

Nehemiah 1:5-11 The Prayer of Repentance

A sermon delivered at Calvary Chapel DC Metro
www.calvarydcmetro.org

Nehemiah is the story of the man God used to rebuild the city of Jerusalem in the 5th century BC.

We covered all the background data last week, so if you missed it, I highly encourage you to go to iTunes and download the podcast or get it off the church's website where you can either listen to the message or read it.

But basically God allowed the Jews to be taken captive in 586 BC because they had turned their backs on Him and began following other gods. The city of Jerusalem was completely destroyed and everyone and everything of any value was carried away from Israel to the area of modern Iraq and Iran.

Almost 125 years later the king of Persia allowed some Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple. Now, as we pick things up in Nehemiah, some people from that group have just come back to Persia and they give Nehemiah, who works for the king, an update on what they found.

3 And they said to me, "The survivors who are left from the captivity in the province are there in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down, and its gates are burned with fire."

4 So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

Nehemiah is wrecked spiritually and emotionally by the news that things are not the way they ought to be. Ever felt that way? Ever looked at something in your life and said, this isn't right, this shouldn't be, this shouldn't have happened? Have you ever experienced regret, remorse, or frustration? And have you ever asked the question, "Why? Why did it turn out this way?"

Well, Nehemiah knows the answer. In this case, the Jews were suffering as a direct result of their sin. That's not always the case, it would be horrendously cruel to suggest that anyone who was suffering in any way was simply experiencing the punishment of God. And yet, there is no denying that it does happen *some* times--like this one. The Jews had wandered away from God and now they were suffering as a result.

Nehemiah understands that. But He also knows God promised it didn't have to stay that way.

God has always warned us of the dangers of being separated from Him. Being separated from Him for eternity is called hell. But He also always promised an open door to those who return to Him, it's a process called repentance, and we see it played out this morning in Nehemiah's prayer. Read with me and see what he said to God about the situation:

5 And I said: "I pray, LORD God of heaven, O great and awesome God, *You* who keep *Your* covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments, 6 please let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, that You may hear the prayer of Your servant which I pray before You now, day and night, for the children of Israel Your servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against You. Both my father's house and I have sinned. 7 We have acted very corruptly against You, and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.

Theologian Wayne Grudem defines repentance like this: "Repentance is a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ."¹

If I can rephrase that, he's saying repentance involves the mind, which understands that the sin is wrong, the heart, which feels remorse, and the will, which determines to change. That sounds an awful lot like a fulfillment of the Great Commandment to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, doesn't it!?!

So let's look at Nehemiah and see if he meets those criteria – we'll start with the emotions – do you think he had a real emotional response to the situation? Well, he "[sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; \[...\] fasting and praying before the God of heaven.](#)" And you can hear his heart in the words of his prayer, can't you? "[please let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, that You may hear the prayer of Your servant which I pray before You now, day and night, for the children of Israel Your servants](#)"

I think he's pretty torn up about sin, don't you? I'm not saying you have to turn into a blubbing bucket of tears or else you're not really sorry – but I am saying that you ought to have some sense of the weight, conviction, and sorrow of your sin.

And that's true whether you're coming to God to ask for forgiveness the first time leading to salvation, or whether you're asking for a reset for the sins you've committed today as a Christian. If we truly understand who God is and what sin is – that it rebels against Him, that it chooses us over Him, that it tells Him, "I know what You've said, but I've got my own reasons for doing something different" – if you understand *what* you have done and *Who* you have done it to, that ought to have some kind of emotional impact on you or you have to wonder – am I really repentant?

Read through the pages of the New Testament and you see a lot of emotion when repentance is involved – you see people – grown men and women, respectable men and

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 713.

women – crying publicly over their sins and their need as they come to Jesus. And at the same time the opposite is true – you see people who disagree, who won't accept what Jesus says getting angry, violently angry as they deny the message. The gospel is directed to the whole person – and that includes the emotions – not just the emotions all by themselves, but they are definitely a part.

Another part of repentance is that which is processed by the mind – the intellectual comprehension of what is going on. We see that in Nehemiah as well, right? He knew, he understood, several things. I've got three if you're taking notes.

First of all, **he knows who God is** - there are 33 references to God, that's a lot of You and Your's, in verses 5-11. And, he addresses God as the "LORD God of Heaven." Do you notice how the word LORD is spelled with all capital letters? That represents the actual, proper, name of God – Yahweh, "I AM," that God revealed to Moses at the burning bush. Whenever you see LORD in all capitals in your Bible, hiding behind it in the original Hebrew is the name Yahweh.

So again, Nehemiah knows who he is praying to. He's not just throwing something up to "the big man upstairs" or some nebulous, undefined, unknown, concept of God. And yet, that's different from much of what we see today – people talk a lot about prayer, whenever tragedy strikes they say, "Our prayers go out to the family." And I always ask – who or what are they praying to? Is there an address line on that prayer, or is it just thrown up to the sky with the hope that something up there will grab it or hear it? Do they know to whom to send it?

Because the God Nehemiah is praying to, the God I pray to, the God I hope you're praying to, has a name, and He has a character, He has an identity and He can be known. Prayer, by itself has no value, it derives its value out of the One it is directed towards. You can't ask for forgiveness if you don't know who you have offended. You can't draw near to God if you don't know Who He is.

Nehemiah calls Him, "O great and awesome God" and knows what He is like. He says "You keep covenant and mercy with those who love You and keep Your commandments."

So, Nehemiah knows who God is, and secondly, **Nehemiah knows that he and the rest of the Jewish people have sinned against God.** He understands that. He doesn't deny or refute it, he doesn't question whether or not it was *really* sin, and he doesn't rationalize, minimize, or try to explain it away. He accepts the current condition as a result of past choices.

Is that true with you? Can you call sin, sin? Or, are you trying to argue for why things are different in your case, or trying to ignore conviction or instruction, hoping it will go away? Well, you need to know something: *You can't be forgiven until you admit your guilt.*

That's true when you're seeking forgiveness from God and it's true when you're seeking forgiveness from your fellow man. In our house, you're not allowed to say, "I'm sorry"

unless it was an accident – if you sinned against someone, you have to say, “Will you please forgive me for _____.” And you have to fill in the blank. You have to recognize your sin, name it, and own it.

And we see Nehemiah do the same thing here. He is asking forgiveness because (vs 6) “we have sinned against You. Both my father’s house and I have sinned. 7 We have acted very corruptly against You, and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.”

The only reason he’s generalizing there is because of the comprehensiveness of their sin. He can’t make a list long enough to say everything they did, so he admits to the nature of it. It would be like if you had told a bunch of lies – you could ask for forgiveness for lying to someone, without naming each and every lie. But you don’t just say, “I’m sorry for not treating you right. No, you say, please forgive me *for lying to you.*”

Getting back to Nehemiah – he knows *who* God is, he knows *what* sin is, but **he also knows there is a way out of this mess:**

8 Remember, I pray, the word that You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations;

That much has already happened, right? God had warned them that there were consequences to sin, and they were feeling them right now - they are in captivity in Persia because of their sin. BUT, God also told them, long ago, how to repent:

9 but *if you return to Me, and keep My commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I will gather them from there, and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for My name.’*

Sin is turning away from God, repentance is turning back toward Him, “*if you return to Me, and keep My commandments and do them.*” The consequence of sin is separation from God, the consequence of repentance is reunion with God, “*though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I will gather them from there, and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for My name*”

And Nehemiah says He and some of the others are in. They see what is wrong, they understand it, they feel it, now they want to do something about it. Nehemiah even hints that he has a plan for what to do:

10 Now these *are* Your servants and Your people, whom You have redeemed by Your great power, and by Your strong hand. 11 O Lord, I pray, please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name; and let Your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”

For I was the king’s cupbearer.

Here is a vital part of repentance – we said repentance involves the heart – feeling true regret for sin, and it involves the mind – understanding who God is and what our sin was/is so that we can be forgiven, but repentance also involves the will – a desire to do something about the situation, a desire to change with God’s help.

Let me say that again, because both parts are important. Repentance includes 1.) a desire to change, 2.) with God’s help.

God, or His standard, is over there, and I am over here – what can be done to get back where I belong? Nehemiah says, God intended us to be in Jerusalem, but we’re over here in Susa, how can we get back to where we belong? You say, God wants this to happen in my life, but I’ve been doing that – what needs to change so I can get to where I belong?

Well, you can feel sorry about your sin – you can cry and feel terrible about it but never change. That’s remorse, not repentance. You can recognize that your sin is sin but come up with excuses for it – that’s rationalizing, not repentance. You haven’t truly repented until you have said, “God, I recognize that You are right, and I am wrong. I recognize that this is sin. And now, I’m asking You to forgive me, AND I’m asking You to help me change.”

Nehemiah is saying, “God, we want to fear Your name – that is, we want to worship You, we want to do things Your way, not ours.” But in order to do that, we need to be back in Jerusalem where we belong. So, I’m going to talk to the king about that and I’m asking, could You please open the doors and make that possible: [“let Your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. For I was the king’s cupbearer.”](#)

The rest of this book is the story of how things turned out. But what we need to see this morning is that the whole thing began with repentance. It began with understanding who God was, what He had commanded and how not obeying His commands had led to the current situation. But it also included knowing that there was a way to repent – a way to be forgiven, a way to change, *because* God had made it possible.

This message of the need for repentance is a central theme of the Bible.

Before the Jews were taken to Babylon, and later Persia, God had told them, through the prophet Isaiah (55:6-7):

[Seek the LORD while He may be found,
Call upon Him while He is near.
7 Let the wicked forsake his way,
And the unrighteous man his thoughts;
Let him return to the LORD,
And He will have mercy on him;
And to our God,
For He will abundantly pardon.](#)

Several centuries later, when the Jews are back in Jerusalem and the city is thriving again, John the Baptist shows up and begins (Luke 3:3) [“preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.”](#)

When Jesus began His public ministry his very first words, recorded in Matthew’s Gospel (4:17) were, [“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.”](#)

And after His resurrection, He explained His life and ministry to two of His disciples on the road to Emmaus summarizing it for them like this, (Luke 24:46-47), [“Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”](#)

We repent the first time when we come to God and ask for forgiveness of our sins. That first time when we really understand intellectually and are moved emotionally by the realization of Who He is, who we are, and what we have done. Maybe that’s where you are this morning – maybe you need to repent for the first time and become a Christian – it isn’t automatic – you weren’t born a Christian – there needs to be a definite moment or season in your life when you came to really know, understand, feel, and embrace the Truth - a time when you said, “God, You’re right, I’m wrong – please forgive me and help me to change.”

But it’s not a ‘one and done’ – we all need to repent, regularly – daily – multiple times daily. We’re swimming against the current in life and it’s constantly pulling us away from God. So Christian, what is it you need to repent of today – in your relationship with God or in your relationship with someone else – where is the change that needs to occur?

In the coming weeks we’re going to see some pretty cool stuff happen in Nehemiah’s life. He’s going to get to be a part of some massive projects, but it all begins with his repentance – with having his life recalibrated by God. How much of your life is left? Do you know? And what could be accomplished in it if you were to live it out in service to God? I leave you with that question.

If you want to become a Christian this morning – if you see that your life is not what God says it should be and you want to repent, just pray with me with right now.

Heavenly Father, I see and understand what You are saying to me today. I’ve been wrong in my choices and my attitudes, I’ve been living life my way instead of Yours. And God, I ask for forgiveness. I ask that you would forgive me, through Your son Jesus – that He would take the punishment that my sins deserve. And from here on out, would You please show me how to live for you, and help me to do it. In Jesus’ name I pray, Amen.

And those of us who have already prayed that prayer, pray it again Lord, asking You to show us anything in our lives that needs to change. Anything that needs to be repented of – help us to recognize it, turn from it, and move away from it and closer to You. We offer our lives up to You and ask you to use us as You see fit for the building of your kingdom. Amen.”