

Roots of Revival: Part 2

Nehemiah 9:1-37

Introduction: This past week I travelled back to Louisville, Kentucky with Josh and Eric as we gathered with 12,500 people, over 10,000 of those pastors, elders, and other church workers. We heard preaching, testimonies, and sang hymns with a single piano and one man leading the whole stadium. It was powerful, emotional, and convicting. There was a call to preach, love, look to the cross, confess sin, remind ourselves and our congregations that God is unchanging, that He is gracious and kind, but His wrath is coming. Over 10 years ago, this conference had 3000 men and women, and has continued to gain momentum each year as young and old are having their eyes opened to the realities of the gospel, God's Word, and His glory. Is this revival? Is this the start of something that will lead to dramatic change in our churches and country?

The answer is, of course, I have no idea. While all of this is exciting, there is one telltale sign that will signal revival: there will be a real, growing consciousness of sin, which means a clear understanding of God, His Law, sorrow over our treason and actions toward Him, and a desire to repent. **"The first evidence of a true movement of the Holy Spirit is an awakened conscience, leading to genuine sorrow for sin in God's people. Only after that does revival come."** (James Montgomery Boice)

Last week we started by looking at the first step of revival was the people of God coming together with a renewed appetite for God's Word. After finishing the wall, the people realized that something had to change with the course of their lives, their families, and their leaders. They asked Ezra to read, make plans, and help them understand the Law. This led to mourning, but also joy. It also meant that the leaders of each household began to study God's Word and reinstitute the Feast of Tabernacles, which had been neglected for years. Revival begins with a re-prioritization of life, with a willingness to do whatever God's Word said, no matter what change that necessitated in terms of time. This helped flow to the next step of revival, which is confession of sin. Before we unpack this next section, let me give a couple of caveats:

- **My goal is not to be heavy handed in making you feel bad** – Sometimes preachers, especially young preachers can measure success by how bad they make people feel, and we can be heavy handed in our calling out sin. I'm sure I've been guilty of this in the past. It's interesting that last week we saw that as the people began to mourn, the priests told them to stop, since the feast was a time of rejoicing. In other words, there is a time for everything. It also means that conviction of sin will come through the work of the Spirit, and if He is working, I do not have to press emotional buttons to try to elicit more bad feelings from you
- **The work of Jesus and His gospel will give the power to change** - We are going to talk about sin this morning, and my hope is that you will be convicted of your sin, but our goal is NOT to get you to make moralistic changes. Our goal is to compel you to turn in your brokenness to our Savior who paid for all of our sin, covered our shame, and restores us completely.
- **Joy is the end result, not shame and mourning** - We want to leave here with joy, not misery. We want to identify and confess anything that has zapped our joy, any sin that has clogged our ability to rejoice.

Confession: from Rejoicing to Mourning

"Now on the twenty-fourth 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 the foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and 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.”

After the Feast of Tabernacles ended, the people began a corporate fasting, an acknowledgement of sin. The feast ended on the 22nd day of the month, and after a one day interval, the national fast started on the 24th. There are a couple of observations we make about this fast, which moved them from their time of rejoicing in God’s faithfulness to dealing with their sin. As we already stated, there is appropriateness and grace in God’s timing of all of this. They were called to rejoice and then deal with sin, much like having to deal with all kinds of things heading into a wedding but laying that aside during the actual celebration.

Overt – The mourning of the people over their sin was visceral: it included fasting, wearing sackcloth, and rubbing dirt on their heads. We do not practice this today, but this is equivalent to tearful sorrow, weeping over the reality of sin

Public - The confession was NOT just in silent prayer or in the confines of a house. This was public for all to hear. But notice this was NOT airing it among the other nations but among the family, separate from all the other nations. There are certain things that are family issues that the whole world does not need to know. “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed (James 5:16)

Corporate & Individual – Notice the people confessed their own sin and the sin of their fathers. The Bible is abundantly clear that though we may feel the effects of our parents sin (socially or financially), we are NOT bound to their sin. This confession of parental sin was a way to acknowledge that the sin of fathers was no excuse for sons to act the same way. Yes, our parents may have been divorced, or given to drunkenness, or angry and hateful, and though we acknowledge that, we are NOT bound to the same.

Word Driven - The study and obedient response to God’s Word led to newfound worship and practice of feasts, but the Word was not put back on the shelf. The Word was read for 3 MORE HOURS. Why was this so vital to drive people toward confession? We cannot confess our sin until we gain a clear view of the holiness of God, His character, and His glory. When we see Him as the Word shows us, we have a foundation for and clarity in what we are confessing.

Worship Focused - For the next three hours the people worshipped by making confession to the Lord. This was confessing sins of both omission and commission, of idolatry, of falling short of His glory. They examined their life and heart openly, honestly, with a goal of leaving nothing out, but putting everything on the table so God could wipe it all away.

Confession: from Self-focus to God Saturated

God as the Subject of all (5–31)

At the conclusion of this time of open worship and confession, the Levites, who functioned to help lead in worship, called the people to engage in responsive prayer to the Lord. “Stand up and bless the Lord your God from everlasting to everlasting. Blessed be your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise.” This is a unique prayer (although should not be) in that the subject of this lengthy discourse is God Himself. The response to confession was to reflect back to God who He was, to lay out a historical look at His work on behalf of His people, and to acknowledge the continual sin of the

Israelites. Far too often we skip over this in prayer. We jump to requests. We ask for things from God instead of treasuring Him. We turn the prayer into a focus on our needs instead of proclaiming His deeds, goodness, and character. This is a model prayer that turns from self centeredness to God saturation. This also informs us of all our worship, from singing, to preaching, to reading of Scripture, worship is God saturated with Him as the subject, not us. As the prayer walks through redemptive history, we get a clear picture of who God is and why He should be exalted.

God as Creator (5-6)

“You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the hosts of heaven worship you.”

God is creator, sustainer, and preserver of the universe. He created the world so He ultimately owns it, sets the rules, and receives glory through it. We know that all things were ultimately created through Christ and for Christ, and that He is preeminent in all things (Col. 1:16-19). God as creator shows His authority, purpose, and sovereign control over all. When we see God this way, it is clear who we are in comparison.

God as Initiator (7-8)

“You are the Lord, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur.”

God chose a moon worshipper in a pagan land and called him out of there to a land he never knew nor would he ever receive. Abram believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6). God was the one to call the people of Israel through this man, not because he was good or had anything to offer, but because He freely chose. We remember that He initiated our salvation (Eph. 1:3-5), and we remember we are the object of His love.

God as Liberator (9-12)

“And you made a name for yourself, as it is to this day.” (10)

God liberated his people and heard their cry in slavery. God worked wonders to liberate His people and in doing so, made His name great among the nations. In Christ we are not longer enslaved to sin, because we have died with Christ and have been set free from sin (Rom. 6:6-7) and have become slaves of righteousness (Rom. 6:18)

God as Gift Giver (13-15)

“You made known to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses your servant.” (14)

Once liberated God not only gave His people sustenance but gave them the Law, for their good, so they would know God’s expectations for their good. The Law was to be kept and faith in God demonstrated, and even the breaking of the Law would drive the people back to Him.

God as Merciful in Character (16-18)

“But you are a God ready to **forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger** and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them.” (17)

The people were obstinate. They failed to trust God and instead chased after other gods, making a golden calf and declaring that this hunk of metal was the god who got them out of Egypt. God demonstrated His character when He acted out who He is. He was ready to lavish grace and mercy out of His steadfast love so that He could offer forgiveness. When history is reviewed, even in our own lives, we cannot help but see the greatness of His mercy and grace, withholding judgement we deserve and granting grace that we do not.

God as Provider (19-21)

“You gave your good Spirit to instruct them and did not withhold manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst (20)

God did not simply forgive and leave alone. He continued to provide for His people, giving them bread every morning for 40 years, and gave His Spirit as a guide each day. We have the same advantage as we have been given the Holy Spirit as our guide in the truth, and we know that God is the one who provides our food each day. (Luke 11:1-4)

God as Conqueror (22-25)

“And you gave them kingdoms and peoples and allotted to them every corner...and you subdued before the the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gave them into their hand.” (22, 24)

God led Joshua to conquer a land of giants, soldiers, and fortified cities so that the people would have houses they did not build, vineyards they did not plant, and cisterns they did not dig. God was the one who promised the land and then delivered the land. God will always deliver on His promise and will bring to fruition His kingdom one day. We are more than conquerors (Rom. 8:37) through Him who loves us, was raised and seated at the right hand of the Father (Eph. 1:20), and raised us up with Him (Eph. 2:6)

God as Merciful...again (26-31)

“Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back...you gave them into the hands of their enemies...in time of suffering they cried out to you...you heard them...you gave them saviors...but after they had rest they did evil again before you...NEVERTHELESS, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.”

This is the cycle we see during the time of the Judges (and really beyond to the time of the Monarchy). There would be sin/rebellion, judgment, crying out, God delivering, the people forgetting, sinning again, and round and round the cycle went. This displayed God’s long suffering in that He bore with His people for many years, and puts into context His judgement. He would have been perfectly just to jettison His people for their continual sin, but He consistently brought them back. Even in the time we’ve been studying in Ezra and Nehemiah, God still brought His people back to the land He promised them. We are reminded that God continues to forgive our sin in Christ, since Jesus satisfied the payment for our sin through His death and resurrection, and advocates on our behalf to His Father (1 John 2:1-2)

A Plea for Mercy (32-37)

After acknowledging God and all of His attributes, the prayer turns to acknowledge the sinfulness of not only the past but the present.

You have been Faithful

“Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps His covenant and steadfast love, let not all the hardship seem little to you that has come upon us.” (32)

We bank our forgiveness on the unchanging character of God, the fact that He cannot lie and always keeps promises. This is the foundation for our cry out for mercy.

We have been Sinful

“Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully, and we have acted wickedly” (33)

Not only have the fathers of our past rebelled and been disobedient, the people had to confess their own sinfulness.

We feel the effects of Sin

“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” (36)

What God had given for our joy, because of our sin, we have felt the effects of our sin. Instead of reigning in the land, we are slaves. Even when we are forgiven, there will be consequences that we will invariably deal with.

Help us Change

“Because of all of this we make a firm covenant in writing” (38)

Because we have been forgiven, because God is faithful, because Christ’s sacrifice is so complete, we can now turn and obey, seeking to glorify God in all things.

Confession: from Wandering to Searching

So how do we practice this kind of confession that would lead to revival in our homes? How do we move from joyless wondering to joyful freedom? We “search” after God in His Word.

S eek

We seek God through His Word. We don’t read Scripture simply to feel better about ourselves, we seek to know, understand, see, and comprehend the depths, breadth, and width of all who God is. In order to be convicted of sin, we must see our lives in light of the Person of God. Do you know when I am NOT convicted? When I read the news, my Twitter feed, follow people’s lives on Face book, compare myself with others. I am convicted of my sin when God’s Word is huge in my thinking. I was convicted this week when I heard God’s Word preached and sung with clarity. This is why God’s Word was the agent of change for Israel, and for us

E xamine

Once we come to grips with the greatness of God, we can examine our heart. This means we not only examine our actions (complaining, lying, pornography, etc), but those sanitized sins, the “acceptable” sins like gossip, pride, selfishness, and idolatry. I can freely examine whether I have turned good things into ultimate things, whether there is anything in my life (work, TV, social media, spending) that has taken the place of God. This is the work of confession, where honesty meets transcendence, where God digs out our deepest idols, even those that seem so respectable.

A cknowledge

Once I’ve examined, I must acknowledge my own sinfulness, not excusing or explaining away, simply admitting without caveat my sinfulness.

R epent

Repentance is ultimately a work of God in my life (2 Tim. 2:25), a work that He changes my mind, my heart/desire, and my actions. Repentance is an act of faith that turns from sin and replaces it with righteousness.

C onfess

We gladly confess our sins because He (Christ) is faithful and just to forgive our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9). This is where none of us here should ASSUME they are saved, assume that they are right with God, if confession of sin is not a normative or desired action.

H umble

Lastly, we humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt us, casting all our anxieties on Him, because He cares for us (1 Peter 5:6-7). It takes humility to admit we are wrong, that we have offended and committed treason against God and that He would be just to judge us. Humility demands that we are willing to come clean, to open up our lives so that the sweet freedom of forgiveness and newness can take hold.

Is this how we worship? Is this part of our devotion to the Lord? When was the last time you have been convicted of your sin? Have you known the freedom of confessing even the darkest of sin in the deepest pocket of your heart? There will be no revival until we come to grips with the God of the Word, which will lead to conviction and consciousness of sin, which in turn allows us to confess, turn, and replace that sin with righteousness.