

A Time to Weep

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Preacher: Phil Meulman

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 22nd of August 1999. The preacher is Phil Muleman.

His sermon is entitled A Time to Weep and is from Nehemiah chapter 9 verses 1 to 37.

Our loving God, creator of this earth, we thank you and praise you that you are indeed our God and that you have revealed yourself to us through Jesus.

Please help us now to understand your word and to live it out in our lives. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Well, please open your Bibles if you already haven't to Nehemiah chapter 9 on page 380.

What do you do when you've made a mistake? A real blunder?

[1 : 05] Are you sad? Do you wish that you'd done something different like follow the swans instead of Richmond? Second time this morning?

Or perhaps, anyway, don't worry. Do you try to cover it up when you've made a blunder? Well, I once made a huge error when I was selling boats in the sale of rather a large yacht.

And realising my mistake, I tried to cover it up only to make matters worse for me and those that I worked with. And it wasn't until I retraced my steps, that is, looked back on what I had done and owned up to the problem, that things began to improve.

Well, today in Nehemiah, we'll see the people of Israel come to grips with some of the mistakes from their past. As we've looked at Nehemiah over recent weeks, we've seen that Nehemiah's task was to rebuild the destroyed walls of the city of Jerusalem.

And he was also concerned for the spiritual well-being of his fellow Jews, just as he was for their physical welfare. So, Nehemiah stayed in Jerusalem, fully involved in the renewal and reforms of God's people.

[2 : 24] Spiritual renewal and reform is brought about as God's people look back on their past through the reading of Scripture. As they look back, they realise why they and their ancestors, their forefathers, have ended up in the precarious situations that they have encountered throughout their long history.

And the reason is because they have failed to obey God as he has commanded them to in Scripture. For them, for the people of Israel then, it's a time to weep, a time of confession as they realise their own wickedness.

But it's also a time of renewal, a time of commitment, a time of renewal and commitment to serving God. Well, this morning as we look at chapter 9, I want to trace three things.

And the first one is tracing the people's sorrow in chapter 9 verses 1 to 4. Then secondly, I want to have a look at the survey, that long Bible passage which is read to us, from the survey of Israel's history from verses 5 through to 31.

And then the third thing I want to look at is the supplication, that is the prayer, that the people of Israel made in the remaining verses of chapter 9. Well, let's begin by looking at the sorrow.

[3 : 48] So we'll go back up to there, verses 1 to 4. Well, you may remember from last week that the people have just celebrated what they call the Feast of Tabernacles.

And this was a festival of great joy that lasted for seven days. And on the eighth day, all the people assembled together. And then a couple of days later, which was actually the 24th day of Tisri, which is the month of September or October, the people of Israel were assembled for a day of repentance, as verse 1 tells us in chapter 9.

Now, it seems that two days break was necessary to give the people an opportunity to adjust from joy, because this is a great festival of joy that they were celebrating just beforehand.

They had to adjust from this time of joy to sorrow. The transition from praise to repentance was necessary if the word of God was to have a lasting effect in the lives of the people.

And this sincere penitence of chapter 9 was a prelude to the signing of the covenant that you read about in verse 38 and in chapter 10 of God's people.

[5 : 02] So, for them, it was a time of renewed dedication to God. Now, the intensity of the people's grief for their sin or their wrongdoing is given expression by the people's fasting and in sackcloth with earth on their heads, as verse 1 tells us.

Now, fasting was an act of self-denial that involved placing spiritual concerns over physical needs. That's why they went without food and so on. Now, wearing sackcloth, which we see on numerous occasions throughout the Bible, symbolised profound sorrow.

And dust, or earth on the head, was a reminder of one's mortality. In Genesis, we're told that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Now, another sign of the Jew's seriousness in seeking God was their separation, as verse 2 tells us, from all foreigners.

And all these foreigners were the worshippers of false gods who didn't render obedience to Yahweh, the one true living God. And separation from the non-Jewish nations was not a self-righteous, holier-than-thou attitude on the Jews' part, but compliance with God's command recorded in Leviticus chapter 20, which says, You shall be holy to me, for I, the Lord, am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine.

[6 : 38] These are God's people. And God's people here rejected earthly comfort and some human friendship in their pursuit of service and serving God.

Well, Jesus calls us to a life of self-denial. And this doesn't mean that we become recluses or hermits or withdraw to a monastery-type lifestyle, despising all human company, far from it in fact. But what it does mean is that we ought to be serious in our quest for likeness to God. The Jews' acknowledgments of their misdeeds embraced their own personal sins and those of their ancestors. Verse 2, they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their ancestors. Now, parents, parents not only pass on to their children their own fallen nature, but also act as role models of sinful conduct.

Nevertheless, God's grace, his undeserved favour here, can help us to break out of this downward spiral which we all fall into, this downward spiral of wickedness, so that we may, though still far from perfection, provide an example of godly living for future generations.

[8 : 04] And we, as God's people, need to be doing that. And the Jews' determination here to leave their evil ways and consecrate themselves to God is seen in the fact that they stood for three hours, that is, a fourth part of the day.

They stood for a fourth part of the day to hear the book of the law of the Lord their God, followed by a further three hours, or a further fourth part of the day, in confession and worshipped the Lord their God.

Now, we listened to Alan read the Bible here for five minutes. It might have been a bit hard for us to read, to listen to that. But these people, they stood for a quarter of the day hearing the word, and then a further quarter of the day in worship and confession of the Lord their God.

This repentance and confession, like the earlier joy, was brought about because they valued and applied God's word, as we saw last week.

Well, that's the people's sorrow. And in verses 5 through to 31, it provides for us, I think, a very helpful survey of the history of Israel's history.

[9 : 19] And verse 5 makes it pretty clear that this survey was a prayer. Blessed be your glorious name, which is exalted above blessing and praise. But God doesn't need a lesson in Jewish history, does he?

So what is the purpose of this resume, if you like, in verses 5 through to 31, of these historic events that we read about? What's the purpose of it?

I think it was an appeal to God, who in the past revealed himself as a great and mighty and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love, to display his power again on behalf of his people in their present circumstances, in their present suffering.

And this recap of Israel's history, showing God's awesome power, was also a tonic to lift up the spirits of the people there that were gathered. It was a warning to them as well not to rebel against God, as their forefathers had done so often in the past.

Now for us, if we research church history, and there's many people who like looking at church history, if we research church history lamenting the good old days when church buildings were full

and the preachers pulled the crowds, remember a few weeks ago I said that Billy Graham came out here in the 50s and he pulled all the crowds into the MCG, the biggest crowd that's ever made it there.

[10 : 54] If we go and lament those sorts of things today, I think that many of us would fall and sink into depression and into despair about the church because those situations of the past just don't seem to be here in this era, do they?

But if we read of those days gone by to discover how powerful God is and what he has accomplished through his people, then we ought to be encouraged as we seek to serve him in our current generation because it's darn obvious that God is still active in our world today, not just in days gone past.

And that's the aim of this prayer here that is prayed by Ezra and the Levites who were the teachers of the law. It is there to encourage God's people.

And I think these verses focus on five facets of God's dealing with his people. The first facet is seen in verses 5 and 6.

And there we see it is the glorious God who made the world. This prayer begins with adoration of God, adoration of Yahweh, the one true living God, the eternal and the glorious creator.

[12 : 24] And this is their God who had entered into an everlasting relationship with his people. And the Levites say in verse 5, Stand up and bless the Lord your God.

In their sorrow of the earlier verses, the people are now reminded that the glorious God who made the world would answer the plea of his people in their anguish and pardon all their sins.

So that's the first facet of God dealing with his people. The second facet is in verses 7 and 8. We see that it is the righteous God who keeps his promises. And the key to these two verses is seen at the end of verse 8.

You have fulfilled your promise for you are righteous. This promise, given in the form of agreement or what was called a covenant, was that God would give to Abraham the land of the Canaanites, as we're told in verse 8.

And as the people hear what's been read and as they look back and think back and recall God's word to them in the past, they are seeing how God has fulfilled his promise to them right now.

[13 : 39] You see, back in Genesis 12, God had promised several things to Abraham, one of them being land, the land which they had been exiled from for so long.

But now these people have returned to the promised land after many years in exile. And they are, if you like, living proof that the faithful God who made his promises so long ago to Abraham was still keeping his promises today with his people who are now back here in Jerusalem.

And the initial pledge that is made by God to Abraham concerning the land of Canaan was later expanded to include the descendants of Abraham who would be more numerous than the sand on the beach and the stars in the skies, as Genesis tells us.

Now, wrapped up in these promises was one in which God spoke about Abraham's seed. Genesis 22, verse 18 says this, And by your offspring shall all nations gain blessing.

The Apostle Paul makes it clear here that in his letter to the Galatians that the offspring or seed of Abraham was none other than Jesus Christ himself through whom the gift of salvation came to sinners.

[15 : 08] And when Jesus, the Saviour of the world, came to earth and died on the cross, the righteous God was keeping and had kept his promises to Abraham.

Now, these promises seemed to far cry from the experience of the Jews who were here invoking the help and the aid of God. However, the implication of the description of Abraham in verse 8, which says, You found his heart faithful, is that only those who are unwavering in their devotion to God will know his favour.

And today, obedience to God's word and his promises continue to be the passport to blessing. Well, the second point, the righteous God who keeps his promises.

The third point, in verses 9 through to 15, we see that it is the gracious God who cares for his people. This recap of Israel's history moves on from the patriarch of Abraham through to the days of Moses, a period of several hundred years.

And the gracious God hurt his people's distress and suffering as slaves at the hand of Pharaoh in Egypt. We all know the story so well, don't we?

[16:28] So what does God do? He sends Moses to Pharaoh to demand the release of the slaves. And when Pharaoh refused to comply with God's command through Moses, the Lord performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh.

The plagues that occurred in Egypt at God's command demonstrated God's superior power and punished this Egyptian Pharaoh for his arrogance, for his hard-heartedness.

God graciously cared for his people and he made a name for himself along those who were trying to be more powerful than he. And of course, God displayed his extraordinary power and strength to all those who saw as he divided the sea so that those he graciously cared for could pass through the Red Sea.

But for the enemies who were in pursuit of God's people, they were hurled into the depths like a stone into the mighty waters, just lost.

Now there are, of course, in these few verses, many other gracious acts that God did which we don't have time to look at here this morning. So the God whose heart was touched at the pain of the oppressed people in Egypt and who watched over them in their wanderings in the desert is the same God who watches over us.

[18:02] Just as God defeated Pharaoh and his servants, we will one day see Satan, a far worse enemy than Pharaoh, crushed under our feet, as Romans tells us.

The gracious God who cares for his people. The fourth point is in verses 16 through to 26. We see that it is the merciful God who does not abandon his people.

God's graciousness in 9 through to 15, verses 9 to 15, is now contrasted with his people's wickedness. They were stiff-necked, refusing to obey God's commandments, forgetting about the mighty wonders he had performed in the past.

And verses 18 and 26 tell us that God's people committed great blasphemies against him. The incident of the golden calf, which was clearly idolatry, broke the very first of the Ten Commandments that were given by Moses on Mount Sinai.

And not only were the people disobedient in Moses' time, but throughout Israel's history, they were wicked and disobedient to God's commands and laws.

[19:19] They killed prophets who insisted on preaching God's message to them. They didn't want to listen to that. Surely you would think with this wickedness that is going on, that God would wipe his hands of these disobedient people, that he would obliterate them.

But he didn't. He didn't. He didn't forsake his own people. And despite their rebellious behaviour, he not only continued to guide them and provide their every need in an inhospitable environment.

I can't say that word. But he not only did that, he also sent his good spirit to instruct and to teach them, as verse 20 tells us. God's spirit equipped Moses to teach and lead Israel.

And later, God's spirit spoke through the prophets, people like Isaiah and Jeremiah, to admonish and rebuke his people who persisted in disobedience to God.

And God's spirit too was active in the lives of Ezra and Nehemiah here, as we read Nehemiah. God looked after his people.

[20:32] Why? Verse 17 tells us, He is a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

Now when you are burdened with sin or guilt, remember this verse, God is a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

The emphasis of these words is that God would cease to be God if he didn't pardon or forgive repentant sinners. The term merciful or compassionate, as the NIV Bible says, has overtones of the warm, passionate feeling a mother has for her child.

And the meaning of slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love is that God is reluctant to discipline covenant breakers, thus giving them time to repent, much time to repent, but is quick to fulfil his own covenant obligations.

We too, like the people of Nehemiah's time, can come to God with all of our sins and all of our sorrows, because this God, this one true living God that we are talking about here, is the God of amazing grace.

[22:09] Well, the fifth thing that we see, seeing how God deals with his people, in verses 27 through to 31, we see that it is the sovereign God who achieves his plans.

Nothing, but nothing, will thwart God's plans. And so we see that when God's people in their wickedness continue to disobey God, God did give them into the hands of their enemies who made

his people suffer.

And this happened time and time again because of their wickedness. But as verse 27 says, in their time of suffering, they cried out to you, that is to God, and you heard them from heaven.

And according to your great mercies, you gave them saviours who saved them from the hands of their enemies. And these saviours or deliverers were the judges in the period of the judges in the Old Testament, people such as Deborah, Gideon and Samson.

Though God abandoned them into the hands of their enemies, it was only a temporary abandonment. Nevertheless, as verse 31 says, in your great mercies, you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.

[23 : 42] Through all this backsliding and subsequent repentance of God's people, we see that he continues to work his purposes out according to his perfect timetable.

God's time, not our time, his time. And the waywitness of his own people and their own inability to follow his commands would never, could not, ever, thwart his plans.

He would allow no one, no world power, nor any person to destroy the people which he called out to be the vehicle through which he would reveal himself to the world.

And you see, every event that we see going on in the Old Testament was leading on to the birth of his son, Jesus Christ, and his saving death and resurrection on the cross.

Well, that's a survey of Israel's history and it's a long passage. But it's good to look back on the history of Israel to see what things have gone on in their life and what, you know, how their checkered history has brought them to the point they are and how we can understand why it was necessary for Jesus to come into the world.

[25 : 06] I was at a preaching school last year and it was Don Carson who preached here as well one day and one of the things he encouraged people to do was to have an understanding of the Bible, to have a timeline of the Bible, if you like, to understand key events in the life of God's people.

And so, this is something which comes out of the Crossways material which is a timeline of Israel's history from creation to the fall to the period of the patriarchs and of Moses and the period of the judges, Gideon, Samson and so on and to the time when kingship comes into Israel when Israel is a united nation and becomes a divided nation and so on.

And you look through this timeline and you can't see it here, it's just another visual demonstration to keep you all awake but it's a potted history of Israel's story really and it's useful for us today to have something like this stuck on our wall so we can look at the events of Israel's history to see how God has been gracious, how he has looked after his people and I can only encourage you to try and do something like this yourself to put it on your wall so you can look it up.

For example, Nehemiah is written about 450, 440 years before Jesus was born and we get the placement of where it is in Israel's history.

A simple thing to have but very valuable in helping you to understand the Bible, helping you to understand the scriptures and so on. So that's a simple application which I would encourage you all to think about.

[26 : 49] Well, we've looked at the sorrow of God's people, we've seen a timeline or a survey of Israel's history and in the remaining verses of this chapter we look at the supplication or the prayer that is made by these people and this recapitulation of Israel's history made by Ezra and the Levites in response to the people's confession I think contemplates the nature of God, doesn't it?

It's a great reminder of the great, mighty and awesome God keeping covenant and steadfast love. And the result of this reminder leads to the confession by the people that God has been just in all that has come upon us or upon them for you, for God that is, has dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly.

They've seen that from their history. No one, kings, priests and officials, whatever, have kept your law or heeded the commandments and the warnings that you gave them.

that God gave thousands of years before. And the present hardship that we read about in verse 32 and the captivity under the Persian king were directly related to the sins of their forefathers.

God's God's God's God's God's God's willingness to bless his people and retracing their steps by looking back on scripture, by looking back on God's word, his commandments and his laws that he's handed down and by confessing their sin and committing themselves to serve this great and awesome God gives them a new confidence that God is with them.

[28 : 54] God has never abandoned them but God, they have an assurance now that God is with them. Now, this God of amazing grace, the God of amazing grace has promised in his word in

scripture to respond to this kind of frank and open confession of sin.

And when we feel the weight of sin on our consciences we would do well to reflect on God's promises to forgive our sins.

God can forgive us. Now, sin burdens us and it burdens us all at some stage. Perhaps it burdens us all the time.

In fact, we deceive ourselves and others let alone God if we say that we have no sin within us. But when we are troubled about things in the past or in the present, it is good for us to reflect back and see what God has done for us in the past through the scriptures.

It will highlight our sinful nature, there's no doubt about that, and hopefully draw us to confess our wrongdoing before God if we are serious about scripture. and it may even bring about a time of weeping for us.

[30 : 23] That could be a time of cleansing. But you know what? It will give us assurance that if we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness as 1 John 1 verse 9 says.

And that knowing that we are forgiven, that we are made holy in God's sight, will enable us to continue on serving God now and in the future.

Hold on to that. Amen.