



know, walls are good. But because of what they represent.

Protection, safety, rest for God's people. An invitation to join. But last week Josiah was helping us kind of turn the page. Nehemiah is not just concerned with the outside just like God.

He's concerned with what's going on in the heart. And he now turns to spiritual renewal. Building the walls strong in here. So, let's start looking at this together.

First of all, thinking about confession. Israel have just celebrated, haven't they? If you were here last week, you know that. They heard the word. They understood the word. It gave them great joy. They celebrated.

[ 5 : 14 ] Festival's over. A whole bunch of them stayed for two further days. If you remember, you were here last week. You would have heard that at the beginning of that festival, the people wept.

And the leader said to them at that point in time, this is not the right time for that weeping. This is a time of joy and celebration. So, there's unfinished business, isn't there?

And in these two chapters, we come to that unfinished business that made them weep before. Now, that conviction that they had done things wrong leads them not to celebrate but to confess.

What does it look like? Well, two things really to recognize. That God's people, first of all, take confession seriously. Look at chapter 9 and verse 1.

On the 24th day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads. Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners.

[ 6 : 13 ] They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors. They stood where they were and read from the book of the law of the Lord their God for a quarter of a day and spent another quarter in confession and in worshiping the Lord their God.

It's serious, isn't it? It's public. It's unmissable. It's in the way they dress. It's in their worship. They don't go to a confessional box.

Behind a closed door, God's people come together in public to say sorry. And it's corporate. They don't just confess their own individual sins. They confess the sins of their ancestors too, verse 2.

That sounds really weird to us, doesn't it? As people raised in a kind of an individualistic society. Sounds odd. Just want to be clear. God does not hold us responsible for the wrong things that another person has done.

That's not what this is about. But on the other hand, we all know that there are patterns which are wrong, unhelpful, sinful, that run in families, don't they?

[ 7 : 21 ] And run in communities. Anger, addiction, abuse, all of those things are not just individual things. And those things need to be confessed in order for their spiritual power over us to be broken.

We know what Adam's sin did to us, don't we? Just like we know what Jesus did for us. There is representative responsibility in the Bible.

We all know that we sin as we. Not just as me. Even if we disagree about how to fix that. Third thing you see here about it being serious is it takes time, doesn't it?

Quarter of a day, just reading God's word. Another quarter of a day, saying sorry to God. It's another six-hour special. And the kids are still in.

We're not going to do that this morning. On the other hand, this is not kind of a short, sorry God, let's move on. Now, that's how I tend to confess.

[ 8 : 26 ] That's not this, is it? The Israelites take the time to identify what has gone wrong and verbalize it. Externalize it. Now, we don't want to wallow in guilt as Christians, do we?

We don't want to replay endlessly in our minds all the things we've ever done wrong. That's just learning to hate ourselves. That's not healthy. That's actually wrong if God loves us.

Some people think if they feel bad enough about what they've done wrong, that will make God happy. You meet people like that, don't you?

If I make myself feel really miserable about this for a while, then my misery will pay my dues. And then I'll be okay with God. That's just another way of trying to earn God's approval, which we know we can't do.

That's not good. On the other hand, we don't want to be people who skate over our sin, do we? We don't want to hate ourselves, but we do want to hate our sin.

[ 9 : 31 ] And in order to do that, we have to see it. And we have to name it. And that takes time. Because we want to be grieved by the things that grieve God.

Things that damage us, damage other people and dishonor him. That's not unhealthy guilt. That's appropriate regret, isn't it? Because we want to feel like God feels about sin.

He's the single, happiest, most healthy, stable individual there is. If he feels like this about sin, we want to feel like that about sin. So confession is a way to spiritual health.

We need to confess. Secondly, though, confession happens through prayer. Notice that? If you read chapter 9 during the week, there's an enormous prayer.

Basically, the rest of the chapter is one long prayer from the leaders. Why? Well, prayer turns our focus from us onto God. And God's goodness.

[10:34] And it's in the light of God's goodness that we see ourselves truly. That we see our own failings. That's the rest of the chapter. When the leaders pray, what do they do? Well, first of all, they tell of God's grace.

Tells the story of God's grace to humanity. And it goes like this. If you read the chapter, you'll recognize this. God gave us life. Not something we don't or could have given ourselves.

God gives us life. He promises to do good to us. Not because we're super special, but because he is. He frees us from slavery, from death.

That's Israel out of Egypt, isn't it? He leads us through the wilderness of life. That's numbers and the pillar of fire. He gives us a home. That's Israel in the promised land.

He gives us things that we don't deserve, we haven't earned. That's grace, isn't it? That's the first part of the prayer. But the second theme of this prayer is God's people's rebellion.

[11:41] Their sin. Time and again, God's people get comfortable and they take God's blessings. They say, thank you very much. And then they forget. They disobey.

And they ignore God. And that really is the definition of sin. Here's something from Billy Graham. Sin is rebellion against God.

Simply put. And how do we get there? Here's Francis Schaeffer. In other words, not recognizing God's grace and mercy to us.

That is the beginning of rebellion. It would be great to be able to say that these days we're a massive improvement on Israel. The whole of humanity is not like that anymore.

I'm not sure it would be true. We have the story of Israel in the Old Testament because it is the story of humanity. But God didn't give them what they deserved.

[12:51] Did he? He gave them mercy. There's a story in this little commentary by Dale Ralph Davis.

When he's thinking about this chapter. It's a wonderful story. It's a story of a man called Bill Miller. You put yourself in Pennsylvania in 1940. You've just bought your first car. It's probably one of those American lowriders.

So you're feeling pretty good about yourself. But you've got to get it home. And it's snowing on the roads. That's fine because the roads are clear. So here's Bill Miller in his first car.

And he's driving it home. And he thinks, I'm going to see how fast this thing goes. 100. 110. 120. Careers out of control.

Ends up in a snowbank. Knocked unconscious. Passing motorist stops. Finds him. Takes him to hospital. Four days later he wakes up out of a coma.

[13:47] And he was told that a guy called Warren Felty. Had rescued him from the side of the road. And taken him to hospital. Four years after that. Bill Miller is the B-17 pilot in the Second World War.

And he's shot down over Germany. And along with a whole load of other prisoners of war. He's being frog marched 75 miles again. Through two feet of snow. And he can't hack it.

And he stumbles off the path and falls into a snowdrift. You know what happens if you fall asleep in a snowdrift. You die of hypothermia. But then suddenly there's someone next to him shaking him.

Getting him up. Kicking him. Slapping him in the face. Making him go on. And this person helps him go all the way to the prisoner of war camp. Who is it? Warren Felty.

The same guy who rescued him 4,000 miles away. Four years. Before. So he survives the war, Bill Miller.

[14:45] And he's back in the United States. But he's still in trouble. He's at a roadside cafe. And he's facing complete economic ruin. Because he hasn't got a distributor for the products that his business makes.

He doesn't know what to do about it. And there's another motorist who never stops at this restaurant. Decides to stop at the restaurant. Comes in. Meets Bill Miller. And within two hours they've signed a contract to distribute his products.

And he's saved from economic ruin. Who's the motorist? You already know, don't you? Warren Felty. Guys, this is God with us. We just keep getting into trouble.

All over the world. All over the place. And he steps in. And he rescues us. Time and time again. He's so good.

Isn't he? He's so patient. And he just puts our failings in an even worse light. But you know what? It also makes it safe. It makes it safe to come back to God and say sorry.

[ 15 : 46 ] It makes it safe to confess. It's easy enough to admit we make mistakes, isn't it? These days you'd have to find somebody very arrogant.

For them not to be willing to admit they ever make any mistakes. That's not difficult. In fact, it's even doable to admit specific mistakes sometimes, isn't it? Yeah, I got that one wrong. What's really hard, friends, is to admit not that we got something wrong, but that God was right.

Because that means we have to do business with him. Doesn't it? Maybe that's you.

You've come this morning with unfinished business. Within the rebuilt walls of God's house, it is safe to confess. It is safe to say sorry.

If you think you've got nothing to say sorry for, then I think that you either haven't understood just how gracious God is, or you haven't understood how deeply rebellious our hearts are.

[ 16 : 55 ] You see, and if we're his children, and we get it wrong, and we don't say sorry to the Father who loves us, then our relationship with him will not deepen.

It will become more distant. So in our church, we want to confess, don't we, to the Lord God? We'll spend time reminding ourselves of God's goodness and grace and his rescue of us.

We will spend time searching out and naming our sins before him. We're just going to stop and do that right now. Just take a moment. Search your heart. Remind yourself of God's grace and goodness.

And then I'll pray for us. Amen. Lord, we recognize you are great.

God's grace and goodness and grace to us. From the first breath that we drew, Lord, through everything good that you have given us, through the promises that you've made, through the Lord Jesus, that you are willing to shed your own blood for us, to make us yours, to offer us free forgiveness.

[ 18 : 33 ] Lord, we are so sorry. Lord, we are so sorry. We are so sorry for ignoring you, for taking your blessings and rejecting you, for not acknowledging that you are right.

please, please, will you forgive us. Please, forgive us as your people, when we've got it wrong, as a church.

Please, forgive us as individuals, when we haven't acknowledged that you are God. Please, forgive us as a country, when we have gone the wrong way. Please, please have mercy on our world, where people do not love like Jesus loved, with his power and his grace.

Lord, will you have mercy on us. We thank you so much for the words of John Newton, who said, yes, I am a great sinner, but he is a great saviour.

Amen. So we need to confess. It's cathartic when we say sorry, isn't it? We know we're doing something good.

[ 19 : 50 ] And right. I feel so relieved. Just get that off my chest. Get that thing out of my closet. But the point is actually, not just to feel cleaner, is it?

If you had a shower, you're not going to go straight out and jump in a puddle. What we see next, in Nehemiah chapter 10, is that real confession leads to change.

Here's a fantastic thing that St. Augustine said he knew all about confession and commitment. The confession of evil works is the first beginning of good works.

See, real confession leads to real change. In fact, Jesus says as much, doesn't he? He says, if anyone listens to my words and goes and does them, then he's building on a rock.

Anybody hears my words, goes, forgets them. Well, that's just building on sand. We need to confess. Get clean, but then go out and try and live clean as well, don't we?

[ 20 : 54 ] So having poured out their regret and their repentance before God, Israel come together and they make some changes. We're looking at the beginning, end of chapter 9 really, verse 38, and the beginning of chapter 10, which was read for us.

Verse 38, in view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites, and our priests are affixing their seals to us. What does this change look like? Well, two things. It's a covenant commitment. We need to see that. And it's a specific commitment. First of all, it's a covenant commitment.

Verse 38, we just read it, it's a binding agreement. They don't just say, I'm sorry, and sort of, you know, I'll do my best to change. That's it. They write it, they sign it, they seal it.

Not just the leaders, actually, because the second part that we read names all the ordinary people as well. They all do it. They make a promise. They say, I am going to be different.

[ 22 : 00 ] And they make a promise and they think about the consequences of breaking that promise. That's the oath and the curse that was being read about. In fact, if you're holding a Bible right now, in some form or other, then chapter 10 is a copy of the covenant agreement that Israel made with God.

They're not messing around. Like us, they are covenant people. They are living in the light of a holy agreement that they have made with God.

God's promise is what that rests on. It's a covenant commitment. But secondly, it's specific. Think particularly about verses 29 to 39.

They promise to keep God's ways. They promise to live in God's rest. They promise to give to God's work. Not just generally, but specifically, if you read those verses.

They say, that's what we're going to do. This is what it will look like and this is how we're going to do it. Do we make that kind of specific commitment when we recognize that something has gone wrong in the past?

[ 23 : 12 ] Spiritual renewal does not happen when we make vague resolutions. We need to commit. We're just going to take a moment to look at the specifics of the commitments that God's people make.

Here they are. Just take a moment to just read those things. Reflect on them and ask yourself, which of these things may God be speaking to me about?

Thank you.

Thank you.

Should we love him and commit to him more than Israel or less? What about the words that the Israelites use here?

[ 24 : 58 ] We promise. We assume responsibility. We will not neglect. It puts us to shame, doesn't it?

God is gracious and we are sinners so we need to confess and commit. Jesus invites us to do exactly that but he uses different words.

He says repent, believe and be baptized. And we said it's safe to do that within the rebuilt walls for these Israelites. If it's safe for them it's even safer for us in the Lord Jesus because if Jesus went to the cross carrying those sins to pay for those sins, to do away with those sins so we could be forgiven for those sins, then we're safe to confess those sins, aren't we?

We don't need Ezra the priest. We don't need Nehemiah. You don't need the pastor. You need Jesus the high priest as we heard earlier in the service.

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence because we approach in Jesus' name. God bless you. It's safe. It's safe to say sorry, to tell God what we have done wrong.

[ 26 : 18 ] And without that kind of prayerful confession, friends, there will be no heart change. You might be able to change your habits but your heart will not be new.

Unless we acknowledge not only that we've done stuff wrong but that God was right, then we won't be safe. Because real confession isn't therapy for the old heart.

It's coming to God again so that he can give us a new heart and growing that new heart. We might make a commitment but only in Jesus will our commitment stick.

Why? Because it depends on what he has done for us, on his power and his promise, not on our stickability. And far beyond what Nehemiah could see, only in Jesus Christ can the consequences of the things that we confess and regret be undone.

Because Jesus promises to make all things new. So for us today, confess and commit becomes instead.

[ 27 : 26 ] Confess and commit in Christ. Have you done that? And have you made that sign of outward commitment as baptism?

Maybe you have no words. You know what's going on in your heart. You know that you need to confess and commit but you have no words. Here's another story that Dale Ralph Davis tells. It's a man called Ian McDermott who was an elder at the first church that he served at.

Huge guy. It wasn't just an elder though. It was a source of treasure. Because everybody knew that his pockets were always loaded with sweets on a Sunday.

So you could come on a Sunday, especially if you were a child I think. And you could hold out your hand. And Mr. McD would give you sweets. One week there was a little four-year-old boy.

[ 28 : 26 ] Sort of this high. And he went up to Mr. McD who stood towering over him. Didn't say a word. You know what Mr. McD didn't ask, have you been a good boy this week?

The little boy just held out his hand. To receive. To receive. We can do that, can't we?

Come and stand in front of God. Huge in his holiness. And his goodness. With no words. He won't ask you whether you've been a good boy this week.

Hold out your hand. Receive treasure from him. Maybe for you it's been a gentle drift away. You look up and suddenly you're ten miles out to sea away from God.

Maybe you've become tired. Of doing good. Maybe you got to a point where you said, you know what? I'm just not going to care too much.

[ 29 : 29 ] Because it's too hard. And it costs too much. Or maybe you're naturally sceptical. You just hold everything at arm's length. Including Jesus.

Maybe you've never committed. And you know you need to. We're going to take a moment. I'm going to encourage you. To commit to the Lord Jesus.

I'm going to pray. And if you want to make that prayer yours. Then please say amen. It doesn't have to be out loud. That's fine. In your heart.

It's okay. Let's take a moment. Lord, you've spoken to me through your word today.

And recently I have not listened. I'm listening now. I'm sorry. Thank you that you love me and forgive me in Jesus.

[ 30 : 37 ] I am yours. Amen. Amen. If you've made a commitment. I'd encourage you to follow up on that commitment. By sharing it with someone.

It doesn't have to be me. Although you're welcome to come and speak to me. Maybe you've identified something in the course of today. That actually is stopping you. From committing. From being baptised.

Or whatever that looks like. Maybe you just want some prayer or some help. Doing that. Please come and find one of us. After the service. We would love to help you.

Pray with you. In doing that. Amen. Amen..