

DISCUSSION GUIDE :: SESSION 9



**A NATION RESTORED
CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS
NEHEMIAH 9-10
03/26/2017**

MAIN POINT

Hearing God's Word read and taught should produce confession and repentance in us, both corporately and privately.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What is repentance? Come up with a definition as a group.

Divide the following Scripture passages up among your group and have each person read them aloud: Leviticus 26:40-42; Ezra 9:7-9; Jeremiah 3:19-22; Ezekiel 33:11; Daniel 4:27; Jonah 3:6-10; 1 Peter 2:25; 2 Peter 3:8-9; and 1 John 1:9. Having read these verses, should we change anything about our definition of "repentance"?

Jesus once said, "Unless you repent, you will all perish" (Luke 13:3,5). Repentance can be defined as a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of that sin, and a sincere commitment to turn from it and walk in obedience to Christ. Even as Christians we often stumble away from the Lord by pursuing less than godly endeavors. We must accept responsibility for wandering away from God. No matter how badly we have stumbled in sin, the Lord lovingly invites us to come back to Him. Now that we've laid a groundwork for what repentance is, let's look at the example the people of Israel set for us following their celebration of the wall's completion.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

The Festival of Booths lasted seven days. Each day, Ezra read from the Law as he did previously. After observing this festival, the leaders and the people set aside another day for corporate worship. Unlike the festival, this observation was an occasion for public repentance.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ NEHEMIAH 9:1-3.

How did the people outwardly demonstrate their repentant hearts? What does this tell us about the attitude with which they approached repentance?

Words alone aren't enough when it comes to repentance. What are signs in our lives of genuine remorse and repentance?

The people wore sackcloth to the assembly, which signified extreme anguish or mourning and, along with placing dust on the top of one's head, humiliation. Fasting was the abstinence of food for a time to have a deeper experience with God. It commonly was associated with periods of prayer. Here it related to confession of sin. Together these signs reflected the grief and humiliation the people's sinful behavior caused. This perspective of their sin meant they looked at their deeds in the same manner God viewed them.

This time of worship and confession happened in public, with everyone taking part collectively. What are the benefits of confessing your sins to another person?

Read James 5:16. Why do you think confession leads to healing? How do you determine who is appropriate or safe to confess your sins to?

Read verse 3 again. Why is confession an essential part of worship? What do we communicate to God through confession and repentance?

What is the connection between confession and the reading of God's Word (v. 3)?

The people must have had a genuine hunger to know God's will and His promises because they read from Scripture for several hours. We, too, must allow God to speak through His Word. That is the only sure basis for revival and for correction of the life and mission of the church. We can learn from the balance here between hearing God's Word, worship, and confession. Each is essential to our spiritual growth as individuals and as a church.

HAVE A FEW VOLUNTEERS READ NEHEMIAH 9:7-37.

The first part of the prayer (vv. 4-15) is a prayer of worship and praise to God. What specific events from their history did the prayer draw attention to?

What character traits of God does the prayer affirm?

The prayer begins with an acknowledgment of God's incomparability. Only God is the true God of creation who gives life to all and receives the worship of heavenly beings. They praised God for His grace, power, and mercy, which He showed time and again through Israel's history, from creation to the conquest of Canaan.

Verses 16-37 turn to confession. What did the prayer say about the Israelites' actions and attitude toward God throughout that same span of history?

Where did the people pray for God to be at work in their present situation (v.v. 32-37)?

In as much as God showed grace and mercy to the people of Israel, they repeatedly rebelled against Him. The prayer refers to the Israelites as arrogant, disobedient, and rebellious, and these were the sins that the people confessed at this time. After the long review of Israel's broken promises and rebellion against God, the prayer finally turns from confession to a petition addressed to our God, the God who (unlike Israel) keeps His gracious covenant. The only request in this long prayer is that God would take note of their hardships.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ NEHEMIAH 9:38 AND 10:28-29.

The time of worship and confession led to a public moment of repentance, which was symbolized by the signing of a covenant between the people and God.

What was the point of this covenant (see Neh. 10:29)?

The people's covenant with God expressed their commitment to living in obedience to Him and His laws. The leaders led the way in making a public, binding agreement to live according to God's laws. The leaders of the community also led the people in changing their behavior. The earnestness of their decision to obey fully God's laws was demonstrated by their public expression of the decision.

In Nehemiah 10:30-39, what evidence do you see that the people's commitment to return to God's ways was both massive and serious?

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

When have you experienced genuine repentance? What steps did you take to turn to Christ and not continue in sin?

How can an understanding of the depth of God's love and grace affect the way you pray, as it did for the people of Israel? What is something our group can pray about for you this week?

What would it look like for you to take up a posture of faith and genuine repentance today? Share different ideas of how to make repentance a part of your daily lives.

PRAY

Close your time in prayer, praising God for the grace He has given to us. Thank God that He graciously gives what we cannot earn. Pray that God would continually remind you of His love and grace, so that you may trust Him more.

COMMENTARY

NEHEMIAH 9:1-38; 10:28-29

9:1. In the Old Testament era there was a close connection between repentance and mourning. Just as mourners wore sackcloth (see Gen. 37:34) and put dust on their heads (see 2 Sam. 1:2) when someone died, so did those who mourned their sins and their spiritual condition.

9:2. Critical scholars who argue for the displacement of this chapter from its "original" location after Ezra 10 often point to the connection between the removal of foreign wives (see Ezra 10) and this verse. However, in this verse the issue is not specifically foreign wives, but foreigners in general. God's chosen people, those of Israelite descent, were the ones who needed to confess, not the foreigners.

9:3. Presumably they who stood in their places were the Israelites who separated themselves from foreigners (v. 2), while they who read from the book of the law were those mentioned in the following verse (v. 4)—the Levites.

9:5. The prayer in verse 5 is probably a liturgical introduction distinct from the prayer itself that begins in verse 6. The call to praise Yahweh your God from everlasting to everlasting is close to King David's blessing in 1 Chron. 29:10 when he and the people generously gave for the building of the first temple.

9:6. The prayer begins with an acknowledgment of Yahweh's incomparability. Only Yahweh is the true God of creation who gives life to all and receives the worship of heavenly beings. While several biblical psalms allude to creation (see Pss. 8; 19; 95; 104), only in Psalm 136 does the theme of creation begin the psalm, as it does here.

9:7-8. Like Abram, many of those taking part in the penitential service had been brought out of Ur of the Chaldeans (Babylon). Abram, later renamed Abraham, received the mercy of God, who made a covenant with him (see Gen. 15; 17). Just as Abraham was faithful, so God also had been faithful—He had kept His promise.

9:9-11. The description of the exodus from Egypt is recounted with quotes and allusions from Exodus 3; 10; and 14. The term arrogantly translates a Hebrew verb meaning “to act presumptuously, to be arrogant.” The Egyptians regarded the Israelites as their slaves; in reality the Israelites were Yahweh’s covenant people, and their redemption from Egypt was remembered as the central redemptive act of the Old Testament. In this mighty act, God made a name for Himself as their Savior that endured to the time of Nehemiah and beyond.

9:12-15. The description of the wilderness period (vv. 12-21) begins with a recital of God’s care and provisions for His people. Specific mention is made of the law about the holy Sabbath, which during the exilic and postexilic era became one of the primary markers of Jewish identity (13:15-22). God had provided for Israel’s every need, and at Kadesh-barnea He commanded them to go in and possess the land He had promised the patriarchs (see Num. 13-14).

9:16-17. In verse 10 it was the Egyptians who arrogantly mistreated Israel, but now the same verb is used to describe the arrogance of Israel’s ancestors against God and His commands, in spite of His care and provision. Their rebellion against God (v. 17) was both deliberate (they refused to listen) and nonsensical in their appointment of a leader to take them back to their slavery in Egypt.

9:18-21. God’s mercy was put to the test in the making of the golden calf (see Ex. 32). Yet even this serious offense was met with mercy. God’s presence remained with them in the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire, and His provision continued during their entire 40 years in the wilderness. God even sent His good Spirit to instruct His people.

9:22-25. The final historical period, the giving of the land (vv. 22-31), is introduced with a synopsis primarily derived from Moses’ review of the event in Deuteronomy. The defeat of Sihon and Og (see Num. 21; Deut. 2-3) were crucial victories that secured Transjordan for Israel (see Pss. 135:11; 136:19-20). All that God had promised He faithfully brought about for His people, who delighted in His great goodness.

9:26-31. Just as God’s faithfulness to His people in the wilderness (vv. 12-15) was rewarded with their rebellion (vv. 16-17), so God’s faithfulness in the gift of the land was met with unbelief and unfaithfulness. In a poetic play on words not found elsewhere in the Old Testament, the Israelites are described as those who were disobedient and rebelled against God (v. 26). Verses 27-30 recount the cycle of sin played out repeatedly in the Book of Judges. Despite their persistent and repeated failure, God did not destroy them or abandon them.

9:32-37. After the long review of Israel’s broken promises and rebellion against God, the prayer finally turns from confession to a petition addressed to our God, the God who (unlike Israel) keeps His gracious covenant. The only request in this long prayer is that God would take note of their hardships. The term hardships occurs only rarely in the Old Testament, but it is used to refer to times of great distress or trials, such as the exodus (see Ex. 18:8) or Jerusalem after its destruction at the hands of the Babylonians (see Lam. 3:5). The prayer makes it clear (vv. 33-34) that the blame for all their hardships was their own and not God’s. God was just. Both the Levites leading the prayer and all who joined in with them confessed their solidarity in sin, because they had acted wickedly. The tragic irony was that the land was God’s great gift to them—if they would only keep the covenant. Instead they would lament, Here we are—slaves in it!

9:38. After their corporate confession of sin, the leaders made a binding agreement in writing. The phrase “binding agreement” is unique, combining the common Hebrew idiom for making a covenant with the rare term “agreement,” derived from the Hebrew verb that means “to be faithful, to be trustworthy.”

10:28-29. Once the document was completed, the rest of the people had the opportunity to participate in the great event. This sworn oath first dealt broadly with obedience to God demonstrated in obedience to the law of God given through God’s servant Moses. The particular areas of compliance to the law are then specified in verses 30-39.

READING ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK

Nehemiah 12:27-47