

Sermon – 05/04/2009 pm

Confessing Sin

Study Text: Nehemiah 9:26-31

God is gracious. God is good. God not only delivered his people out of bondage but brought them into their own land. He gave them an abundance of good things. They enjoyed prosperity. And they lived happily ever after? Is this what happened? Did they walk in obedience to the commands of God?

This whole prayer is one of confession. But in the first half the emphasis is on confessing God's character and his works, his greatness and his grace. The sense is that of acknowledging God and worshipping him. The sin of the people during the Exodus and afterwards is the focus of this second part of the prayer. The people rebelled against God repeatedly but God continued to meet their rebellion with grace and restoration.

Confessing Sin

Nevertheless they were disobedient and rebelled against you (9:26). The history of God's people is not a happy one. Ezra had led the people in reading this history. In this second part of the Levites prayer they remembered how their ancestors lived after God gave them the land in all its bounty. Despite this wonderful blessing of God they rebelled against him again and again.

As a loving father disciplines his children so God gave his people into the hands of their enemies. He also sent drought and famine on the land. He allowed them to suffer, but when they cried out for mercy he raised up judges to deliver them from their enemies; people like Deborah, Gideon and Samson (Judges 2:18).

But after they had rest they again did evil before you ... and many times you delivered them according to your mercies (9:28). They did evil by breaking the covenant God made with them through Moses. They became proud and refused to read or hear God's word. They refused to listen to the prophets God sent to warn them. The Book of the Law was pushed onto the back shelf. It gathered dust in the storeroom. Prophets like Jeremiah were beaten and thrown into a dungeon and left to die. God gave them yet again into the hands of their enemy, this time Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. This time they were all deported and their city razed.

Before the destruction of Jerusalem many starved to death. Nebuchadnezzar killed many more. But some were carried off as prisoners to Babylon where they would remain for 70 years, just as Jeremiah said. They suffered this punishment because their hearts were hardened by sin. They refused to heed God's warnings and continued to break his holy covenant.

Every human being is born in sin. The Bible teaches the doctrine of original sin. The power of sin is seen in the history of God's people in the Bible. We do not have to look at the history of the world with its wars and violence, murder and strife, injustice and immorality.

Sin takes a powerful grip on our hearts, a grip that we are not able to escape. That is the lesson of human history from Adam to Adolf Hitler, and to us all today.

Continuing Grace

There is no suggestion whatsoever in this prayer that God was not justified in what he did through Nebuchadnezzar. There is no blaming of God for what happened. God would have been completely justified in wiping these people off the face of the earth. *You did not utterly consume them nor forsake them* the Levites prayed (9:31). Why?

Why did God not destroy them? Because of his great mercy. *You are God, gracious and merciful* (9: 31). God revealed himself to Moses in this way after the rebellion and provocation of the golden calf (Exodus 34:6). The Levites read this account in the Book and noted it earlier in this prayer (9:17b). They realized that it was an unchanging attribute of God. God of course, is unchanging in all his attributes. They saw his grace and mercy in the preservation of a remnant in exile, and in the return of this remnant to Jerusalem.

God continues to be gracious towards his chosen people, and his wrath continues to be upon his enemies – like it was upon Pharaoh. Indeed, he has revealed his grace not only by words spoken to Moses but by the living Word sent down from heaven. *The law was given through Moses but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ* (John 1:17). God's grace has been fully and finally revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord.

This prayer of the Levites was prayed over 400 years before this revelation in Jesus Christ so there is no direct reference to Jesus, or the cross and the resurrection. But when we pray we will make reference to this great and wonderful truth. *We have seen his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth* (John 1:14). Indeed we call this to mind when we close every prayer as we should, calling upon the name of Jesus Christ.

Call for Deliverance

The people called upon Ezra to read the Book of the law of God on the first day of the seventh month. They heard it read all during the feast. They heard it read for three hours on this particular day – the 24th day of the month. By this time they knew a lot about God, about his nature and his works. As the Levites led in prayer the people understood what was being said.

Now therefore (9:32). In this verse the prayer comes to its climax – or rather to the supplication, the humble request for God to do something. The history of God's dealing with his people came down them in the here and now. The prayer could have started at this point as many do. 'Now therefore look upon us in your mercy O Lord'. But from looking at the history they learned that God is great and awesome and that he keeps covenant and mercy.

God's greatness can of course be seen in the creation, but his grace can only be understood from his word. Many people fail to understand God's grace because they do not read the Bible. God's grace, revealed in his forgiveness of sin, is part and parcel of his justice and ultimate judgment upon sin. *In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and gave his Son to be the propitiation for our sin* (I John 4:10). 'Propitiation' comes for the word for 'mercy seat', the place on the Ark of the Covenant where blood was sprinkled in atonement for sin. Without the shedding of blood there is not forgiveness.

Do not let our hardship seem small before you (9:32). Before making their request they again confess their own sin before God. *We have done wickedly* they said, identifying with their forefathers and also acknowledging their own sin in failing to obey God's law (9:33). They had all wept before the Lord a few weeks earlier. They had acknowledged that the hardship they were facing was completely justified as punishment for their sin. They cried out to God *we are in great distress (9:37).*

What was their distress? The city wall was rebuilt and they were rejoicing as they worshipped God. But they were still under Persian rule. They had to pay taxes to the Persians. They were not living freely in their own land, the land God gave their forefathers. Some scholars question whether Nehemiah or Ezra would have sanctioned this request for freedom from Persian rule. But the request was not about rebellion, nor a complaint of injustice. It was just that God had promised this land to the Jews as their own possession.

God gave this land to them but they had not been faithful to his covenant so he threw them out of the land. But they knew that God's promise remained. They pleaded for God to restore the land to his people. It was their God-given inheritance.

What requests do you bring before the Lord? Do you pray about your inheritance? 'We are in great distress' they prayed because they were living as servants in the land God gave their forefathers as their possession. Is your inheritance here on earth? Are most of your prayers about things of this world – your health, your job, your family, your finances?

Jesus rebuked the man who asked him to settle a dispute he was having with his brother about their inheritance. Few things provoke more quarrelling than family disputes about inheritance. But as a child of God your inheritance is in heaven. Your inheritance is in Jesus Christ who is in heaven. *Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness* said Jesus (Matthew 6:33). God in his mercy, and through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, has given us an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade, an inheritance kept in heaven for you.

Do you remember this inheritance when you pray? Do you pray 'your kingdom come, your will be done'. It is the kingdom of Jesus Christ, not the land of Palestine or any other place or thing on this earth that should be the focus of your prayers.

The prayer closes with the leaders and the Levites making a vow or covenant to the Lord. The contents of this covenant are detailed in the next chapter. We must be careful about making vows but sometimes it is a proper to bind ourselves with a solemn promise to the Lord as we plead with him in prayer (Acts 18:18).

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