

Armagh Baptist Church – Sunday 8th March 2020

Nehemiah 9:1-37

'We need A Clearer Vision of God!'

Introduction

Nehemiah chs.8, 9 &10 are dealing with the Revival that came upon the Jewish people just after they had completed the rebuilding of the Walls of Jerusalem. In these chapters we are able to see the necessary requirements for Revival.

We need to remember that 'Revival' is not primarily to do with people getting saved. It has primarily to do with God's People being revived in their hearts, getting back to the Lord, and then because of the obvious fresh and up-to-date experience of God in *their* lives, the people around them sit up and take notice, and as a spin-off of revival many new people come to faith in Christ.

Last week we saw the first Key to Revival – and that was **the Centrality of the Word of God**. God's People getting Back to the Bible. Allowing it to speak to their lives with freshness – as if they were hearing it for the very first time.

In ch. 8 we saw all the people gathering in Water Gate Square, and actually asking Ezra the Scribe to bring out God's Word and begin to read it to them. We saw how he read to them for 6 hours from the Books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy (8:1-3).

We found that the people were in tears as they listened to God's Word (v.9). As it was opened up to them and explained to them for the first time perhaps in many years, it came home to them with freshness – and it really impacted their lives!

According to ch.8:2 that all began on the 1st day of the Seventh Month. In v.14 they discovered that they should be celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles (The Feast of Booths) so they lived in little shelters up until the 8th day of the month.

Now as we come into ch.9 another couple of weeks have gone by, and it's now the 24th day of that same month. And the people of Israel all gather up again to find out more about God's Word (Read 9:1-5a).

This time they have come together for Confession and Worship.

What they do this time is all based upon what they have been studying in God's Word over the last few weeks.

So for them Revival began by Understanding the **True Meaning of God's Word**. As we'll see today this led them to the next stage: **True Worship of God** himself.

v.3 sums it up – they spent the first quarter of the day *Reading* from God's Word. The second quarter is spent in *Confession* and *Worshipping* the Lord their God.

So here we have 3 hours of **Reading God's Word**, and 3 hours responding to it in **Confession of Sin**, and in **Worship of God**.

These people had come with the right attitude:

(v.1b) They were genuinely sorry for their sins.

(v.2a) They were serious about meeting with a Holy God.

Now this in no way contradicts what we saw last Sunday. The emphasis in ch.8 was not so much that we are sinners, but that we are **forgiven sinners!** Nehemiah wouldn't let them mourn and weep over their sin then, he wanted them to remember the experience of hearing God's Word with genuine **Joy** (vs.9-10). He told them that *'The Joy of the Lord is your strength'* (Nehemiah 8:10).

But today we're talking about being genuinely **sorry** for our sins. We're taking one step backwards, if you like, but only because God's Word does so. I think it does so for a reason, because you cannot fully appreciate **The Joy of Forgiveness** of sins, until you have been burdened by **The Seriousness of Sin** - and realise just how much it grieves our Holy God.

Again look back over history - Revivals have only come when God's Word has been opened up and understood with freshness. And Revivals have only come when God's people realise afresh how seriously our God treats sin because He is **Holy**, and how much he has shown us his **Grace** when He has forgiven us for those very sins that caused him so much hurt and pain in the first place!

e.g. When Jonathan Edwards preached his famous sermon: **'Sinners in the hands of an angry God'** (In Enfield, Connecticut on 8th July 1741) he read it by candle light in a small church, in the back end of nowhere in New England, and people began to shriek with horror because of their sins. So much so that they eventually drowned out his voice! They asked him to stop, and just tell them how they could have their sins forgiven! That's how revival started in New England 280 years ago, and then it began to spread to other places.

Throughout chapter 9 the themes of **God's Grace, Mercy** and **Patience** are intertwined with the **Disobedience, Rebellion** and **Sin of God's people**, again and again and again. Every time they sin and rebel, you would expect God to be done with them, but each occasion of sin and rebellion is another occasion for God to show again his grace and mercy, love and forgiveness, and no matter how far they go, God never gives up on them.

This chapter is a powerful illustration of Paul's great verse in Romans 5:20...

"Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound!"

Or as the NIV puts it, *"Where sin increased, grace increased all the more!"*

The grace of God is an amazing thing! - That's why we sing about it "**Amazing Grace**" - But have any of us really begun to understand it?

God saves us by His Grace – not because of anything good that we have done. And then He goes on loving us and looking after us in His Grace, even when we sin and fall and fail as Christians. We're not perfect, none of us are! We cannot be perfect this side of Heaven, but because God has saved us by His Grace, there is no sin that we can commit as a Christian, that will take him by surprise, or put us beyond His Grace. Because we have been saved in the first place on the basis of grace (not merit), so we continue to be saved by God's Grace, not by any merits that we might achieve along the way! - That is truly amazing!

Let's go down through Nehemiah ch.9 and just notice how God dealt with His Old Testament people on the basis of Grace, and then remember that he deals with us, His New Testament people, on just the same basis of Grace.

We're not told, but Ezra probably led the people in this great prayer from v.5 on... It reflects the early chapters of the Bible that he had probably just read to them: Beginning with Creation (v.6), talking about Abram's name change (vs.7-8), and The Red Sea (vs.9-12), how he brought them to Mount Sinai & the Giving of the Law (vs.13-15), highlighting all that God in His Grace had done for these people.

So Ezra just turns his Bible reading into Prayer! We should learn to do that – to pray over what we've just read or studied, and talk back to God about it – then Bible reading and Prayer become a two way conversation – like a relationship! After all, that's what God wants to have with us!

1. Ezra calls us to Worship the God of Creation (vs.5-6)

He begins by acknowledging The LORD, Yahweh, as the Only true God:

- As the Creator of everything we see around us.
- As the Giver of Life to all things.
- The one who alone is Worthy of Worship.

The so-called sophisticated world we live in today has problems acknowledging all that. But the problem is if **God's people** begin to have doubts about God as Creator, then it's no wonder we have no revival!

That is the starting point of worship!

He is worthy of our worship just because of who He is, and if He had done no more than just create this world in which we live, He would for that alone be worthy of our praise and worship.

2. He calls us to Worship the God of Abraham (vs.7-8)

Out of all the people that God had made on the face of the earth, God chose one man and his family to be special to Him. Abram from Ur of the Chaldeans - away in the Persian Gulf. That's the very place that these people, in Nehemiah's day, had just been brought back from!

The significance of that point would not have been lost on those people that day! God had called and chosen them, just as he had chosen their forefather Abram, and called Him out for Himself. (Indeed just as He has called us out too!)

In v.8 they reflect on the Covenant God made with Abram away back in Gen.15.

God promised to give him descendants and a land. Now **they** were Abraham's descendants standing at last, all those centuries later, back in the land that God had promised to Abraham all those years before!

So God had been faithful in keeping His side of the bargain. He had faithfully kept His Covenant promises to these people – not because of anything in them, but because of something in Himself – His own **Righteousness** (v.8b). God is true to Himself, no matter what we do, and no matter what happens in this world.

3. He calls us to Worship the God of Redemption (vs.9-12)

In the Book of Exodus we see how God's people had suffered at the hands of their cruel task-masters & slave-drivers in Egypt (v.9). Their cry went up to God. When they cried out to Him, he listened and responded, by saving them out of the bondage of Egypt. Performing miraculous signs and wonders to bring them out of their slavery, to set them free, to serve and follow Him instead, and how he had dealt with their oppressors.

That was their Salvation. Their Redemption. Their Rescue. God had Saved them.

And He led them every step of the way since (v.12).

Is that how you look back on the moment that God saved you?

4. He calls us to Worship the God of Justice (vs.13-15)

At the foot of Mount Sinai God established His Covenant – not this time with an Individual, as he had done with Abraham, but with a Nation – his descendants.

He established that covenant relationship by setting boundaries for the people. Here the people acknowledge that those regulations and laws were **just** and **right** (v.13). There was absolutely nothing wrong with them. And there still isn't!

Every Law that God ever gave, He gave for a reason – for the people's benefit! It's not that He was trying to be a spoil-sport. They were all given to protect them. The God who made us, knows what we need, better than we know ourselves. Start ignoring God's Laws, and you'll begin to discover things falling apart.

Just look at society today, look at family life today, look at the morality of our nation today, look at relationships between people today. We're reaping what we've sown by neglecting God's Laws – that were made for our own good!

But as well as giving His people Laws, He also gave them everything that they needed along the way (v.15). He told them to go ahead and possess the land He had promised to Abraham, and to them (v.15b) - Just go ahead and take it!

See how much God did for these people! Was He a mean God? Was He a hard-hearted God? Had He treated these people unfairly? Not at all! - But look at v.16.

5. We're called to Worship a God of Grace (v.16)

...but sadly, the people responded with **Disobedience & Rebellion!**
(v.16) "**BUT** they and our fathers..." There's a but!
In response to all God's Grace we read that they...

*"Acted presumptuously and **stiffened their neck** and **did not obey your commandments. They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders you had performed among them, but they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt.**" (vs.16-17)*

Now what would you expect to read next? - "So God had enough of them and gave up on them, and let them go and do whatever they wanted..." No!
As Romans 5:20 says: "*Where sin abounds, grace did much more abound!*"

6. We're also called to Worship a God of Mercy (v.17)

No, that's not what we read at all...(Look at v.17b)

*"But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and **merciful**, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them..."*
(Even when they did v.18!!)

(v.19) "*You **in your great mercies** did not forsake them in the wilderness!*"
(Even though He would have been quite within His rights to do so!)
Look what he continued to do for them not just for a few years, but for 40 years!
(Read vs.19b-21). On top of all that, He still gave them the Promised Land.

7. Here we're called to Worship the God of Abundance (vs.22-25)

God kept the Covenant He'd made with Abraham, and He gave them the Land. And it was far better than they could ever have imagined. God was generous! The Land had an 'Abundance' (v.25) –

"Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound!"

But even then, how did the people respond?
Through all the years Living in the Land (vs.26-31) (i.e. through Judges & Kings)
The People went through an endless cycle of sin and rebellion and disobedience, only for God to repeatedly rescue them and bring them back to himself (v.28).

8. Here we're called to Worship a God of Compassion (vs.26-31)

Again and again God sent His Prophets to warn the people to return to Him. Again and again, rejecting the messengers, they went deeper & deeper into sin. Finally He handed them over to their neighbours (v.30)
But even then He didn't forget about them completely (v.31).
Why? "*For you are a gracious and merciful God!*" (v.31b)
There is seemingly no end to the **compassion** of our great God!

So in v.32 we're brought to Nehemiah and Ezra's Day – back in Jerusalem again.

And on the basis of their history, as they looked back on God's gracious dealings with them, these people are not down grovelling around in the dust before their God. In fact from v.32 to v.37 they have confidence on the basis of the past, to actually ask God for more!!

9. Because they Worship the God of the Covenant (vs.32-37)

"Now therefore, Our God..." (v.32)

"Therefore" i.e. on the basis of your grace towards us in the past. On the basis of this "Covenant of Love" (v.32) that you have kept through thick and thin with us, even when we totally rejected it's terms, we'd like to ask for one more thing...

Think about all this hardship we've been through this last nearly 300 years – "*since the time of the kings of Assyria until this day*" (v.32b) (i.e. 722 – 450 BC).

i.e. “Lord we’ve been through a lot...”

But (v.33) we’re not complaining –

“Yet you have been **righteous** in all that has come upon us...” – (You were right; we were wrong!) – “For You have dealt **faithfully**, and we have acted **wickedly!**”

And they show they have learned their lesson. They spell out before God the reasons why He was right to do what He did (vs.34-35):

- We have not kept your law (v.34)
- We paid no attention to your commandments (v.34)
- Or to the warnings you gave us (v.34)
- We did not serve you (v.35)
- Nor did we turn from our wicked works (v.35)

There’s true confession of sin. Calling a spade a spade. Calling sin, sin!
Looking back over our past. Seeing how God has dealt with us, Seeing how we have treated God, and then listing out before him, where we have gone wrong.

Yes, God is a gracious God, Yes He’s extremely patient with us, Yes He’s slow to get angry with us, Yes He does love us with an everlasting love, but still *sin is sin!*

And where we have rebelled against God, and gone our own way, and done our own thing, and treated Him with contempt, then we need to admit it, and say so.

- Only then can we truly get back to a right relationship with God.
- Only then can we begin to experience His blessing again.

God doesn’t take His salvation away from us, or take away our status with Him as His children, but because of our rebellion and backsliding, He certainly can and does withhold His blessing from us. - Is that really what you and I want?

On the basis of the Covenant that He has made with us, we can have confidence to ask afresh for further blessings (See vs.36-37).

“But...we’re still not experiencing all you have for us!”

Conclusion

Can we honestly say as a church that we’re experiencing all that God has for us? As we look around this morning, we can see a good-sized congregation here, but can we honestly say, as we look into our hearts, that we’re all that we’re meant to be, spiritually speaking? It’s not all about **numerical growth**, we should be more concerned about **spiritual growth** in our own hearts! Are we growing spiritually?

I don’t know about you, but I don’t believe for one moment as I look into my own heart this morning, that I’m as close to God as He intended me to be, and maybe you aren’t either, if we’re really being honest?

I believe God wants far more for us, as a church, than what we’ve got today!

As we look back over our history together, especially over the last 10 years, or however long you’ve been attending this church, are we not very much like the children of Israel?

- We haven’t always been faithful to God.
- We haven’t always been obedient.
- We haven’t always walked closely with God.
- At times we’ve been angry with each other, or sinned against each other, in different ways.
- At times we’ve gone running after material things, or things of this world, with far more enthusiasm, than we’ve run after God.

Nevertheless God has been gracious, and He has blessed us beyond what we deserved, because “*Where sin abounds, Grace does much more abound!*”

But are we really content with what we’ve got spiritually at the moment?

Do we not need to confess our shortcomings to the Lord this morning?

And then on the basis of His Grace and Faithfulness ask Him for more?

I want to see more of God’s Blessing upon this work, and in this church, and in this surrounding area. I believe God does too.

The question is: How much do you want to see it?

(From the hymn: ‘Rock of Ages’ – Augustus Toplady)

Nothing in my hand I bring,

Simply to Thy cross I cling;

Naked, come to Thee for dress;

Helpless, look to Thee for Grace:

Foul, I to the fountain fly,

Wash me, Saviour, or I die!

Not the labour of my hands,

Can fulfil Thy law’s demands;

Could my zeal no respite know,

Could my tears forever flow,

All for sin could not atone;

Thou must save and Thou alone!