

16.11.2019 OUR FORGIVING GOD

***“He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy.”
Proverbs 28:13***

In Nehemiah 8 we saw the relationship between Law and Grace. The reading of the Law revealed to the Israelites their sin and led them to the godly sorrow of repentance. Immediately Nehemiah told them to rejoice, since they were to celebrate 3 festivals that month that pointed to Christ, the Messiah who would deliver them from their sins. They were to rejoice in God's grace and let that same grace develop character in their lives. They eat the fat and drink the sweet themselves and send portions to others.

Nehemiah 8 is relevant to us today. As individuals and as a people we have often fallen short of God's will for us. The Word of God reveals to us our sin and our utter helplessness to produce righteousness. As with sincere hearts we repent of our attitudes to God, we are reminded that Christ is the answer to our unrighteousness. His grace (love) has redeemed and purified us and will sanctify us as we live in a faith relationship with Him. Every Sabbath day is a celebration of His grace and our release from the captivity of sin. “We are to *remember* our condition as sinners, but we are to *enjoy* our condition as saved.” (Ephesians 2:1-18)

For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. John 1:17

For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. Romans 8:3, 4

Our study this week is Nehemiah 9. Here is the next step. The people confess their failures in the past (despite God's faithfulness to them) and their weakness in the present.

Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads. Then those of Israelite lineage separated themselves from all foreigners; and they 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 one-fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God. Nehemiah 9:1-3

‘Having exalted the Lord in the feast of Tabernacles, the people realize the inconsistency of maintaining associations unsuited to the Lord. Hence the feast is immediately followed by "separation" and "confession." "The seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers and stood and confessed their sins". It is still incumbent upon all who name the Name of the Lord to depart from iniquity. But separation, if true, demands confession; for the fact that we have to separate at all, is the proof that we have been in wrong associations, and this wrong calls for confession. Then again confession without separation would be unreal, for how can we continue in the evil that we confess. Hence true separation and honest confession will ever be found together.’
H. Smith

Furthermore, because the foreigners didn't have a share in the corporate sin of the people of Israel, the Israelites separated themselves from them, as the Hebrews knew that it was their sins that needed to be forgiven. They acknowledged the sins of their nation, which had led them into exile.

Nehemiah 9:4-8: The Beginning of the Prayer – Praise

“Stand up and bless the Lord your God forever and ever! Blessed be Your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise! You alone are the Lord; You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and everything on it, the seas and all that is in them, and You preserve them all. The host of heaven worships You.”

The people begin with a seven-fold doxology of praise. God is worthy of praise because He is our Creator and Sustainer... ‘*You preserve them all*. He is eternal and unchanging. He is the Sovereign God who chooses as

He wills and He is the Giver of unconditional promises to those whom He chooses. He is the faithful God. He manifests His grace and power on behalf of His people.

So, even as the people confess their unfaithfulness, they begin with praise, because their only hope is in the faithful God who loves them despite their unfaithfulness and disobedience.

Nehemiah 9:9-31 Confession

Now the people review their history and the failures of the past and the present. All true intercession and confession comes from a true understanding of sin – that *'there is none righteous, no, not one'* and that *'we have all gone astray and we have turned everyone of us, to our own way'*. We will not seek to blame others; our parents, our forefathers, our peers. Like all great prayers of confession and intercession (Moses, Daniel, Nehemiah, Ezra) we recognise that we are part of the problem and our prayers become both individual and corporate prayers of confession.

The Jews confess their utter failure of faithfulness to God. They find no good thing to say of themselves. They review their history in the wilderness (16-21); in the Land (22-27); and in captivity to their enemies (28-31). Their failure increased with the passing of time, expressing itself in different forms of evil. But one failure was common to every position – their constant disobedience to the word of God. In the wilderness they disobeyed Jehovah's commandments, and refused to obey. In the Land they were disobedient and cast Jehovah's law behind their backs. In bondage to their enemies they sinned against His ordinances.

In the Land their disobedience occurred in the context of prosperity... *And they took strong cities and a rich land, and possessed houses full of all goods, cisterns already dug, vineyards, olive groves, and fruit trees in abundance. So they ate and were filled and grew fat, and delighted themselves in Your great goodness. Nevertheless they were disobedient and rebelled against You (9:25, 26).*

Through Ezekiel God declared the sin of Judah... *"Look, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: She and her daughter had pride, fullness of food, and abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. ⁵And they were haughty and committed abomination before Me... You who judged your sisters, bear your own shame also, because the sins which you committed were more abominable than theirs; they are more righteous than you."* Ezekiel 16:49, 50, 52

In the Land they also compounded their wickedness. They cast God's law behind their backs and killed His prophets, who testified against them (9:27).

Centuries later, Jesus would say to their children, *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!"* Matthew 23:37

Nehemiah 9:32-38 – Praise, Acknowledgment of God's Justice and Petition

"Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and awesome God, who keeps covenant and mercy: do not let all the trouble seem small before You that has come upon us...from the days of the kings of Assyria until this day. However You are just in all that has befallen us; for You have dealt faithfully, but we have done wickedly... "Here we are, servants today! And the land that You gave to our fathers, to eat its fruit and its bounty, here we are, servants in it! ...And we are in great distress." (9:32-27)

in spite of all the failure of the people they recognise that God did not "utterly consume them, nor forsake them." And hence they rightly conclude that God is "a gracious and merciful God". Thus it is they appeal to the mercy of God. Linking up their present sorrowful condition with the past failure, they say, "Let not all the trouble seem little before Thee". But while appealing to the mercy of God they recognise the righteous government of God. "However," they say, "You art just in all that is brought upon us; for You have done right, but we have done wickedly". And all their wickedness they trace back to disobedience to the Word. They had not kept the law: they had not served Jehovah, but followed their own wills in "wicked works"; and as a result they were in "great distress".

The people recognise that they are totally undeserving of God's grace and favour. But they know through their experience that God is the faithful God and is merciful. By faith, they lay hold of Him and ask Him to accept their confession, bless them and turn their mourning into joy.

Conclusion

Our God is a God of grace. He knows that of ourselves we can never rid ourselves of sin and sinfulness. So He is merciful to the unrighteous and justifies (declares righteous) the ungodly.

*For when we were still without strength, in due time **Christ died for the ungodly**. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. **But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.** Romans 5:6-8*

I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and You forgave the iniquity of my sin. For this cause everyone who is godly shall pray to You in a time when You may be found...Psalm 32:5, 6

Seek ye the LORD while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. Isaiah 55:6, 7

'Shall we not regard the mercy of God? What more could He do? Let us place ourselves in right relation to Him who has loved us with amazing love. Let us avail ourselves of the means provided for us that we may be transformed into His likeness, and be restored to fellowship with the ministering angels, to harmony and communion with the Father and the Son.' *Steps to Christ p. 22*
