear on their lives. And then there's that scene of repentance at the end of chapter 10 that we saw a few weeks ago. Then when you come to Book of Nehemiah, it is the rebuilding of the wall. in chapters one through seven.

And then again, the rebuilding of the people. The people still need rebuilding, so to speak. So you have the rebuilding of the temple, and then the rebuilding of the people in Ezra, and then you have the rebuilding of the wall. Now they have the temple built, and now they're building the wall around the temple. and then the rebuilding of the people again. So that gives us a little bit of a structure of these books as a whole. With this in mind, let's pray and ask God to bless the reading and preaching of his word as we come to Nehemiah chapter one.

Almighty God, we come before you. Unless the Lord builds a house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. And unless, O God, you bless the reading and preaching of your word, it is read and it is preached in vain. Therefore, oh God, we ask that you would put out your spirit upon us tonight through the reading and preaching of your word, that saints might be sanctified and that the lost might be saved. In Jesus's name we pray, amen. Hear now the word of God, Nehemiah chapter one. The words of Nehemiah, the son of Hakaliah.

Now it happened in the month of Chislew in the 20th year, as I was in Susa, the capital, that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said to me, the remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are destroyed by fire.

As soon as I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days. And I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And I said, Oh, Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments.

Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant, that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel, your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments. the statutes and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, if you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples. But if

you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen to make my name dwell there. They are your servants and your people whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.

Oh, Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name and give success to your servant today and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. Now I was cut bare to the king. Amen. And thus ends a reading of God's holy word. May he bless the proclamation of it to our lives.

Well, the book of Ezra, which we just completed two Sunday evenings ago, spanned roughly 80 years from the year 538 BC to the year 458 BC. And during that approximately 80 years, many things happen. You saw in that book, the great rebuilding of the temple. You saw how God raised up even pagan kings to help deliver his people out of Persia and Babylon and to bring them back. back to the promised land, to Jerusalem, to rebuild the temple. Many, many things happen in that 80 years.

But how things ended in the book of Ezra in the year 458 BC was a scene of repentance. You'll remember how in 458 BC, in chapters 9 and 10 of the book of Ezra, here they are back in Jerusalem. The temple's been rebuilt. Things in some ways, at least externally, are looking Pretty good, but yet there was this issue of many people in Jerusalem, followers of Yahweh at least in name, marrying pagan women.

And so there was a scene of repentance at the end of the book of Ezra. That whole scene takes place in the year 458. Well, Nehemiah now opens up 13 years later. So there's a 13 year gap from the end of Ezra to the beginning of the book of Nehemiah. So here we are at the start of Nehemiah in the year 445.

And how do we begin? Well, we begin with more repenting. And you might think to yourself, well, haven't we just been repenting? If you were to read these as one book and you weren't to think of the 13 year gap, you would say, just immediately prior to this in the final chapter of Ezra, I was repenting. And now at the start of Nehemiah, I'm repenting again. Why is there so much repenting? And the answer is because there's so much sinning.

There's always repentance needed in the life of the people of God. There's always a place and time for repentance. In the life of the Christian daily really we could say we are to be repenting of our sins. Repentance is often hard but it is to be a regular part of our Christian experience.

Well, as Nehemiah opens, he opens with this repentance in the first chapter. Now, before we can really dive into the heart of this repentance, which is what, by God's grace, we will do in this sermon, we want to consider something of the historical context, because that's how the book really does start in the first three verses.

You see some facts about the historical surroundings and what is going on. It mentions here in the first three verses that what takes place here, happens in the 20th year of Artaxerxes. This again would be in the year 445. It happens in the month Kislev, which has some value. We'll look at that in a moment, why that month matters.

Nehemiah, we read, is in Susa, which is the winter residence of the Persian king. So he's with the Persian king in an important place in Susa. And we see some circumstances here in the first three verses. We learn that Nehemiah's brother and his friends come to him and they give him an update.

And what is the update on how things are going in Jerusalem? Well, the update is this, verse three, and they said to me, the remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are destroyed by fire. Obviously, this is bad news. And they cared enough about telling Nehemiah that they traveled the roughly 800 or 900 miles to tell him this. So this gives us something of the historical context.

But now I want us to consider really tonight three things from this prayer about repentance. And here's what we see. Out of love for God's glory, repent out of a desire to address the problem, and repent out of confidence in God's mercy. Out of love for God's glory, out of a desire to address the problem, and out of confidence in God's mercy. So first tonight, repent out of love for God's glory. See this in verses four through seven. In verse 4 you see that it is as soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days.

It was immediately upon hearing this bad news about the state of the church in Jerusalem that Nehemiah began to weep. He sorrows for the church. He cares about the church. He was not slow to shed the sympathizing tear. You can think about how so many great leaders in the Christian faith were known to have wept out of love for the church. You can think about how Jeremiah wept. And of course, Jesus himself wept over Jerusalem. Paul wept because he loved the people of God.

And so a godly leader, a strong leader, is not to be above weeping out of love for Christ's church. But we also see not only that he wept right away but he wept for a great amount of time. He says in verse four, I sat down and wept and mourned for days and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. So he wept for days and he fasted for days, he wept for and prayed and fasted on and off for four months.

How do we know that? Well, this was in that month Kislev. in verse 1 of chapter 1. And then we read in chapter 2 verse 1 in the month of Nisan. And so this was about four months for four months obviously didn't fast perpetually for four months but he fasted and wept and prayed on and off over these issues for days over the course of four whole months. And we read even in verse 6 that day and night he prayed.

So you get a picture here of a man who really cared about the church. But one might ask, why did Nehemiah pray in verse 4? We know from the rest of the book, as we see his personality, that he was not a man who was slow to take action. He was willing to be decisive. He was willing to take action and do things quickly, so why does he seem to slow down here and pray? You might say to Nehemiah, Nehemiah, come on, won't you just do something already? Why are you spending so much time in prayer? Don't you care we're perishing? And Nehemiah might say in response, ye of little faith, I am doing something.

I am doing something because I am appealing to the God of heaven. the one who can do something about your circumstances and your situation. He is praying not because he is unwilling to do something, but because he is

doing something. The prayer is the something that first and foremost needed to be done. This act could not have been pursued apart from praying earnestly to God.

But what is your attitude tonight towards prayer? Have you ever had this experience? You tell somebody what's going on in your life, And they say, well, let me pray for you. And have you ever had your thought, whether you would voice it or not? Well, won't you help me? I don't need your prayers. I need your help. Well, that's not the attitude that Nehemiah exercised. His attitude was, I'm going to do something. I'm going to help. I'm going to start with prayer. And also you see his deep concern for the people in his prayer life. And it should challenge you. What is your heart like in prayer? Do you care about prayer?

Somebody said this that I read this week. It was a master stroke of the devil to get the church to lay aside the mighty weapon of prayer. He, that is the devil, does not mind at all if the church expands her organizations. if she will only give up praying. He laughs softly as he looks at the church of today and says under his breath, you can have your Sunday schools, your social organizations, your grand choirs, and even your revival efforts, as long as you do not bring the power of Almighty God into them by earnest, persistent, and believing prayer.

Again, I ask you, what is your attitude towards prayer? Is prayer a priority? Do you believe that when you're praying, you're doing something important in service of others? You might think of it like this, Satan has a good theology of prayer. He has a good theology of prayer in this way, that he hates prayer because he believes prayer works. Satan, perhaps, believes prayer works more heartily than you and I are tempted in believing that prayer really works. Not that he does pray, but that he knows it works and so he hates it and he doesn't want you to be a man or woman of prayer.

This whole prayer of repentance starts by exalting God's glory. Notice how he starts in his actual words of prayer in verse five. And I said, Oh Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God. He begins in this prayer. of repentance by exalting the glory of God. He calls him a great and awesome God. But a great and awesome God, who is not a gracious God, is only a terrifying God. And so he adds to that comment that he is a great and awesome God these words in verse 5. who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments. He acknowledges alongside of the fact that he is a great and awesome God, he is also a gracious God. And that brings him confidence to go to him with this prayer of repentance. He acknowledges God's glory and he also acknowledges God's graciousness.

He begins in verse six then to confess the sins of the people. But it's not that hard to do that, to confess the sins of other people. It's not very hard to look around and confess that so and so has this sin and that person has that sin and to begin to confess the sins of our forefathers or the sins of other people. But he doesn't just confess the sins of other people.

As he goes on, he starts using this first person plural again, just like we saw in Hebrews 2, 1 through 4. He says, we have sinned against you. We. have acted corruptly against you. He acknowledges that he and his own fathers are guilty of sin in these verses. And so he acknowledges his own guilt, his own need of growth and grace. But how does this exemplify God's glory and repentance, which is our first point? Repent out of love for God's glory.

Well, you'll notice twice he uses this language of against you. He says in verse six, he says, we have sinned against you. In verse seven, he begins, we have acted very corruptly against you. He knows that it is against you and you only that I have sinned, O Lord." He thinks to himself, you are the great and awesome God. He acknowledges that very fact in verse five in the opening words of his prayer, and then he says, but against you, O great and awesome God, we have sinned. You see, what made the sin so dreadful to Nehemiah, the sins that they had committed, was the one against whom they had sinned.

He doesn't pray that they would have their walls rebuilt here, which was the immediate issue at hand. He doesn't pray that their gates would be rebuilt, which was the immediate issue at hand. According to verse three, the news came to them that the walls had been destroyed, that the gates had been burned.

And then he starts praying a prayer of repentance. Why would he do such a thing? Because he knows that this is the real issue that they need to be dealing with, their own sins. Why should you repent then here this evening? It should be out of a desire to see God's name glorified because you know your sins are against him. How might this truth, that the heart of your repentance should be a love for God's glory, how might that help you in your life of repentance? Well, how often is this the attitude of your heart, I know I need to repent of this but it's going to be embarrassing, I know I need to repent of this but it's going to be really really hard, it's going to be difficult, I'm not sure I want to do it.

But then when you have as your goal the glory of God you simply say this, Yeah, it's going to be difficult, but my life's about God's glory, not about me. I know it's going to be hard, but my life's not about my ease, it's about God's glory. It's going to be embarrassing to confess that I've done X, but my life isn't about not being embarrassed or feeling good about myself.

Not that we should just long to mope and grope, but it's not ultimately about my ease or my joy even. It's about God's glory. And so by motivation for the glory of God, I want to see his name exalted. I want to see him praised with my life. I'm going to confess this thing that I don't really want to confess. I'm going to repent of this thing that I don't really want to repent of because it's about him and his glory. And so you see that in the way he brings up that it's against you. It's against you. He's not worried about the wall primarily. He's worried about their hearts. So repent out of love for God's glory, but secondly, repent out of a desire to address the problem. And you see this in sort of a sweeping way throughout verses 4 through 11, this idea that repentance is addressing the real problem at hand.

And I alluded to this already, but you see it in the fact that The brother and friends come in verse 3, and the report has nothing to do with sin. They don't mention any sin in verse 3. All they do, according to verse 3, is mention, hey, we've got walls, they're not being built, we're ashamed, our gates have been destroyed. They report this bad news.

And then again, strangely, perhaps it might appear, Nehemiah starts a prayer of repentance. And he does this because he knows what they need most is to have their sins addressed. That really, the walls being destroyed were only a symptom of a sin problem. That that was the consequence, temporally, materially, this worldly, so to speak, of their sins, of their rebellion against God.

You might think of it this way, when you have a cold, you get a tissue and you blow your nose. But that's really only dealing with the symptom of your cold. When you really want to deal with your cold, you also take some medicine to help deal with the underlying issues that are bringing about the runny nose and the other discomforts.

He understood that if they had new walls with the same old bad hearts, it would do them no good. They would not be secure around tall walls so long as their sinful hearts remained unaddressed. And so he calls, he begins to repent because he knows that their biggest problem will be their lack of repentance, their lack of holiness. Give them the greatest walls in the world as so long as they are sinners behind those walls, they will live a life of rebellion against God.

And the same is true of our lives too. Put up whatever security earthly things you might want in your life. Get the bigger bank account, get the nicer house, get the thing that you want, get the things of this life that you desire. Without holiness of life, it will do you no good. What mankind needs is to repent of sins and look to Christ. To live a life completely given over to the Lord Jesus Christ. Earthly comforts can come, earthly comforts can go, but holiness of life, repenting of sin, is dealing with what we need most.

Thirdly then, we see repent out of confidence in God's mercy, verses eight through 11. In verses eight and nine, let me just read them again, he begins to appeal in verses eight and nine to many different Old Testament texts. So he says this in verse eight, remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses saying, if you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples. But if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven from there, I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen to make my name dwell there." What he is doing in verses 8 and 9 is he is praying the promises of God back to God.

And this is a scripture-saturated prayer. Verses 8 through 10 have 11 allusions or references to either Deuteronomy or Leviticus. None of them are verbatim quotations, but the verses are riddled with very clear language and allusions to particular Old Testament texts, which as a brief aside, is a great reminder to us that your prayers are to be as, insofar as you are able, scripture-saturated prayers. They should be filled with the language and ideas of God himself. But, specifically in verses eight and nine, you see him praying God's promises back to God himself. He's quoting these Old Testament texts and he's saying, you made a promise that even if we were scattered all over the world, if we turn to you, you would forgive us and you would bring us back. And so he's saying to him, God, be faithful to your word. You said you would do it. Now I'm saying to you, do it.

And this is a great pattern for your prayer life. Do you pray this way for your children and your grandchildren and even your children yet unborn? You pray Genesis 17 over your children. You need to be doing that. Genesis 17 where it says, he says, I will be a God unto you and to your children after you. That promise is to you and to your children after you if you're in Christ. And so you pray for your children, and your children, and your grandchildren, and your children's children, all the things.

You pray it this way. You say, A covenant-making, covenant-keeping God to my children and my grandchildren until Christ comes again. Care for them, save them, redeem them. Why? Because you said you would be this God. So I'm calling you to be this God. There are perhaps some in this room who you don't know the state of your children,

and in some sense none of us do, but you might have genuine concerns, or of your grandchildren. pray for them in this way, this sort of way that Nehemiah is praying.

You pray this sort of way when you see your sins and you say, you told me, Father, in 1 John 1, 9, you told me if we confess our sins, you are faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Father, forgive me. And you must forgive me. You said you would forgive me for the sake of your son, not in a prideful way, not in an arrogant, demanding way as if you deserve it in and of yourself, but in a demanding way in the sense of you believe that he said it and he's gonna keep his word.

There's so many promises in scripture that we can't really tease this point out to its full because we would just have to preach the entire Bible tonight. Nehemiah 1, 8, and 9 is an example to all of us to have that pattern in our prayer, to pray God's promises back to them, back to Him.

Well, somebody might object and say, well, clearly these people had a lot of sins. They wouldn't have been worthy for God to remember His promises. He says, remember your promises, but they weren't worthy for that. They weren't worthy to have God remember His promises on their behalf.

Listen to what Matthew Henry says. Matthew Henry says God is more mindful of his promises than we are of his precepts. God is more mindful of his promises than we are of his precepts. So you break the precepts, you break the laws, and you think, Well, I've broken it and I've done it at a severe level and maybe I've done it again. That thing that I said I didn't want to do again, I've done it again. What confidence can I have that I can pray his promises to him? Matthew Henry says, God is more mindful of his promises than you are of his precepts.

Praise the Lord that God is this way. So this is why he's confident of God's mercy. It's not because they hadn't broken his precepts, but it's because he believes that God is a covenant-making, covenant-keeping God. As he continues to plead to God in repentance, he continues this appeal to scripture in verse 10.

He says in verse 10, they are your servants and your people whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. This is a clear reference to the language that Moses himself used when he interceded on behalf of God's people after the Golden Calf incident. The language he uses in verse 10 is so very clearly pulling the language that Moses used. And what was Moses's argument there and what is Nehemiah's argument here? He says, these are your servants, verse 10. These are your people, verse 10. These are those whom you have redeemed, verse 10. He is saying, in essence, what Moses said, right?

He is saying Have you taken them this far and will you now cast them off? Did you bring them through the Red Sea just to lose them? Did you bring water out of a rock just to let them go? Did you rain down manna from heaven and now you're going to reject them?

And how much more so can that be your humble, sincere petition to God your Father tonight? You can say to him, did you send your son into this world to shed his blood for me? And will you not sanctify me? Will you not grow me

in grace? Will you not strengthen me in my resolve for holiness? Will you not save my son, my grandson, my grandchild, my friend, my family member?

For the sake of your son's blood, that it not be shed in vain, show forth your power to lavish its saving efficacy upon that person and that person. and this portion of my heart and that portion of my heart, I ask you, do you ever pray that way? You should pray that way. You should actually go to your heavenly father and say, because of the blood of your son, sanctify me. Not because I'm worthy, not even just so that I can maybe feel better about myself, but because I want the power of your blood, the power of your son's blood, the work that he has done to be shining forth in my life, that it might be said of me Christ was crucified for that man. The blood of Christ was shed for him.

It's all about him getting the glory. It's not even for your sake. It's not for your life to be easier. That's not the point. It's that God would be glorified. That Jesus could be shown to be so mighty that even your life could look more like his. Even your friend or family member that you know is far from him could be saved. Not even for their sake, though you love them and want them saved forbidden to be with you forever in glory, but ultimately, because you want it to be said, the blood of Christ was so good, it could save that person that everybody else said was too far gone.

Well, we see then this third point that his repentance was one of confidence in God's mercy, and so too should yours. On our text tonight, we've seen these three things about repentance. Repent out of love for God's glory, repent out of a desire to address the problem, and repent out of confidence in God's mercy. But I want to make one final observation before we close tonight.

You will notice that here Nehemiah is in Susa. He's in a palace, and he's a cupbearer, which would have been a position of great responsibility and authority in the Persian kingdom, and yet what does he do when he hears about the hurting church? He cares. He sorrows. He gets involved. He wants to do what he can to help. He doesn't say, I'm a man of luxury. I'm a man of power. I'm not interested in these suffering people a thousand miles away. He takes an interest in them, and we'll see in chapter two Next time, Lord willing, that he's willing to risk everything to try to care for these people.

Well, in this, you see an example of a phrase I heard recently. You can tell the character of a man by what he does for the man who can offer him nothing in return. You can tell the character of a man by what he does for the man who can offer him nothing in return. And then this truth, should take you to a man that Nehemiah pales in comparison to, shouldn't it?

You see, this man was willing to give up being a cupbearer, a position of authority and power, out of a sincere love for God's people and his hurting church. But he was a mere man who gave up a mere earthly palace to go humble himself and try to help a hurting church to whatever extent he might have been able to be of use. but consider Christ, consider the words of this hymn.

Thou who was rich, beyond all splendor, all for love's sake becamest poor. Thrones were a manger, did surrender, sapphire paved courts for stable floor. Thou who art God, not a mere cupbearer, beyond all praising, All for love's

sake becamest man, stooping so low, but sinners raising heavenwards by thine eternal plan. Thou who art love beyond all telling, Savior and King, we worship thee.

Emmanuel, within us dwelling, make us what thou wouldst have us to be. So while we should appreciate the example of Nehemiah, of his humility and his care for his for God's church in verses 1 through 11, we should be driven beyond his example to Christ Jesus, a man who was not a cupbearer, a man who was God himself, a man who was a person who was not merely dwelling in a great earthly palace, but a man, the person who dwelt in perfect union and communion with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit in heaven itself and a man who came stooping low, low not merely to help raise up some walls, but a man who stooped low to raise up sinners in his life, death, and resurrection. This should stir us up in addition to repentance out of love for Christ. Let us pray. Almighty God, we do thank you for who you are, who you have revealed yourself to be, And we praise you, even as Hunter prayed earlier in the confession of sin, we praise you that you, O God, are not like us.

O God, we perhaps would have rejected the prayer of Nehemiah. We perhaps would have had the heart that would say, 13 years ago, don't you understand? 13 years ago, y'all had this revolutionary repentance, and here you are again, 13 years later, needing to repent in dust and ashes. And yet, oh God, you heard Nehemiah's prayer, and we will see in future weeks that you did restore them afresh, at least for a season.

And oh God, we pray that we too would long to repent. Repent of our sins, repent out of love for your glory, repent out of a desire to address the problem, and repent out of confidence in your mercy. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.