



It's All Grace

Gregg Caruso // Nehemiah 9

I. INTRO

A. Today we will be looking at Nehemiah 9. Let's take a few moments to consider what's been going on that brings us to this point...

1. The Jewish people have endured about 150 years of chaos and devastation that included the destruction of Jerusalem, 70-years of captivity,
2. Oppression and objectification of every kind, and at times, even by their own people.
3. The Jewish people had become a laughingstock. Other nations and peoples were asking what appears to be a legitimate question: "If your God is so great, where is he?"
4. And to make matters even worse, we saw back in chap 5 that Nehemiah had to chastise his own people for loansharking one another and forcing the poorest of the poor into (what amounts to) second and third mortgages, having to sell off their children into debt slavery and even sexual exploitation.

B. This is a big ugly mess! The chosen people of God had been brought to lowest point (probably) in their existence. Or, as one of my mentors used to say, "They were looking up from underneath a rock." (Recovery Movement?)

C. Today we will see the culmination of all the prayer, instruction, and work that Ezra (the Priest) and Nehemiah (the Governor) have poured into the Jewish people.

1. It is commonly believed that Ezra had arrived back in Jerusalem about 13-years prior to Nehemiah, trying to reestablish the OT patterns of worship.)
2. In chapter 6 we saw the completion of the wall in just 52-days causing the enemies of the Jewish people to lose their confidence (6:16). No

doubt, this was also a major boost to the physical, spiritual, and political confidence of the Jewish people. (Neh's polling numbers were probably quite high.)

3. In chapter 7 we see Nehemiah setting up some good governmental systems and structures that included recording genealogies (or public records) as well as implementing appropriate taxation.
4. In chapter 8 we see the Jewish people feeling safe and secure enough to begin to regather in a congregational setting. For all the years Ezra had been back in Jerusalem, his passion was to teach the people God's word.
 - a. Neh 8:2 is an insightful v. – *“all...could listen with understanding.”* (Think about when you're feeling weighed down by various concerns and how difficult it is to concentrate on studying the Bible with any depth.) But here in chapter 8 the people's burdens were lifted enough to want to understand the Scriptures. So, Ezra would read a portion of the Scriptures and then the other Levites would go out among the people to explain it. Which is hopefully what happens in our Community Groups and Bible Studies.
 - b. We also see in Neh 8 some excellent vision casting. When the people heard the word of God with renewed attentiveness and understanding, they began to mourn and weep. (I think it's worth mentioning here that there are at least two reasons to mourn and weep – one is when we feel convicted by our actions, the other is when we see the beauty and glory of God and the gospel.) Ezra and Nehemiah apparently discerned that the people had mourned and wept enough, and they told them to go and party. (There was also the admonishment to remember the poor—v. 10).
 - c. This is the context for what may be the most often quoted verse from the whole book of Nehemiah, the end of v. 10—*“Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”* Don't get stuck in grief but let your grief carry you to a loving, compassionate, and sovereign God.
 - d. **What's our lesson here?** Reading God's word, with understanding, will lead to joy and rejoicing. In our context this is primarily the responsibility of our preaching team. It's a huge responsibility that we don't take lightly. (My observation is that, in many churches,

sermons are not doctrinal but devotional, which leads to an experiential theology and not a biblical theology.)

- e. Another lesson for us, perhaps, is that now is the time for us as a community of believers to get excited about regathering after a year of very limited gathering (“get to,” not “have to.”)
- D. Okay, all of that brings us to Neh 9, where we begin to see legit spiritual renewal take place. What we will see here in Neh 9:5b-37 is the longest recorded prayer in the Bible, which will take the people back to Genesis 1 and trace the history of God’s enduring mercy and our propensity to consistently and continually turn aside to follow our own selfish desires.
- E. Not much has changed. Here is how Paul describes humanity in Rom 3:10-12: *“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become useless; no one does good, not even one”* --Romans 3:10–12, quoting from Psalm 14
1. This is a hard-hitting verse, right? It’s certainly offensive to most people who are not Bible believing Christians.
 2. And I don’t know about you, but I get a little defensive when I read this verse too. I just don’t like being identified as “useless.”¹ (You?)
 3. Here’s how Eugene Peterson said it in his paraphrase, The Message: *“There’s nobody living right, not even one, nobody who knows the score, nobody alert for God.”* (I hope you see what Peterson did...no one is living right)
 4. So, here’s what Paul is trying to say (which will help us to better comprehend the prayer in Neh 9), no one can achieve complete and utter righteous living in their own strength and willpower; every person on the planet – past, present, and future **is** (or **will be**) unrighteous at some level. No one is completely tuned into God. And the vast majority of people, Christian or not, would agree with this.
 5. And of course, when we **see this** and **own this**, the seed of the gospel can be planted in fertile soil and we will begin to see why Jesus needed to come down from the perfection of heaven into our brokenness to live a **completely righteous life** and be **fully alert** to His father in heaven. Because no completely human person is capable of this.

¹ Other translations have employed words like worthless, unprofitable, corrupt, gone wrong.

6. And this helps us to see how Nehemiah points us to Jesus in that he came out of the opulence of the palace and into the brokenness of God's people to restore peace and with Ezra's help, bring about spiritual renewal through the correct comprehension of God's word.
- F. Sometimes I find it helpful to place concepts into an equation. Here's an equation that should help us to see where we're headed today: Our propensity to SIN + God's Mercy = Covenant Grace.
- G. With all that said, I will read chap 9 (I'll make a few comments along the way because we won't be able to address everything that's said) and then pray...
"Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt upon them. The descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. While they stood in their place, they read from the book of the law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day [3-4 hrs]; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God [Good Fri Service]...⁴Then the Levites stood on the platform and read... [a prayer of declaration and remembrance of God's mercy...]

'Arise, bless the LORD your God forever and ever! O may Your glorious name be blessed And exalted above all blessing and praise! 'You alone are the LORD. You have made the heavens, The heaven of heavens with all their host, The earth and all that is on it, The seas and all that is in them. You give life to all of them And the heavenly host bows down before You [recalling creation—and then recalling their history]. 'You are the LORD God, Who chose Abram And brought him out from Ur of the Chaldees, And gave him the name Abraham. ⁸'You found his heart faithful before You [not utterly and completely faithful—(Rom 4:3 tells us he believed God and it was reckoned unto him as righteousness), And made a covenant with him To give him the land of the Canaanite, Of the Hittite and the Amorite, Of the Perizzite, the Jebusite and the Girgashite—To give it to his descendants. And You [God] have fulfilled Your promise, For You are righteous. 'You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt And heard their cry by the Red Sea. 'Then You performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh, Against all his servants and all the people of his land; For You knew that they acted arrogantly toward them, And made a name for Yourself as it is this day. 'You divided the sea before them, So, they passed through the midst of the sea on dry ground; And their pursuers You hurled into the depths, Like a stone into raging waters. 'And with a pillar of cloud You led them by day, And with a pillar of fire by night To light for them the way In which they were to go. [Ezra is recalling God's faithfulness] Then You came

down on Mount Sinai And spoke with them from heaven; You gave them just ordinances and true laws, Good statutes and commandments. ‘So You made known to them Your holy sabbath, And laid down for them commandments, statutes and law, Through Your servant Moses. ‘You provided bread from heaven for them for their hunger, You brought forth water from a rock for them for their thirst, And You told them to enter in order to possess The land which You swore to give them. [Now begins confession] ‘But they, our fathers, acted arrogantly; They became stubborn and would not listen to Your commandments. ‘They refused to listen, And did not remember Your wondrous deeds which You had performed among them; So they became stubborn and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. But You are a God of forgiveness, Gracious and compassionate, Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness [hesed]; And You did not forsake them. ‘Even when they made for themselves A calf of molten metal And said, ‘This is your God Who brought you up from Egypt,’ And committed great blasphemies, You, in Your great compassion, Did not forsake them in the wilderness; The pillar of cloud did not leave them by day, To guide them on their way, Nor the pillar of fire by night, to light for them the way in which they were to go. ‘You gave Your good Spirit to instruct them, Your manna You did not withhold from their mouth, And You gave them water for their thirst. ‘Indeed, forty years You provided for them in the wilderness, and they were not in want; Their clothes did not wear out, nor did their feet swell. ‘You also gave them kingdoms and peoples, And allotted them to them as a boundary [corner]. They took possession of the land of Sihon the king of Heshbon And the land of Og the king of Bashan. ‘You made their sons numerous as the stars of heaven, And You brought them into the land Which You had told their fathers to enter and possess. ‘So their sons entered and possessed the land. And You subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, And You gave them into their hand, with their kings and the peoples of the land, To do with them as they desired. ‘They captured fortified cities and a fertile land. They took possession of houses full of every good thing, Hewn cisterns, vineyards, olive groves, Fruit trees in abundance. So, they ate, were filled and grew fat, And reveled in Your great goodness. ‘But they became disobedient and rebelled against You, And cast Your law behind their backs And killed Your prophets who had admonished them So that they might return to You, And they committed great blasphemies. ‘Therefore, You delivered them into the hand of their oppressors who oppressed them, But when they cried to You in the time of their distress, You heard from heaven, and according to Your great compassion You gave them deliverers who delivered them from the hand of

their oppressors. ‘But as soon as they had rest, they did evil again before You; Therefore, You abandoned them to the hand of their enemies, so that they ruled over them. When they cried again to You, You heard from heaven, And many times You rescued them according to Your compassion, And admonished them in order to turn them back to Your law. Yet they acted arrogantly and did not listen to Your commandments but sinned against Your ordinances, By which if a man observes them he shall live. And they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck, and would not listen. ‘However, You bore with them for many years, And admonished them by Your Spirit through Your prophets, Yet they would not give ear. Therefore, You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. ‘Nevertheless, in Your great compassion You did not make an end of them or forsake them, For You are a gracious and compassionate God. ‘Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and lovingkindness, Do not let all the hardship seem insignificant before You, Which has come upon us, our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers and on all Your people, From the days of the kings of Assyria to this day. ‘However, You are just in all that has come upon us; For You have dealt faithfully, but we have acted wickedly. ‘For our kings, our leaders, our priests and our fathers have not kept Your law Or, paid attention to Your commandments and Your admonitions with which You have admonished them. ‘But they, in their own kingdom, With Your great goodness which You gave them, With the broad and rich land which You set before them, Did not serve You or turn from their evil deeds. ‘Behold, we are slaves today, And as to the land which You gave to our fathers to eat of its fruit and its bounty, Behold, we are slaves in it. ‘Its abundant produce is for the kings Whom You have set over us because of our sins; They also rule over our bodies And over our cattle as they please, So, we are in great distress. ‘Now because of all this We are making an agreement in writing; And on the sealed document are the names of our leaders, our Levites and our priests.” [pray]

II. BODY

- A. If you hear nothing else today, I want you to hear this—after reading or listening to this prayer, I want you to know, beyond a shadow of doubt, that there is nothing that you have ever done that places you out of reach of God’s saving grace and care.
- B. Given all that we have covered so far, I would like to draw your attention to three points that are addressed in Neh 9 that I think are essential for our own

growth and development—as well as our ability to share about the goodness of God in this current cultural moment.

1. Review what is meant by the need to separate ourselves from “*all foreigners*” as seen in Neh 9:2.
2. Review what is meant by God’s *lovingkindness*.
3. Review the difference between MERCY and GRACE. (Which will lead us into celebrating the Lord’s Supper together.)

C. So, let’s consider these one at a time...

1. Review what is meant by the need to separate ourselves from “*all foreigners*” as seen in Neh 9:2.
 - a. When the Bible instructs God’s people to separate ourselves, what does that mean? It pains me to say this in 2021 but if someone were to read Neh 9:2 with racist predilections, they might project this into our current culture context and maintain that races should not mix or intermarry—and that interpretation would be completely false.
 - b. This, and other verses like it, were used by pro-slavery and then Jim Crow Americans to keep races separate.
 - c. We see the NT equivalent of this admonition in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians (which was pretty appropriate instruction for the Corinthian Church, their Christianity didn’t look too different from the secular culture that surrounded them):
 - 1) 2 Cor 6:14-15: “*Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness...what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?*”
 - 2) 2 Cor 7:17 (which is a quote from Is 52): “*Therefore, COME OUT FROM THEIR MIDST AND BE SEPARATE,*” says the Lord.”
 - d. These passages in both the Old and New Testaments are NOT about keeping the races separate—or about the Church not engaging the surrounding culture²; these passages are about focus and intention.
 - e. To be a full-fledged member of a church, or to be in a God-honoring marriage (for that matter), we need to agree on THE primary

² Which was the main failure of the Fundamentalist Movement that began in the 1930’s.

objective of the relationship, which would be a mutual commitment (or covenant) to put God first at all times.

- f. Be with people, do life with people, who are actively endeavoring to put God first in everything. And yes, have growing friendships with unchurched unbelievers—without trying to pretend you have it all together. (When you blow it, own it.)”
2. Review what is meant by God’s *lovingkindness*.
 - a. Hopefully most of you will remember our study in the book of Ruth back in the Fall of 2019...
 - b. The word lovingkindness is not used much in our current cultural context, but it is one of the beautiful and impact words of the whole OT.
 - c. The Hebrew word, used in Neh 9:17, 32, is *hesed* and means the consistent, ever-faithful, relentless, constantly-pursuing, lavish, extravagant, unrestrained, energetic love of our Father God.
 - d. Some you will have heard the phrase “hound of heaven,” which is actually the title of a 182-line poem written by the believing English poet Francis Thompson (1859–1907), which is about the pursuit of a sinner by a loving God. The poem became famous after his death and significantly influenced Christian authors, such as G. K. Chesterton, and J. R. R. Tolkien. You can find the Thompson’s poem on the internet.
 3. Review the difference between MERCY and GRACE. (Which will lead us into celebrating the Lord’s Supper together).
 - a. Let’s review the equation I mentioned earlier: Our propensity to SIN + God’s Mercy = Covenant Grace (what does this mean?)
 - b. This equation, hopefully, reminds us that there is a difference between MERCY and GRACE, so how we can distinguish between the two? While they are **overlapping** there are **distinct differences**, which are often confused in the Church as well as in our culture.
 - c. Mercy is obtaining or securing that which we don't deserve.
 - 1) There is the story of a mother who pushed her way into Napoleon’s presence to plead for the pardon of her son. The emperor told the mother that it was the man’s second offense,

and that justice demands his death. The mother replied, “I don’t ask for justice,” I plead for mercy.”

- 2) To which Napoleon replied, “But, he does not deserve mercy.” “Sir,” cried the mother, “it would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask.”
 - 3) “Well, then,” said Napoleon, “I will show mercy.” And her son was saved.
- d. Grace -- Because of God’s mercy we can open our hearts to Him and believe on the sacrifice of Christ and receive His saving grace.
- 1) Definition: All that God is, lavishly poured into you (see Eph 1:8, NIV).
 - 2) Jonathan Edwards speaks of grace as, “the very Holy Ghost dwelling in the soul and acting there as a vital principle.”³
 - 3) In the Church and in our culture, we have made grace too cheap. As we surrender, as we die to ourselves and come alive to Christ, only the grace of God can come into us to do in us and through us what we could never do on our own.
 - 4) (The late) Larry Crabb: “Only Christians have the capacity to never pretend, that’s because real change is only possible when we live from the inside out and face the realities of our internal life and let God mold us into a person who is free to be honest, courageous, and loving.” THAT is the work of grace.
 - 5) And here’s a bonus Crabb quote: The church has lost its power because it loves so poorly. (*Inside Out*: 107)
- e. Comparisons:
- 1) GRACE is getting what we don’t deserve; MERCY: is NOT getting what we DO deserve.
 - 2) MERCY is God’s attitude toward us, and GRACE is God’s activity within us.
 - 3) MERCY forgives us and GRACE transforms us.

III. CONCLUSION/COMMUNION

³ Jonathan Edwards, *TREATISE ON GRACE*.

- A. So, as we conclude and move into a time of celebrating communion together, we attempt to define “Covenant Grace.” And with a name like, Community Covenant Church, we should be particularly interested.
- B. The essence of covenant grace is the same throughout the Old and New Testaments. God saves sin-addicted people by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone.
- C. “You contribute nothing to your salvation except the sin that made it necessary.” — Jonathan Edwards
- D. When speaking about God’s Covenant of Grace, we must view it in its historical framework.
 - 1. For example, the scope of god’s Covenant of Grace has expanded from the OT into the NT. If we go back to the inception of the initial covenant, it began with some small families (e.g., the families of Abram and Noah), and then into the nation of Israel...
 - 2. **But now** with the Church, God’s Covenant of Grace is made up of people *“from every tribe and language and people and nation,”* as we see in Rev. 5:9. So, again we see that the Bible tells just one story but it expands through the centuries and into the New Covenant, which is a covenant of Grace.
- E. As we move into our celebration of The Lord’s Supper this morning, I would like for us to ponder two things...
 - 1. Has the gospel of God’s covenant of grace, through the coming of the God’s kingdom, the sacrificial Cross of Christ, and the free and total work of grace saved you? (Remember, you contribute nothing to your salvation.)
 - 2. The great reformer Martin Luther rightly said that, as sinners, we are prone to pursue a relationship with God in one of two ways.
 - a. The first is religion/spirituality
 - b. The second is through the free and total work of the gospel. Luther said the two are antithetical (hostile) in every way.
- F. Let’s take our bread and the cup...

Reflection Questions for Personal and Community Group Study

1. Why do you think so many people believe their salvation is based on our good deeds outweighing sinful deeds?
2. What is the book of Nehemiah best known for?
3. What is the book of Nehemiah actually about (if you had to write a thesis statement)?
4. In what sense and to what degree should we confess the sins of our fathers (Neh. 9:2)? What does this mean?
5. One popular author argues that if we view ourselves as sinners, we will sin more. Why is he mistaken? Where is the right balance between seeing ourselves both as made righteous in Christ and yet “the chief of sinners” (see 1 Tim 1:5)?
6. Why does it matter that salvation is totally of God and not a joint endeavor between God and sinners?
7. Nehemiah 9 is the longest prayer in the Bible. What makes it a prayer rather than merely a retelling of Israel’s history? Why is this significant?
8. What can we learn about the nature of God from this passage? What can we learn about the nature of humankind?