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| <b>Series:</b><br>Nehemiah, Healthy Walls  | <b>Reference:</b><br>Nehemiah 9 | <b>Title:</b><br>Good for the Soul | <b>Date:</b><br>7.9.17 |
| <b>Website Writeup:</b>  |                                 |                                    |                        |
| We're witnessing a revival in Israel beginning in chapter 8 of Nehemiah and now extending into chapter 9. This is where we find that confession is good for the soul, and leads into a deep attitude of praise & gratitude of God's faithfulness even in light of their past unfaithfulness. |                                 |                                    |                        |

## Color Changes in text indicate slide changes

### UPG Prayer of the Day...

The Durbet, like other Mongols, are known for their love of fine horses & horse racing. Many of the Durbet live as nomads with lifestyles of seasonal migration. Their dwellings are portable tents called gers or yurts, made of felt on lattice frames. Some have become settled farmers. Oral historic poetry is an important part of Durbet culture. It's traditionally recited by a poet, accompanied by a two-stringed lute called a dombr. The Durbet were traditionally animists & shamanists, but in the late 1500s they adopted Tibetan Buddhism.

### Sermon...

We've seen Nehemiah called to return & rebuild the walls & gates in Jerusalem. As a result we've seen God's Word, practices of faith & intimacy in relationship between God & His people reestablished. How that's brought conviction, leading to profound joy & celebration of God's grace. People have been gathering at the Water Gate, hearing the Word of God read, living in temporary shelters to remember their salvation from Egypt & God's provision in the wilderness. A wonderful renewal.

They're gathered yet again in Chapter 9 where we witness their deep confession of communal, familial & individual sin, contrasted with a praise of God's patience & grace! They're fasting & wearing sackcloth - an outward sign of repentance. We'll notice how the Word of God leads them into deep honest self-appraisal of their situation. But more importantly, they acknowledge how faithful God's been to them despite their former attitudes. As we read, visualize two groups of Levites shouting these things back & forth across the square of the Temple as the people, gathered between them, listen.

*Let's look first at verses 36-37. <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.*

God's led them back to understanding they can't blame anyone else, their own sin led them to this point. They'd developed the bad habit of not listening. This is true confession. They're not saying, "Well, we may have done a few things wrong...but it's really their fault" No, they're saying, "We've been wrong, we've not listened!"



Remember when Moses met Aaron when he came down off Mt Sinai? The people had asked Aaron to forget about Moses, since he'd been gone so long & to make them new gods. Aaron said give me all your gold & fashioned it into a golden calf. When Moses returns, what does Aaron say? Does he say, "I was weak & wrong, and made this calf"? No, he says, "I took all their jewelry & threw it into the fire & out came this calf!" And Adam said, "It was the woman that YOU gave me..."! That's not confession, it's blame-shifting & dishonesty. Neither Aaron, nor Adam, could blame anyone else for their lack of obedience in their situations.

In the Narnia series, CS Lewis writes in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* about self-centered Eustace the boy who turned into a dragon as a symbol of his sin nature controlling his life. He tries to shed the dragon skin pulling off one layer himself, only to find a tougher layer underneath. He can't be free of it & needed Aslan to do it for him.

What's our dragon skin? We want to live our own lives, wanting the benefits of grace, but always being in charge? The licentious Christian life? Or, is it our own moralism which makes us feel better than others? The self-righteous life? These things are only protective armor which block us from knowing the true love of God - we must allow him to strip us of them; the sin which so easily entangles, or the self-righteous heart.

If we find ourselves in spiritual bondage there's no one else to blame but ourselves. If society's a wreck, we're at least partly responsible, but we have a gracious god. If we're a lost generation looking only towards self-pleasure, the almighty dollar, a career, or relationship to save us & bring fulfillment, we'll be lost. If we're a generation who doesn't honor God's Word, then we'll find ourselves in spiritual bondage. If we're spiritual slaves in 'the land of the free & the home of the brave', it's our doing. If we've picked up the bad habit of not listening to the Holy Spirit & God's Word, we can't blame anyone but ourselves - but again, we always have a gracious god of reconciliation! But relationship takes work - if we want to experience the blessings & abundant life Jesus promises we can't neglect our relationship with Him.

We too need to confess & listen! But how? Let's see how they did it. Notice these people have been building up to this. Now they're being led to an inner confessional life which leads to an abundant life! They fast, weep, pray for mercy - they focus together as community - the confess as a body! They don't blame anyone else for their predicament of slavery & bondage! Verse 3 says, they listened, confessed & worshipped for a large part of their day!

*3 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 worshipping the LORD their God.*

Six hours of listening, leading to an equal amount of time of confession & praise! Confession's always followed with the praise of God's goodness & grace - how he sustains us even in our rebellion longing for relationship with us; not giving us what we



deserve! It's not God's fault, nor anyone else's when we find ourselves in spiritual bondage, but he does meet us in it!

Remember the Abrahamic Covenant in Chapter 12 of Genesis takes precedence always - God had promised Abraham three things; descendants, land & that he's blessed to be a blessing. Abraham was chosen; always in the receiving position from God.

In Genesis 15 we have a weird passage where God calls Abraham to gather a bunch of animals, cut them into & place them side by side with an aisle down the middle. Then God causes Abraham to sleep while God walks the aisle between the cut animals alone making a promise to Abraham. This is an ancient ceremony - typically both parties making a covenant would walk the aisle together. In essence they'd both be promising to uphold the covenant between them or they'll become like the animals at their feet. But God walks it alone symbolically promising to him & his descendants, that their relationship was solely based on God's faithfulness, not their ability to live up to it. This is why God is so patient with them, the relationship has always been based on God's grace & his ability to save, not on our ability to follow perfectly.

We can't even rely on our good works; our self-righteousness. Many of us don't do much of anything wrong outwardly, but we quietly judge others, we rely on our own active righteousness of being good to give us worth before God. But we find, like it says in Romans 7:10 that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death - the law always leads us back to our need & passive receiving of Grace from God. When we think so highly of ourselves we're the constant victim of what everyone else has done to us. We react with negative feelings towards our circumstances; "If things weren't this way I'd be fine". We don't realize yet our hearts are twisted before God, we've not readily understood yet the passive righteousness we have under Christ - that he's paid it all for us, we can do nothing to negate His love & nothing to gain it. It is what it is! We're chosen, that's it.

A covenant of Grace. Our mistake has been to put the Mosaic Covenant of the Law before the Covenant of Grace; to beat ourselves up when we fall short or to try & gain our worth before God by being good! And when we can't, we either try harder or turn away instead of back to his grace. God gave the law to show us *how to live* as his children - not *how to become* his Children. We don't practice our faith *to gain relationship* with him, rather because *we are in relationship* with him! God's promise in the Mosaic Covenant is, "Because you're my children, this is how you should live. Since this is what will bring you blessing, safety & prosperity." Not that life would be devoid of suffering, but that walking with God *is* the best way to live. And when we don't listen, we suffer the consequences of our pride & rebellion. God doesn't have to do anything, we punish ourselves enough! It's true in human parenting as well - for the most part I don't have to punish my kids, the results of their bad choices are punishment enough.

We must remember only the first commandment to walk the journey of faith well, '*You shall have no other gods before me*', which encompasses all other commandments. If you break any other commandment, you break the first. And any idol, or god we place



before Him, is in essence placing ourselves before God! When I don't listen, I am saying I know better. Whether it be outright sin or a quiet life of self-righteousness - we're governed by grace not a measuring stick. But now, the Israelites are listening again! The key is to stop thinking of your ability, or non-ability, to walk perfectly, but to rejoice in God's grace!

So the Levites divide themselves into two groups. One stands on the stairs leading up to the Water Gate, and the other on the platform opposite them in the square with all the people between. One group shouts confessions, and the other counters with shouts of praise.

*<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.*

Let's recreate this right now & listen to how they praise God, firstly for being Creator & Maker of everything, the Keeper of promises, the Deliverer from sin, Provider of wisdom & life. Realize they're recounting God's story & how he's sustained & loved them through the years despite their rebellion & lack of listening; they cover the book of Exodus, Joshua, Judges & more! They cover the subjugation by the Syrians, Assyrians & Babylonians! Listen to the grace. Let's listen well as Daniel & Jamie read for us.

Jamie: vv9:5b-15

*"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.

Daniel: vv16-17a

<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.

Jamie: vv17b-25

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.

Daniel: vv26-27a

<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.



Jamie: vv27b

*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.*

Daniel: vv28-29

*<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.*

Jamie: vv30-31

*<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.*

And this all leads up to their own time when the language changes in verse 32 from ‘they’ and ‘them’, to ‘we’ and ‘our’, as they begin to look at their own generation. They own, not only the sin of their own generation, but the generations before, because they are the community of God. Let’s listen again.

Jamie: vv32-35

*<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.*

*“God...In all that has happened to us, you’ve been just; you’ve acted faithfully, while we did wrong.”* Where did we ever get the picture of an angry vengeful Old Testament God? Where do we get the picture of a god who just wants to limit, destroy & subjugate? It’s not there! The Old Testament is filled with an image of a gracious, loving, forgiving god who sustains his people through the Abrahamic Covenant of Grace & seeks to teach them how to live which will bring glory to his name & peace to their lives through



obedience to his wonderful standards! The character of Jesus reflected in every page; every recounting of the story, from first page to last!

And rightly so, this all leads up to their current situation of slavery in their own land due to their own sin - not due to an angry god. Finally, they sum this all up with a commitment, even putting it in writing: <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."*

Chapter 10 outlines their promises which entails giving of tithes, following the Law of God & observing the practices of their faith so they'll not easily forget who they are in relationship to God! Pretty moving! We too need to confess, listen to the Word of God, leading us to worship once more.

We're the people of God. We serve a gracious god who sustains us by his promise not by how perfect or good we are & doesn't retract relationship when we turn away. We too need to confess & listen. Let's get into an attitude of prayer & end this time as the Israelites did with confession & praise. Let's choose to worship God right now by owning our situation, and praising him for his faithfulness (explain).

If we were to do this as they did, we'd be fasting, then sign our Vision & Values, and Statement of Faith together - it would be a large membership class so to speak. At some point you may want to consider going through our membership class (EXPLORE). But for now, let's look forward to our growth together, our shared commitment to God & this community as we seek to build the kingdom of God together.



### Community Group Leader Questions:

1. Did you grow up with the image there was a marked difference between the Old & New Testament God?
  1. Discuss the popular cultural image of both.
  2. Where do you think those images come from?
  3. Does the image of God we're seeing in Nehemiah match up with a vengeful wrathful Old Testament God?
  4. Israel recounts their history & it seems like this loving, gracious, pursuant god is a consistent image throughout time, what difference does that make to you?
2. We'd rather not address the issue of sin, but it is paramount & central to the message of the Gospel. In experiencing Jesus, we face our sin.
  1. What does v36-37 say about our sin? <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."*
  2. Do we see how God gives us good gifts, but our choices pollute these things & create a bondage in life? If Palestine were a metaphor for a person, God has given us a body to live in with health & freedom within it. But our disobedience (our sinful choices) has brought about slavery & bondage.
3. Discuss how there's almost no need for God to punish when the consequences of our sin does the job so easily already.
  1. Can you give some examples of this?
  2. What are some of the simply bad choices we've made which have resulted in naturally difficult consequences?
4. Discuss what it means to reside under a passive righteousness with Christ
  1. How does this clip of Eustace's change illustrate that?
  2. Discuss these statements & how they relate to what happened to Eustace...
    1. God gave the law to show us *how to live* as his children - not *how to become* his Children.
    2. We don't practice our faith *to gain relationship* with him, rather because *we are in relationship* with him!
5. Discuss vv33-35...
  1. How is God's goodness & faithfulness an encouragement to us?
  2. What keeps us from taking advantage of his goodness?
  3. What other 'gods' have we put before him? And how does God's goodness draw us back to him even though we've done this?