God's People Repent

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[0:00] Welcome to Built on God's Word, the preaching and teaching ministry of Highland Park Baptist Church in Bartlesville, Oklahoma.! Evan George teaches on Nehemiah 9, verses 1-37.

Today, we will be in Nehemiah 9, so you can go ahead and turn there. And our main emphasis, what we'll see this morning, is that in response to God's Word, God's people repent of their sin, recount His greatness, and plead for deliverance.
So in response to God's Word, God's people repent of their sin, recount His greatness, and plead for deliverance. We'll see that in our text today, and it will serve as a description and an example of what repentance can look like in our lives.
In recent weeks, as we've continued to go verse by verse through Nehemiah, we've been transitioning from the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem to the reforming of the people. Now, the walls were completed, and Nehemiah has set up the leadership structure in the city.
The people of God have been enrolled by genealogy to reestablish really who the people of God are, and who ought to live in Jerusalem. And last week, as Jeremy led us, we saw a revival as they read God's Word, understood God's Word, and responded to God's Word in chapter 8.
[1:20] As they hear God's Word and they understand it, they find out that they're not properly observing the Feast of Booths as instructed in the law. The people, therefore, go out and they gather branches and they build booths in accordance with this, and the purpose was to remind Israel of their wandering in the wilderness and of God's provision during that time.

Jeremy helpfully told us this would have kind of been like a camping trip. The people gathered branches and built huts on the roofs and in courtyards and in the square, and they lived in them for a week. And this would have been a physical sight to see where this temporary living in these structures would have caused them to pause from their normal activities, remember what God has done, and focus on worshiping God.
And at that time, Ezra was reading the book of the law of God to them daily, every day. And ultimately, that celebration culminated on an eighth day where there was a solemn assembly of God's people.
Now, what's key to know as we walk into Nehemiah chapter 9 is what happened in Nehemiah chapter 8. So if you look at Nehemiah chapter 8, there in verse 2, you'll see that Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard on the first day of the seventh month.
On the second day, as they're reading this, they understand, oh, we haven't celebrated this festival. And so then if you go down to verse 9, I'll continue reading there, 9 through 12, chapter 8, verse 9.
[2:45] And Nehemiah, who was governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people, said to all the people, This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep, for all the people wept as they heard the words of the law.

Then he said to them, Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine, and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready. For this day is holy to our Lord, and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.
So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, Be quiet, for this day is holy. Do not be grieved. And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.
So they understand as the word is taught to them, and they begin to weep and to mourn as they understand their own sin. But this festival, this time, was a time of rejoicing in the Lord, so it wasn't the proper time to deal with their grief and their mourning.

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So as we pick up in Nehemiah 9, they've finished this feats of Booth, and we've really turned to the first appropriate time where they can deal with this grieving and mourning of their sin. So if you look there in chapter 9, verse 1, I'll start reading.
[3:56] Now on the 24th day of this month, the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads, and the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins in the iniquities of their fathers.

And they stood up in their place and read from the book of the law of the Lord their God for a quarter of the day. For another quarter of it, they made confession and worshipped the Lord their God.
So we pick up day 24 of month 7. So this is the second day after the culmination of the Feast of Booths. Enough time to really transition from this joyous festival and separate themselves from foreigners for purity so they can confess their sins and the sins of their fathers.
Here we see external signs of inward change, external signs of ineternal change. They're fasting and mourning. They have sackcloth on and earth on their heads.
And you can think of these as a way to wear their grief on the outside. Sackcloth was a coarse and scratchy fabric made from coarse goat hair normally, and wearing it caused certainly constant physical discomfort.
[5:07] This would have prevented a mourner from distracting themselves, and really this is an external sign that strips you of all social status, wealth, and pride. Placing earth or dirt or ashes on the head would have been something that symbolized a return to the dust from which humans were created.

It visually broadcasted that the person was completely ruined, desolate, and really brought low to the ground. So again, these are external signs to show of the internal grieving and mourning that they have over their sin.
Daily, they're reading from the Word, they're making confession, and they're worshiping the Lord here for a half day in total. If we continue in verses 4 and 5, we see that the Levites cry out to God and they bless Him, the everlasting God who is greater than all.
And so the first point that you'll see on your handout is repenting of their sin. Repenting of their sin. These first five verses summarize their repentance.
There's a helpful commentator who helped couch repentance like this. So the Greek word for repent, metanoia, refers to a change of the mind's perceptions and dispositions and purposes.
[6:19] Repenting means experiencing a change of mind that now sees God as true and beautiful and worthy of all our praise and all our obedience. So it's a changing of mind, a 180 degree change of mind.

As we see God for who He is, great, glorious, and desirable, we also see sin for what it is, diminished, ugly, repulsive. This is why repentance is also a commitment to a profound change of direction, an about-face, an 180 degree reorientation of our lives away from sin and toward God.
And here's the people, as they understand God's Word, as they're mourning their sin, they're turning from their sin toward God. And as we see what they've done, we know that we too must do the same.
Like God's people here, we need God to stir within us to help us see the wickedness of our sin and cause us to turn from our sin toward Christ. And when we turn in Christ in faith for the forgiveness of sin, we're given new life in Him, our sins are forgiven.
And how are they forgiven? Because of the cross. Because Christ Jesus who bore our sins on the cross. That all those who trust Him by faith would be forgiven.
[7:32] So first, in these first five verses, we see a repenting of their sin. Your second point, recounting of God's greatness in their sinfulness. So from verses 6 to 31, what we'll see is a prayer of the people where they're recounting God's greatness and their own sinfulness.

The Levites lead the people in this confessional prayer. And I'll read through it. And as I read through it, what you'll notice is this is one of the most comprehensive summaries of the Old Testament. It spans from creation to their present day.
And as we read it, I'd encourage you to flip your handout over and jot down a few things. So the two discussion questions that we'll talk about in a moment are, how are God and His people contrasted?

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Do we see any patterns in the text? And then I'll encourage you to jot down what we learn about God from this passage. So as I read through it, as you notice different things, jot those down for those discussions and you'll get to talk about those at your table.
So starting there in verse 6. You are the Lord, you alone, and you have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their hosts, the earth and all that is in it, the seas and all that is in them.
[8:48] And you preserve all of them, and the host of heaven worships you. You are the Lord, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of the Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham. You have found his heart faithful before you and made with him the covenant to give to the offspring the land of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Jebusite and the Gragashite.

And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous. And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea and performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants and all the people of his land.
For you knew that they acted arrogantly against our fathers. And you made a name for yourself, as it is to this day. And you divided the sea before them so that they went through the midst of the sea on dry land.
And you cast their pursuers into the depths as a stone into mighty waters. By a pillar of cloud you led them in the day and by a pillar of fire in the night to light for them the way in which they should go.
You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments. And you made known to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them commandments and statues and a law by Moses your servant.
[10:04] You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger and brought water for them out of the rock for their thirst. And you told them to go in to possess the land that you had sworn to give them.

But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their necks and did not obey your commandments. They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them. But they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt.
But you are a God ready to forgive. They were a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and did not forsake them. Even when they made for themselves a golden calf and said, this is your God who brought you up out of Egypt and had committed great blasphemies, you and your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness.
The pillar of cloud to lead them in the way did not depart from them by day nor the pillar of fire by night to light for them the way by which they should go. You gave your good spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst.
Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness and they lacked nothing. Their clothes did not wear out, their feet did not swell. And you gave them kingdoms and peoples and allotted them every corner.
[11:20] So they took possession of the land of Sion, king of Hezban, and the land of Og, king of Bashan. You multiplied their children as the stars of heaven and you brought them into the land that you told their fathers to enter and possess.

So the descendants went in and possessed the land and you subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gave them into the land with their kings and the peoples of the land that they might do with them as they would.
And they captured fortified cities and a rich land and took possession of the houses full of all good things, cisterns already hewn, vineyards, olive orchards, and fruit trees in abundance.
So they ate and were filled and became fat and delighted themselves in your great goodness.
Verse 26. Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets who had warned them in order to turn them back to you.
And they committed great blasphemies. Therefore you gave them into the hand of their enemies who made them suffer. And in the time of their suffering they cried out to you and you heard them from heaven.
[12:27] And according to your great mercies you gave them saviors who saved them from the hand of their enemies. But after they had rest they did evil again before you and you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies so that they had dominion over them.

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Yet when they turned and cried to you, you heard from heaven and many times you delivered them according to your mercies. And you warned them in order to turn them back to your law. Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments but sinned against your rules.
Which if a person does them, he shall live by them. And they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey. Verse 30 Many years you bore with them and warned them by your spirit through your prophets.
Yet they would not give ear. Therefore you gave them into the hand of the people of the lands.
Nevertheless, your great mercies did not make an end of them or forsake them. For you are a gracious and merciful God.
We'll stop there. So that's verses 6 through 31. Now what I'd like you to do at your tables, go ahead and talk about that first discussion question. How are God and His people contrasted?
[13:35] And what patterns do you notice in the text? How are God and His people contrasted? And what patterns do you notice in the text? I know that was only a few minutes to digest a large passage.

But what did you see? How are God and His people contrasted here? Were there any patterns that you noticed? Yeah, you see that cycle.
It almost makes me think of like the judges cycle that we see on display in the book of Judges. But yeah, it's very much across Israel's history. And Tyler, you point out that their faithlessness did not lead to a lack of His faithfulness.
Like He remained faithful the entire time. Thank you for that, Tyler. What else? And that's like the umbrella answer that kind of covers everything.
But were there any other aspects that you notice? Thank you for that. We don't have time today. But if you're curious, you can go through verse by verse throughout this entire section.
[14:41] And really what you find is that what they've done here is condense all of Old Testament history. Genesis to now, they've condensed it into these few verses. And like Jeff mentioned, they start at creation.

So that verse 6 is very much a summary of Genesis chapter 1. You are the Lord, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is in it, the seas that is all that is in them.
And you preserve them, and the host of heaven worships you. So it starts there and follows God working with His people, with His creation from then until now.
Yeah, thank you for pointing that out, Jeff. Okay, as far as how God and His people are contrasted, any other thoughts or comments before we move on to discussion 2?
Thank you for that, Ed. Yeah, and I would just emphasize, as we see God and His people contrasted, what you'll notice in the text is that God's never found at fault. God's never accused of acting wickedly, not loving them perfectly, not being faithful, not being gracious, not being merciful, any of those things.
[15:51] A second point, not all of them. Yeah, okay. Well, I would just encourage you to see that throughout the entire text of how it's framed, is it definitely upholds and shows who God truly is and all these things, and contrasts with them as a people who have sinned, who have deserted Him, who have disobeyed, who have been disobedient, etc.

And so I think you see that stark contrast consistently, cycle after cycle, as Tyler mentioned. You continue to get God's mercy, yet they're disobedient. And that's not to make light of their disobedience or to downplay the horror and heinousness of their sin, but rather to begin to help us understand the unfathomable depths of mercy that God has towards His people, towards sinners.
Okay, now I know there's some overlap, but what I'd like you to do now is go to discussion 2, and look at the notes that you've already jotted down, take a look at the text and jot down a few more. But what do we learn about God from this passage?
And I encourage you to think about what ought we take away, or what can we take away, from what we learn about God in this passage? What does that mean for us today? So go ahead and talk about that for a few minutes, and we'll come back together.
Okay, let's come back together. Maybe kind of a rapid fire. What are some of the different things that we learn about God from this passage? Yeah, He is extremely merciful.
[17:16] Thank you for that, David. Keep throwing them out. What else? Yeah, thank you for that, Tyler. Yeah, you can see there in verse 15.

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He gave them bread from heaven for their hunger, and brought water for them out of the rock for their thirst. And He told them to possess the land which you had sworn to give them. He goes on to say that many years you bore with them, and worn them by your Spirit through your prophets. Their clothes did not wear out, their feet did not swell across 40 years. They lacked nothing. Yeah, He continues to provide and shepherd them. I think I heard one table talk about how, even with how it begins, He's the lone soul, all-powerful creator and sustainer of the universe.
He's a righteous. He's a promise keeper. Any additional ones that you see there, or that you want to share? One that may not jump off as much, but He's also a faithful discipliner.
So when we think of God, we see here that these people, nevertheless, they were disobedient, and they rebelled against God, and they continued to do evil. And so, He gave them into the hand of their enemies, and He caused them some level of suffering, so that in time, they would cry out and return and repent to Him.
[18:34] And we know that the Lord disciplines the ones that He loves. And so we can think of how unloving it would have been to let them persist in their sin, not knowing the depths of the horror and the heinousness, and not getting to be in relationship with Him, that it would be for them to continue down that path.

So we learn all about these different attributes and actions that the Lord has done across history as He's faithfully kept His covenant with His people.
And we know from Hebrews 13.8 that God, the Lord, He's the same yesterday, today, and forever. And so what we can know is that just as the Lord was faithful then, so too He's faithful today.
And though we're in a new covenant brought by Jesus, we know that all of these things, as you were probably reading through there, you could think of New Testament reaffirmations of these same promises and same characteristics and same traits of who the Lord is and what He does for His people.
And I'm not sure where you may be this morning. You may be weary. You may be backsliding. You may be struggling in a particular sin.
[19:45] This week may have been awful. You may have lashed out at your children. There may be sin in your life currently. And what you really need to hear this morning is what we all need to consistently hear is that the Lord is a God who's ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, who does not forsake His people.

We can trust that just as the Lord was faithful and merciful to His people then, so too He continues to be faithful and merciful to us today. And we rejoice in Him for that. Another question for us as we read through these, we know that we're made in the image of God, that we're called to love others because of Christ's love for us.
He first loved us, and so we ought to love one another and love others. And so one thing to think about is, do we exemplify these things in our relationships with others? Are we long-suffering? Are we continually merciful? Do we continue to love others well, even when they don't love us? Whether that be our husband or wife, our family, our kids, our co-workers, other believers.
And certainly, we won't do that perfectly. But as we look to Christ and are thankful for how He embodies all of these perfectly, so we long to exemplify them as we follow Him.
[21:11] Now third, just for the sake of time, we'll go quick, but third, we'll see a pleading for deliverance. So there in verse 32, Now therefore, our God, the mighty and awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love, let not all the hardships seem little to you that has come upon us, but our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, and our fathers, and all your people since the time of the kings of Assyria until this day.

Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully, and we have acted wickedly. Our kings, our princes, our priests, and our fathers have not kept your law or paid attention to your commandments and your warnings that you gave them, even in their own kingdom, and amid your great goodness that you gave them, and in the large and rich land that you set before them, they did not serve you or turn from their wicked works.
Verse 36, Behold, we are slaves this day in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit, and its good gifts. Behold, we are slaves. And its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins.
They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress. So here are the people, they plead for deliverance. So they're repenting, they recount all that the Lord has done, His greatness and their sinfulness throughout this prayer, and they turn and they make

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this plea.
And you can think of them really holding on to the promise in 2 Chronicles 7.14, where the Lord says, If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, that I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.
[22:50] One commentator hopefully framed it like this, Not only is God powerful in creation, election, salvation, provision, and compassion, all of which we see in this prayer, but He is also the God who is near to His people when they call to Him.

God hears and answers the prayer of His children. God did not act on behalf of His people since the very beginning of time, for it to end with them in bondage once again. As the people of God, they know that only the Lord Himself is to rule over them, not these foreign kings who set themselves up in a place of God, over God's holy people and Jerusalem.
Although God gave them great success in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, and much of their reproach has been lifted, they long for God to finish what He began in and through them. They long for their distress to be completely removed.
It is like the believer who has tasted the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ in salvation, and now longs for the day when he or she sees the Savior face to face and is made like Him. We praise God for His forgiveness and the removal of the reproach that was on us, but we long for the day when the distress of our sinful nature will be completely eradicated, and we rejoice that God is faithful to complete what He has begun.
So today we've read of how God's people responded to the Lord and His Word then, and it begs the question for us today, how are we corporately responding to God's Word? How are we, each of us, how are you and I responding to God's Word individually?
[24:16] May we be a people who delight in Him and His Word, who mourn and repent of our sin when we sin, and who eagerly give our lives to share the Lord and His Word with others so that they too may know Him.

Two quick questions for application there on your handout. I'd encourage you to similarly to our passage today, look back at your life. I encourage you to recount God's greatness throughout it, His faithfulness, His loving kindness throughout your life, that that might stir up a delight and a praise for Him in your heart.
And then second, is there anything that you need to repent of? Is there any unrepentant sin in your life? Remember that God is ready to forgive, and I urge you, I plead with you to turn back to Him.
Let's pray. Father, we rejoice in You this morning. Thank You for Your Word. Thank You for such a concentrated reminder of Your great goodness, of Your greatness that we've seen across history. Lord, that You've been righteous and faithful in all that You've done. You've been long-suffering and faithful, not forsaking us, a people who do not deserve You. Lord, we're thankful for Your love for us, most supremely in Christ Jesus.
[25:29] We're thankful that as we see all of Your great works and Your character on display throughout the Old Testament, that we see it pointing us forward and preparing us for the Lord Jesus. And we're so thankful that He came, that He conquered sin and death and Satan.

And Lord, we long for His return, where we will get to be with You face to face. Lord, I pray that You would stir within our hearts, help us know things that are displeasing to You, things that don't honor You.
Lord, we turn from those from our sin toward You, knowing that You are ready to forgive, that Your arms are open and wide and inviting us to come back to You. And Lord, that all who come to You, none will be cast out.
We're thankful that You're faithful to forgive us of our sin. Lord, that You love us so much. Be with us as we go to worship. Lord, You remind us of Your great goodness, demonstrate throughout history, throughout Your people, and even in our very own lives.
So just in the name of the Lord, we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. To learn more, visit us in person or see the website at highlandparkbaptist.net.

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