

# A time to mourn

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- [ 0 : 0 0 ]     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 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. On the stairs of the Levites stood Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bani, Sherabiah, Bani, and Chanani.
- And they cried with a loud voice to the Lord their God. Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabaniah, Sherabiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah said, 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. You are the Lord, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and that all is on it, the seas and all that is in them.
- [ 1 : 1 8 ]     And you preserve all of them, and the host of heaven worships you. You are the Lord, the God who chose Abraham and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham.
- You found his heart faithful before you and made with him the covenant to give to his offspring the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite.
- And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous. And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, and heard their cry at the Red Sea, and performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants and all the people of his land.
- For you knew that they acted arrogantly against our fathers, and you made a name for yourself as it is to this day. And you divided the sea before them, so that they went through the midst of the sea on dry land, and you cast their pursuers into the depths as a stone into mighty waters.
- By a pillar of cloud you led them in the day, and by a pillar of fire in the night, to light for them the way in which they should go. You came down on Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven, and gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments.
- [ 2 : 3 7 ]     And you made known to them your holy Sabbath, and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses your servant. You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger, and brought water for them out of the rock for their thirst.
- And you told them to go in to possess the land that you had sworn to give them. But they and our fathers acted presumptuously, and stiffened their neck, and did not obey your commandments.
- They refused to obey, and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them. But they stiffened their neck, and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt.

But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them.

Even when they had made for themselves a golden calf, and said, This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt, and had committed great blasphemies, you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness.

[ 3 : 41 ] The pillar of cloud to lead them in the way did not depart from them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night to light for them the way by which they should go.

You gave your good spirit to instruct them, and did not withhold your manner from their mouth, and gave them water for their thirst. For forty years you sustained them in the wilderness, and they lacked nothing.

Their clothes did not wear out, and their feet did not swell. And you gave them kingdoms and peoples, and allotted to them every corner. So they took possession of the land of Zion, king of Heshbon, and the land of Og, king of Bashan.

So the descendants went in and possessed the land, and you subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gave them into their hand, with their kings and the peoples of the land, that they might do with them as they would.

And they captured fortified cities and a rich land, and took possession of houses full of all good things, cisterns already hewn, vineyards, olive orchards, fruit trees in abundance.

[ 4 : 59 ] So they ate, and were filled, and became fat and delighted themselves in your great goodness. Nevertheless, they were disobedient, and rebelled against you, and cast your law behind their back, and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies.

Therefore you gave them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer. And in the time of their suffering, they cried out to you, and you heard them from heaven.

And according to your great mercies, you gave them saviors, who saved them from the hand of their enemies. But after they had rest, they did evil again before you, and you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them.

Yet when they turned and cried to you, you heard from heaven, and many times you delivered them according to your mercies. And you warned them in order to turn them back to your law.

Yet they acted presumptuously, and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your rules. Which if a person does them, he shall live by them. And they turned a stubborn shoulder, and stiffened their neck, and would not obey.

[ 6 : 16 ] For many years you bore with them, and warned 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 mercies, you did not make an end of them, or forsake them. For you are a gracious and merciful God. Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love, let not all the hardship seem little to you that has come upon us, upon our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and all your people, since the time of the kings of Assyria until this day.

Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully, and we have acted wickedly. Our kings, our princes, our priests, and our fathers have not kept your law, or paid attention to your commandments and your warnings that you gave them.

Even in their own kingdom, and amid your great goodness that you gave them, and in the large and rich land that you set before them, they did not serve you or turn from their wicked works.

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.

[ 7 : 41 ] And its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress.

Well, I wonder what you think would be the sign of spiritual revival amongst a community or in an individual. I guess for those of us who are Christian believers, we all want to be more faithful and enthusiastic and fruitful as Christians.

We want to make progress in our Christian lives. Perhaps some of us feel distant from God at the moment, and we long for that to change.

What does it look like to make progress, to know greater intimacy with God, to become more like Jesus? In many people's eyes, I guess such progress would mean achieving freedom from the battle with a particular sin, or attaining some kind of spiritual experience where we meet with God in an unmistakable way, or a general feeling of being closer to God.

But Nehemiah chapter 9, which we're looking at this morning, gives us a rather different answer. If you were here last week, you'll remember that in chapter 8, we witnessed a great spiritual revival.

[ 9 : 04 ] The first half of the book has dealt with the rebuilding of the city walls of Jerusalem under Nehemiah. And now in the second half, we've moved on to the greater challenge of the renewal of the people under Ezra.

And in chapter 8, things got off to a great start. After years of neglecting God's word and God's ways, the people were turning over a new leaf.

In particular, we saw that God's people exhibited a great hunger for his word. Do you remember how they listened to it for several hours as Ezra taught it to them, and were told that they paid careful attention to it?

Not only that, they also put it into practice by starting to celebrate the Feast of Booths for the first time in generations, remembering their ancestors' wanderings in the wilderness.

And at the end of the chapter, in verse 18, we learn that each day they continued to hear the law taught to them during the Festival of Booths. Well, that was chapter 8.

[ 10 : 07 ] And chapter 9 is, I guess, important because it shows us what the outcome of chapter 8 was, the results or signs of this renewal. You see, if chapter 8 concerns the source of spiritual revival, which we saw was exposure to the word of God, then chapter 9 deals with its fruit.

And so it reveals to us the true signs or hallmarks of a life which has been impacted by God's word. It shows us what deep exposure to the word of God ought to lead to.

It gives us an example of what genuine spiritual change and progress looks like. And as we'll see, it does so in the form of a prayer. Now, the chapter begins with the people acting in a similar way to what we saw last week.

So at the beginning of the chapter, they gather together and demonstrate a deep repentance as they fast wearing sackcloth. More on that later. And in verse 3, they once again open God's word, the law.

Have a look. Verse 3. Their appetite for God's word had not waned.

[ 11 : 25 ] The feast of booths had finished, but their commitment to the Bible hasn't. This is the youth group or school Christian union that continues to meet to hear the Bible taught each week, even after summer camp or the weekend away is over.

It's the family that keeps going with the family devotions when on holiday. The church whose hunger for the Bible continues long after the city summer school or New Word Alive or whatever it is, is over.

And it's a reminder to us that the way in in the Christian life is also the way on. The people recognize that they didn't just need God's word three and a half weeks earlier when they first gathered and sought to get back on track spiritually, but continued needing to feed on it day by day.

We easily turn, don't we, to God's word in moments of spiritual crisis. But too often those times of renewed commitment to the Bible are short-lived. And before long, we quickly start to rely on ourselves again and neglect hearing from God.

But not so for the people of Israel here in Nehemiah's day. They persevered in listening to the word of God. But having heard God speak to them at such length, in the rest of chapter 9, they now speak to him in turn.

[ 12 : 49 ] A prayer is offered on their behalf in light of all that they'd been learning. It's a long prayer, but it's a prayer that demonstrates the people's response to the word of God and shows the impact that their spiritual awakening had had on them.

Now, chapter 9's a long chapter, and we're not going to be able to notice every detail. But there are two themes in particular that were introduced to again and again in this prayer. Two signs the people of God had been deeply affected by the word of God.

Two hallmarks, therefore, of what new spiritual life, authentic faith, looks like. Here's the first. God's word led the people to have a clearer understanding of what God is like.

A clearer understanding of what God is like. Now, of course, that's no surprise, because we only know what God is like because he's revealed himself to us in his word.

It's the Bible that reveals God to us. And so signing up for Ezra's Bible school in chapter 8 had allowed the people to understand with new clarity exactly what the God they worshipped was like and what he'd done for them.

[ 14 : 01 ] But the link between God's word and God's revelation of himself is actually even tighter here in Nehemiah 9 because every verse in the chapter, every verse in the prayer, is actually taken from the words of the law itself.

Now, the prayer being prayed deliberately prays in the scriptures that have just been taught in the preceding days and weeks. The people are using what God has revealed of himself and what they've therefore learned as the basis for their prayer of praise and petition.

And incidentally, that's a great model for us, isn't it? Sometimes we don't know what to pray for. And so we sort of pray vague requests for God to bless particular people or we guess what God might want to do.

Other times we pray at great length for things that we want without ever considering what God's will might be or what light his word sheds on the issue we have in mind. Rather than prayer being a question of twisting God's arm into aligning his will with our will, as I think we so often see it, when we pray, we're actually seeking or should be seeking to align our will with God's.

Praying your will be done as the Lord's prayer instructs us and as Jesus does in Gethsemane. And of course we discover God's will for our lives in the Bible.

[ 15 : 26 ] So here we have a good model for our prayers. Praising God according to what the Bible tells us about him and then praying for ourselves in light of that.

That's why it's such a good thing for us to pray in the Bible after our growth group studies midweek or our personal quiet times at home. And why it's good for our prayer requests after a Bible study, not just to be shaped by our worldly concerns, but by the things that have challenged us and encouraged us in our studies.

Which is also why I think it's good to read the Bible first and then to pray so that the Bible informs our prayers. So that the Bible informs our prayers. So let's see exactly what it was that the people here had learned from the Bible about God and which they then praise him for in this prayer.

And just notice that it is a prayer of praise. Have a look at verse 5. The people are told, 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.

Three particular things. Notice that they praise God for. They begin by praising God for his power. His power. Have a look down with me at verse 6.

[ 16 : 45 ] You are the Lord. You alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens with all their hosts, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. And you preserve all of them and the host of heaven worships you.

Again, it's very reminiscent of the Lord's Prayer which begins, Our Father, hallowed be your name. The prayer starts with praise for who God is. The people's prayer basically walks us through many of the great events of the Old Testament.

And so it begins with creation. The people recognize that God made everything. You notice the repetition of the word all in verse 6.

It's mentioned four times. And the references to the heavens, the earth and the seas also remind us that God made everything. And remembering this is of course so fundamental to a healthy spiritual life.

It's no wonder that a renewed understanding of God's majesty was one of the first hallmarks of this revival. So often I think the reason why our Christian lives can be so inadequate and our zeal so inconsistent is because we have too small a view of God.

[ 18 : 03 ] We don't see him as he actually is. And the Bible corrects that. First and foremost, it is a book about God. And it introduces us to him in the first pages of Genesis as the powerful creator God.

When we realize how mighty he is, it makes us realize how foolish it is to shake our puny little fists at him and to seek to go our own way in his world. And it also makes our prayers worthwhile knowing that we're praying to the creator God who's well able to answer them.

So it's no wonder that the people begin their prayer by recognizing God's power. But notice too how the people are also given a clearer understanding of God's faithfulness.

His faithfulness. Let me read on from verse 7. They pray, you are the Lord, the God who chose Abraham and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham.

You found his heart faithful before you and made with him the covenant to give to his offspring the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, and the Girgashites. And you have kept your promise for you are righteous.

[ 19 : 19 ] God had chosen Abraham and made a covenant with him. And verse 8, he had kept that promise. Although, as we'll see, Israel had failed to keep her side of the bargain, God had fulfilled his part.

He's a faithful God who keeps his promises. And again, that's a wonderful thing, isn't it? Because we live in a world where we're so often let down, where promises mean so little.

Political parties ditch their manifesto promises as soon as they're in power. Advertisers promise much but deliver little. Vital hospital appointments get cancelled.

Friends postpone meetings in a last-minute text message. We make promises to our spouses or parents to turn over a new leaf and yet quickly slip back into old habits. But God isn't like that.

He's always faithful. He keeps his promises. It's a wonderful thing. No wonder, again, the people praise him for it. And it means it's worth putting God first.

[ 20 : 31 ] It's worth doing what these people did and committing to him afresh because he will never let us down. His promises about the future can be trusted. So the people praise God for his power and his faithfulness.

But notice as well that they also have a clearer understanding of his salvation. His salvation. What he'd done for them as well as what he was like. Let's pick it up again at verse 9.

And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea and performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants and all the people of his land.

For you knew that they acted arrogantly against our fathers. And you made a name for yourself as it is to this day. And you divided the sea before them so that they went through the midst of the sea on dry land.

And you cast their pursuers into the depths as a stone into mighty waters. And it goes on with the people remembering God's presence with them in the cloud and pillar of fire and his provision for them in providing manna and water and giving them the law.

[ 21 : 40 ] So the people praise God for his salvation their rescue from Egypt. And I think it's striking that that seems to be the focus of their praise.

More air time is given to this than anything else. You see reading the law had caused the people to remember above all else their salvation. How God had taken them out of slavery in Egypt and judged their enemies.

How he then spoken to them at Mount Sinai. and ultimately verse 15 how he led them to the promised land. And of course we have so much more to thank God for than the people in Nehemiah's day as we look back.

Because we can look back not only to the exodus in Egypt and the cloud and pillar of fire as signs of God's presence with them and the giving of the law as the way that he spoke to them. But also to a greater rescue from slavery to sin and a greater sign of God's presence with us in the giving of his Holy Spirit and the greater word we have to us in the New Testament as well as the old and a greater hope of the true promised land in heaven.

I guess baptism like the one we have this morning is designed to help us remember this because baptism reminds us of what lies at the heart of God's dealings with humanity.

[ 23 : 06 ] The rescue God has made possible for us in Jesus by washing away our sins at the cross. So spiritual renewal begins and is marked by remembering again and again what God has done for us.

The person truly impacted by God's word and living for him will be the one who thinks often of their salvation of the cross. If you know your Greek mythology you'll know the sirens were a group of dangerous women who would sing to sailors from the rocks.

Their beautiful sound was so enchanting that ships would be lured to sail perilously close to the rocks to hear it until finally they'd be shipwrecked and perish. When Odysseus was sailing past the sirens he sought to resist their charms by ordering his men to plug their ears with beeswax and to tie him to the mast of the ship and under no circumstances to untie him.

And yet as he heard the beautiful singing of the sirens he still begged to be released as his ship sailed past. Jason on the other hand pursued a different tactic with his Argonauts when they sailed past the sirens.

He asked Orpheus to drown out the music of the sirens by playing a more beautiful tune on his harp. And so often we try to make progress as Christians like Odysseus seeking simply to restrain sin or to block it out but it rarely succeeds.

[ 24 : 40 ] Our desire for sin just rages all the more. We need instead to keep remembering the more beautiful tune of God's salvation a melody that drowns out the voice of sin by offering us something better.

Like these people we need to think often of God's rescue. So if we're conscious that our Christian lives are half-hearted at the moment here in Nehemiah 9 we find a solution.

We need to continually expose ourselves to God's word and so meditate on who he is the all-powerful faithful God and what he's done in saving us.

God's word gives us a clearer understanding of what he's like. And when we grasp that we'll find ourselves praising God in prayer as these people did. Spiritual progress always begins by looking to God and meditating on his ways.

As the Scottish preacher Robert Murray Machane put it for every look within take ten looks at him. But having done that having recalled God's ways and his works the people's prayer then takes on a new focus.

[ 25 : 54 ] A clearer understanding of what God is like had also given them secondly a deeper recognition of what we're like and that's our other heading a deeper recognition of what we're like.

It's often said that the Bible is like a mirror because it shows us what we're really like. Indeed Paul tells us in the New Testament that the law makes us conscious of sin.

And so it's no wonder that hearing the Bible taught had enabled the people to gain a more realistic view of themselves. have a look with me first of all at verses 1 and 2 again.

We're told now on the 24th 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 foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.

Striking that the first hallmark of spiritual revival in chapter 9 is a deep heartfelt contrition. The people fast and put on sackcloth as a sign of their repentance and separate themselves from those who didn't know God to express their desire to be distinctive as God's people.

[ 27 : 11 ] You see rather than spiritual revival leading to great mountaintop experiences it usually begins by being humbled under God's word and mourning our sin as a result.

Rather than elevating us God's word first brings us down. And once again there's much we can learn from the people here. They'd already wept because of their sin in chapter 8 if you remember but here they are a few weeks later once again expressing their grief over their sin.

It reminds us I think of the danger of a cheap view of grace where we say a quick sorry prayer or feel bad about something for a few moments but soon forget about it because after all God's job is to forgive me so my sin doesn't really matter.

Now of course I'm not saying that we're to wallow in our guilt but we won't be effective as Christians or fully appreciate God's salvation if we don't have a right estimation of our sinfulness before a holy God.

Charles Simeon the great 18th and 19th century Cambridge preacher was a man who understood this. He often spoke of the importance of remembering our sins.

[ 28 : 27 ] He once remarked I have never thought that the circumstance of God's having forgiven me was any reason why I should forgive myself. On the contrary I have always judged it better to loathe myself the more.

He said there are but two objects that I have ever desired for these 40 years to behold. The one is my own vileness and the other is the glory of God in the face of Christ.

In his biography of Simeon John Piper writes that two things were the heartbeat of Simeon's inner life growing downward in humility and growing upward in adoring communion with God.

But the remarkable thing about humiliation and adoration in the heart of Charles Simeon is that they were inseparable. Simeon was utterly unlike most of us today who think that we should get rid once and for all of all feelings of vileness and unworthiness as soon as we can.

For him adoration only grew in the freshly ploughed soil of humiliation for sin. So he actually labored to know his true sinfulness and his remaining corruption as a Christian.

[ 29 : 35 ] sinfulness and grasping our first point this morning, gaining a clearer understanding of what God is like, will cause us to grasp this second point, gaining a deeper recognition of our sin.

Sin's seriousness can only be understood when we first recognize God's greatness and kindness to us. And the person who's understood these things will inevitably then have a deep and healthy understanding of their own wretchedness.

Just as seeing the Indian batsman's ability to play against spin bowling in the recent test series highlighted all the more England's woeful inability to do so, will so seeing God's perfection helps us see all the more clearly how far short we fall morally.

That might be a good thing for us to pray for ourselves actually, that we would see our sin for what it is. And if we don't, then to pray that our view of God would first be expanded because the two things go together.

And I think that explains the structure of the second half of the people's prayer here in Nehemiah 9, which we haven't got time to look at in detail. But I wonder if you noticed as we read it the constant alternating between God and what he has done and the people of Israel and what they had done.

[ 30 : 57 ] The seriousness of the people's sin was highlighted in its contrast to the kindness of the God who remained faithful to them at all times. Let's pick it up again at verse 15 and just notice this pattern and how it recurs.

the people pray, you gave them bread from heaven for their hunger and brought water for them out of the rock for their thirst. And you told them to go in to possess the land that you had sworn to give them.

But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments. They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them.

But they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. but you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and did not forsake them.

Even when they had made for themselves a golden calf and said, this is your God who brought you up out of Egypt and who committed great blasphemies, you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness.

[ 32 : 00 ] Do you see the constant contrast between you, the God they were addressing, and they, the sin of their forefathers? It's a pattern we get throughout the rest of the chapter as we're given a whistle-stop tour of Israel's history.

So just to look on to verse 22, you gave them kingdoms. Or verse 23, you multiplied their children. Verse 24, over the page, you subdued before them the inhabitants of the land.

But verse 28, nevertheless, nevertheless, sorry, verse 26, nevertheless, despite all this, they were disobedient and rebelled against you.



And so it goes on. Verse 30, for many years you bore with them and warned them, yet they will not give ear. The people's fickleness is always seen against the backdrop of God's faithfulness.

And just notice, as the author recounts the days of the judges and beyond, the emphasis on the people's disobedience. We've already looked at verse 17, they refused to obey.

[ 33 : 16 ] And verse 26, nevertheless, they were disobedient. But have a look on to verse 29, they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments. And the same idea is there in verse 34, our fathers have not kept your law.

or paid attention to your commandments. It's a sorry catalogue of each generation rebelling and repeating the mistakes of their forefathers.

Notice too how they sought to silence God's word. Let's say verse 26, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back. They didn't want to hear it.

And killed your prophets, wanting to silence those who would speak to them on God's behalf. Or verse 30, they would not give ear. So often those things go together, don't they?

Not listening to God's word and therefore disobeying God himself. But the people didn't simply acknowledge the sins of their ancestors, notice.

[ 34 : 20 ] They knew that they too were guilty. Back in verse 2, we were told they confessed their sins as well as those of their fathers. And as we get to the end of the prayer, rather than you followed by they, the pattern changes to you followed by we.

Have a look at verse 33 this time. Sorry, we're dotting around a bit. Verse 33. Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us. For you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly.

Or look on to verse 37. 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. And its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins.

The people acknowledge their own responsibility for their plight. Indeed, in verse 33, they even admit that God had been right to judge them as he had. And what a contrast this is with how we sometimes operate.

We so easily blame our parents as they might have done their ancestors, or our upbringing, or our circumstances, or our education, or the headache we had, or our lack of sleep, or the pressure we were under when we get things wrong.

[ 35 : 44 ] But the people here knew that they were no better than their forebears. They took responsibility for their actions, admitting and mourning their sin.

Spiritual revival begins by accepting our sin, and acknowledging that we therefore deserve God's judgment. But before we finish, it's important to remember that the people here do that in confidence.

In confidence that he'd proven again and again in Israel's history that his character is to show mercy to them. Back in verse 17, quoting from Exodus 34, they remember God is a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

We'll just look on to verse 32 where we get a similar idea. These glimpses of God's mercy are scattered throughout the prayer. Before we look at verse 32, one of the striking things about this prayer is how unlike many of our prayers, there are so few requests in it.

It's largely a prayer of praise and confession. But when we do get to the request in verse 32, notice once more that it's made on the basis of God's gracious character.

[ 37 : 01 ] Verse 32, Now therefore our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love, let not all the hardship seem little to you that has come upon us, upon our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and all your people since the time of the kings of Assyria until this day.

They don't ask God to show them mercy because they deserve it or purely for their own sake, but on the basis of and in accordance with his character and his covenant promises to be faithful and merciful to them.

And they're able to pray with confidence. They're not confessing their sins simply to beat themselves up about it, but in knowledge and hope of forgiveness if they do.

So Nehemiah chapter 9 gives us a picture of what true spiritual renewal leads to. It shows us that it's not a mere resolution to turn over a new leaf or a temporary turning back to God when life goes wrong.

Nor does it mean being elevated to great experiences or being freed from the daily battle with sin which we Christians will face in this world. Rather those who have been genuinely changed by God's word will be given a clearer understanding of who he is and in light of that will have a deeper recognition of what they're really like and so exhibit a deep and lasting contrition for their sin.

[ 38 : 31 ] Let me close with a description of the effects of George Whitefield's preaching taken from a contemporary source quoted by J.C. Ryle and his Christian leaders of the 18th century. Henry Venn who witnessed Whitefield preaching in a churchyard in Cheltenham described the scene like this in a letter to the Countess of Huntingdon.

He wrote as Whitefield preached there was a visible appearance of much soul concern among the crowd that filled every part of the burial ground. Many were overcome with fainting, others sobbed deeply, some wept silently and a solemn concern appeared on the countenance of almost the whole assembly.

Oh with what eloquence, what energy, what melting tenderness did Mr. Whitefield beseech sinners to be reconciled to God, to come to him for life everlasting and to rest their weary souls on Christ the Saviour.

When the sermon was ended the people seemed chained to the ground. Mr. Madden, Mr. Talbot and myself found ample employment in trying to comfort those who seemed broken down under a sense of guilt.

We separated in different directions among the crowd and each was quickly surrounded by an attentive audience still eager to hear all the words of this life. The right understanding of God's word will lead to a healthy acknowledgement of sin.

[ 39 : 52 ] But we're to recognise the seriousness of sin so that like Whitefield's heirs, we then rest our souls on Christ the Saviour. Let's pray that we do both of those things, hating our sin and so relying on Jesus all the more.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.