

The Soul-Restoring Grace of Repentance Part 3

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Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

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This morning's message is from this 9th chapter of Nehemiah. It's our third Sunday looking at messages under the title, today's message is part 3 of, "The Soul-Restoring Grace of Repentance." That's the title, the soul-restoring grace of repentance. In this section of Nehemiah, Nehemiah 8, 9 and 10, we have recounted for us one of the great movements of God in all of Holy Scripture. This is nothing less than the return of the life of God to the people of God. That's actually what the word "revive" means, revival. Revival, a word that's often used to mean different things, a series of meetings that a church holds, revival meetings, but the word really means revivify. Revivify, make alive again. And so revival is the reviving, the making alive again of the people of God which happens, the people of God are made alive when the life of God returns to the people of God.

So revival is the return of the life of God to the people of God and that's what we see in these chapters, most unlikely place. I mean, you're reading through your Bible the historical books, the story of Ezra/Nehemiah, much of it seems to be very mundane, and yet this is one of the great movements of God in all of Scripture. A significant number of the people, the community as a whole are impacted by the Spirit of God and what we see, that revival, the return of the life of God to the people of God, this spiritual awakening is marked by one quintessential distinguishing mark, that one distinguishing mark of revival is true repentance. This is how you can tell the life of God has returned to the people of God, there is true repentance.

So as Christians, this is what we are to be looking for. We are to be always looking to experience what Jesus came to give us, life and life abundantly, and if we're going to experience that life of God in a regular way in our lives, then repentance is going to be a daily need in our lives. We need to always be repenting. And what is repentance? We've said that it is a turning of the whole person from sin to God. The word "repent" really means "to turn" biblically, "to turn; to return." That's the Old Testament root idea of the word "shub" which then forms the basis on which the New Testament authors continue to talk about repentance in the Greek language, and so repentance means this whole-personed turning from sin to God.

And we've said it's a whole-personed turning, that is, it's wholehearted, and the heart in Scripture, in biblical understanding of the soul is that it is composed of three different things. The heart is composed of three distinct elements, that is, the thinking, the mind, the feeling, the affections, and the choosing, the will. Mind, affections and will, and so repentance encompasses all of that. The whole heart. As a man thinks in his heart, so is he. The thinking is part of the heart biblically. The affections of the heart, the desires of the heart are reoriented.

The purposes of the heart, the intentions of the heart. Hebrews 4:12. The will is a part of the heart and so the whole heart is turned from going one direction in a 180 degree turn to go in the other direction. Toward sin, self, away from that toward God, to pursuing him. In our thoughts, there's a change of thoughts about ourselves, about our sin, about God. There's a change of affections. We begin to no longer love sin but to hate it. And there's a change of will. Choices begin to change. The life begins to change. That's the essence of true repentance and so true repentance is the quintessential mark of revival and that's what we see illustrated in this passage. We see the people of God affected in their thinking, change in the way they see God, the way they see their sin, the way they see their lives. There's a change of thought that happens through the preaching of the word, and then there's a change of affections. They are radically moved in their hearts. It's not just an intellectual exercise. That's why repentance sometimes confused in our day, sometimes people dumb it down by misinterpreting it by reading the Greek word "metanoia" as the whole parcel of repentance. "Metanoia" means "to change your mind." It's the best Greek word that they could use in the Greek language to convey what repentance is. But the New Testament authors had the Old Testament concept in mind as they looked for a New Testament Greek word to explain it. Does that make sense? When you're understanding what a word means, you have to think about it in all of Scripture.

So it's not merely a change of mind, it is a change of mind but it's much more than that. It's a change of direction, a change of life, and so we saw in chapter 8, they were engaged in their minds. They heard preaching. All those who could understand, they heard reading of the Scriptures and explanations so that they could understand. Great emphasis in chapter 8. If you haven't read that, read it this week and you'll see that. Then as the Scripture changes their mind about themselves and about sin, their hearts are fully engaged not just in their thinking but in their affections and they mourn and wail over their sins, begin to cry out in anguish under the weight of the realization of the ugliness of their sins.

So we see their affections fully engaged and we're going to see it in chapter 9 as we read it again in a moment, that they come ready to continue their turning back to God with ashes on their head, fasting, ready to confess their sins, which is what we're going to see in this section again this morning. So it's their thinking, it's their affections, and it's their will, and they're going to form a new covenant, they're going to make a new covenant with God. They're going to make definitive steps away from sin to God. A key concept is they separated themselves, we're going to read in just a moment, from the people of the land. They made distinction from the way they were living to now living for God. That's repentance and that's what's illustrated for us beautifully in this passage.

As I said, in such an unlikely place, Judah after the exile. They've returned from exile, their circumstances are not that impressive, not impressive at all. The nation is a shell of what it was formerly and yet God in this place, in this time, chooses to unveil his glory and restore his people in a marvelous way; through the preaching of the word he produces repentance and it's a soul-restoring grace of repentance. As God encompasses the whole soul in repenting, what happens is the soul is returned to what it's meant to be. We mentioned Psalm 19:7 a number of times. It's such an important verse, "The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul, returning the soul, restoring the soul," different ways that same word is translated. It's actually the word "shub," the word for "repent." "The law of the Lord is perfect, repenting the soul," you could translate it.

But restoring is the idea. It's producing repentance that brings about a return of the soul to what it was made to be, and so repentance is something essential. That's why Luther said in his first thesis of those 95 articles that he posted to the castle church in Wittenberg in 1517 when he lit the spark that began the fire of the Protestant Reformation, October 31, 1517. The first thesis he said was that repentance when Jesus called for repentance, when he said repent he was calling for a whole orientation of life that would be a continual evidence of God's grace in our lives. It's something to be a part of our lives every day as gospel-centered Christians.

So the soul-restoring grace of repentance. That's what we're looking at again, and what we're going to see is that part of how the soul is restored is the eyes are opened. That's what we've been saying the last couple of weeks. The eyes are opened to see things that we did not see before. This transformation of heart results in blind eyes now seeing. It results in Christians who were formerly blind, we're all born blind, we're blind to who God is, blind to how ugly our sin is, blind to what our real problem is, and when salvation comes, God opens the eyes, he regenerates the heart, he makes it new and suddenly those eyes that were blind now see. But then the Christian life is a continual need of repentance, that is, eye-clearing repentance because our vision gets dulled by the difficulty of living in a sin-filled world, living still in this body of flesh. There's a spiritual war that goes on in the life of a Christian and it produces sometimes numbing effects to our spiritual vision, and so we need repentance and it's our great need every day is to be repenting and believing and resting in Christ.

The soul-restoring grace of repentance. What I want us to look at today is it opens our eyes to see. This is the theme today. It opens our eyes to see our sin in an entirely different way. That's the theme of today's message. This is one of the key themes of this passage that is the theme of the message this morning. It helps us to see our sin in a way that we never saw it before. It helps us see our sin the way God sees it.

Now the reality is everybody, I mean, most reasonable people acknowledge that they are sinners. If you talk to an unbeliever, most people will acknowledge, yeah, they're sinners and by that they mean, "Yeah, I mess up. I mean, I'm not perfect. I don't do what's right all the time. I certainly am aware of that." But they have no idea of the true magnitude of their sin and you and I have the same tendency to minimize sin, to see it for much less

than it really is, to see it as much less ugly, much less offensive than it really is, and so we give lip-service to it. "Certainly I'm a sinner." In the same way, there's this other reality going on, we tend to minimize our sin and we also tend to minimize the greatness and glory of God. We don't see God as glorious as he is and we don't see our sin as offensive and ugly as it is. But when revival comes, the return of God's presence and light to his people, when you come to see God, you immediately come to see your sin. You can't come to see God truly without seeing your sin more clearly. It's what always happens.

Isaiah 6 we see this illustrated when Isaiah the prophet sees the Lord. "I saw the Lord." He actually saw God in the temple and what is his first response after seeing God and seeing his holiness? He says, "Woe is me, I am undone for I am a man of unclean lips." He's suddenly aware as he sees the holiness of God, he sees the filthiness of his own soul with incredible clarity, and in that he's terrified before a holy God.

That is what the vision of God does, it shows sin to be sin, to be exceedingly sinful, and so that's what we're going to see today. We're going to look at this aspect of repentance, it enables us to see our sin in a much more clear and vivid way. What I want to do is start reading the first section, the first five verses and then we'll read the rest as we go through the service. So we'll read the first five verses now of Nehemiah 9.

1 Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt upon them. 2 The descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. 3 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; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God. 4 Now on the Levites' platform stood Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani and Chenani, and they cried with a loud voice to the LORD their God. 5 Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah and Pethahiah, said, "Arise, bless the LORD your God forever and ever!...

Let's pray together.

Our Father, we ask now that You would bless the reading and preaching of Your word that we might in Your light see light, that Your word might open the eyes of our hearts to see the glory of Christ, the goodness of God, and the exceeding sinfulness of sin, that You might be worshiped more truly and deeply and delightedly in the lives of Your people whom You are redeeming for Your glory. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

So the soul-restoring grace of repentance, the renewed vision of our sin. And so what we see is, there are two points this morning that we want to gather our thoughts around. First of all, we want to observe the dramatic change. That's the first point: a dramatic change. A dramatic change. A whole-personed change of mind, affections and will in how we see our sin. That's what we witness in these pages. They see their sin in a whole new way,

and I want to say something real quickly. This is a brief caveat which will serve as a commercial for Wednesday night as well. There is an issue that this text touches almost tangentially, maybe a little more than tangentially, and that is when is corporate confession appropriate, what does it mean, how does it relate to the life of a particular individual Christian. This is something that's being talked a lot about in evangelicalism related to social justice right now, and how does corporate confession relate to that, and I'm going to really delve into that issue on Wednesday night because it's an important issue and it is touched upon in this passage, and I think there's a lot of instructive help here. But it's not the main point of this passage and so I don't want to do it on Sunday, spending the time doing that because it's going to take away from what the thrust of this passage really is because what we see when we really look at this passage carefully is that as we just read, they stood and confessed their sin and the iniquities of their fathers, verse 2. They saw their sin as connected to the sins of their fathers.

There's a couple of unique things going on here. First is, the people of Israel, the people of Judea who are now living in the renewed, restored province of Persia that is called Judah or Judea at this time, that Nehemiah is governor of, they are renewing the covenant of God and connected through covenant with all of God's people from the past. And one of the things that makes this unique and one of the things we have to talk about on Wednesday is how there's a connection when you are covenantally related to God. For instance, in America, America is not covenantally related to God and so a lot of this stuff is confused by misreading the Bible to think that you can just take this and apply it in this circumstance. It doesn't apply the same way. Now there are applications because the church needs to examine themselves. The church is covenantally related to God but America, that's irrelevant. It might as well be Persia to talk about that.

So that's my disclaimer and advertisement for Wednesday night. Wednesday night at 7 we'll be looking at that issue more carefully. What I want us to see is the main point of this passage is what these people are seeing, they're going to recount all of the iniquities of their fathers and they're going to say we share in that, not in that we were made guilty by that but we are made guilty by the fact that we do exactly the same thing now. We share their spirit, their heart attitude. All that they have done throughout all the history of God's people, we are just like that in our time, in our lives. And so this is what the reading of the law has done. They've read the law of God. Remember this is the revival sparked by the preaching of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. I mean, if we had a series that said and put on our sign out here, "Come, hear preaching series from Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy." That's not very attractive and most people, even Christians who know that it should be, would still be thinking, "Wow, this is going to be interesting." Right, if you're honest? That's how I'd feel.

I mean, I'm constantly amazed and one of the things I was sharing with somebody recently, they were talking about the encouragement they've gotten from the book of Nehemiah and I was telling them, I knew that when we started into Ezra/Nehemiah it would be helpful because God's word, I believe it. All Scripture is God-breathed and is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction. Every word of God, there's nothing that is not essential and relevant, and yet when you get into it, it's so much more relevant than you

expected and that's when I find, "Wow, Lord, You are so much more wonderful than I even realized." This passage is so much more, there's so much more here than I expected. The word of God is a vast fountain of life-giving truth and it's true for Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy as well, and that was the preaching material that sparks this great movement of God.

Remember we saw in chapter 8, they gathered for a four-hour preaching service on the first day of the seventh month. I mean, this is 445 BC, early fall. The seventh month of the year is Tishri in Hebrew, Hebrew calendar, September/October. So it's the last half of September, around the first day of autumn officially, somewhere around that. They gather together for that first preaching service. It's a four-hour preaching service. They read the law of God and they explain the law of God and the people are cut to the heart. Then they gather the next day for more reading and preaching. Then they see what they're supposed to do and they go out and they do it and they gather together again 10 days later for a full week of daily meetings of preaching the word of God, hearing the word of God. The same passages. And then they gather on this ninth day and what we just read is from the book of the law of the Lord their God, verse 3, they heard, they read from the book of the law of the Lord their God a fourth of the day. Another three-hour sermon and that sparks a fourth of the day following that of confession. Three hours of preaching followed by three hours of confession of sin. God is moving.

And this unlikely time, 445 BC, like I said, first day, around the first day of fall. When Israel looks like such a depressing place to be, I mean, the people really were. When you think about the dramatic change, first of all, there are just kind of three subpoints here that will help us, I think. Thinking about their circumstances, the dramatic change in the way they saw their circumstances. We talked about this before but it's so important because I think that it's all woven together. How you see your sin is obscured by the way you see your circumstances and their circumstances were not good. Politically they were under tyranny. Later in this chapter at the end, verse 36, they say twice, "Behold, we are slaves today." Slaves in the land that God has given them. They're back in the land but they're slaves. They're not a free people. They're not a nation that is on top of the world like they were under David and Solomon. They're not a nation with glorious moments of deliverance like they saw under Hezekiah. But they are a postage stamp of their former size, a tiny remnant. They're encircled by enemies who were not indifferent but hostile to them. Their enemies are actively involved in opposing the rebuilding of the wall, the restoration of worship. Why do they care so much? Well, God's allowed that to happen. They're surrounded on all sides by enemies who hate them and oppose the work and here they are, this small little group of people trying to live for God.

Economically they're struggling. Spiritually the community of faith is characterized by apathy and indifference, what you find as you read Ezra/Nehemiah. They're not aware of how much they're sinning. They have no idea. When Ezra preaches or he gets back there and he starts his preaching ministry. We don't have any of his sermons in the part of Ezra but we know that he's sharing the word of God because he came to teach the word of God. One of the things we see is in chapter 9, they come and they start repenting. They say, "Listen, we've been intermarrying with the other nations." That's 458 BC, 13 years

before where we are in chapter 9 of Nehemiah, actually 12 years before, okay? And you have something of a movement of God in that where they have a widespread repentance but it's not quite of the character of this one. But they realize they're wrong, they do a three month investigation to find out who's been sinning by intermarrying with the people, and they mourn over their sin but then 12 years later, they still are right where they were. They have not separated. They intermarry. You're going to see the same thing happening here in Nehemiah. They're going to have to investigate and root out their sin.

So spiritual apathy, you look around you if you lived in that day, you would look around you at spiritual apathy among the people of God. Political tyranny, economic uncertainty, spiritual opposition, social enmity. It was not a great place to be and they would be looking at their lives saying, "Why is it like this?" And the tendency of human beings, even those who have been redeemed, our fallen nature, this is the tendency, to look at our circumstances and to believe that somehow God is not being good or right in what he's doing. I mean, if you asked them for their problems, they might give you theologically the right answers. Hey, what's your biggest trouble? What's your biggest struggle? "Well, my sin." What do you believe about God? "He's good." Let's talk about life and what you would hear is they talked about life is how frustrating their circumstances were. "I'm dealing with this. I'm dealing with that. I don't know what I'm going to do about this. I don't know what I'm going to do about that. I don't know why." And if you listened really carefully, you would hear in their hearts really an uncertainty and a lack of trust in God. How many of you sound exactly the same way? Theologically you know that your sin is your biggest problem, you know theoretically that's the real issue, you know theoretically God is good, but how many of you are doubting his goodness when you look at your life?

If you are in that place, that's exactly where these people were, doubting God's goodness, wondering at his providence. Their future was bleak. It wasn't going to get a lot better from a human perspective, it wasn't going to get better at all, really. If they could have seen the future, and this is a good thing, God doesn't tell you the future. There's a good reason. We couldn't handle it. Their future was bleak. They were going to go from being subjects of Persia to being subjects of Greece, to then finally being subjects of Rome. And when Jesus comes on the scene, they're basically the same as they are here, they're slaves of Rome and they find out Jesus didn't come to deliver them from Roman tyranny, he came to deliver them from something much much more ugly, much much more oppressive, the tyranny of sin.

That's exactly what these people find out when revival comes. That their circumstances are not their problem, their problem is their heart and what happens is the locus of indignation, it's a phrase that R. C. Sproul uses that I like, locus of indignation, the location of their indignation. The focus of what they're indignant about tells you a lot about where someone's heart is and you see it in emotion, you see it in what really moves your heart. What are you indignant about? Are you most indignant about your circumstances? Then you need some reviving. You need God to show you who he is because if you were seeing correctly, if I was seeing correctly, what I would be most indignant about at every moment is what is most worthy of indignation, and what is most worthy of indignation at every moment in my life where I find myself is my own sin.

Even though I may have to be confronting someone else's sin because their sin, I'm loving them enough to speak truth to them, to speak the truth in love, to reprove them, as God says. If you love your neighbor as yourself, Leviticus 19:18 comes in the context, verse right before that says, "You shall surely reprove your neighbor." Think about that. "You shall surely reprove your neighbor. Love your neighbor as yourself." He's saying if you love your neighbor, you would want to do for them what you would want somebody to do for you. If you're thinking rightly, if I'm sinning, somebody tell me. Love me enough to tell me. So even though you're going to talk to someone else about their sin, the believer is someone who, even as he does that, is most indignant about his own sin.

This is the whole point of Matthew 7:1-5 where Jesus says when you go to talk to another brother, why is it that you try to help your brother get the speck out of his eye and you don't get the log out of your own eye? First get the log out, then you'll see clearly to get the speck out. He doesn't say, a lot of times the whole culture today and the church itself is, "Judge not lest you be judged. Get the log out." And so you spend all the time getting the log out but, no, Jesus didn't say that. He said get the log out so you can get the speck out. We're supposed to get the speck out. We're supposed to love one another enough to confront one another, but the point is when you're doing it rightly, even as you go, you go with humility because you're aware of your own sin even as you go, and there's a different tenor and spirit in someone who's humble before their own sin.

This dramatic change of seeing our sin for what it is, this is what we see in this passage and it is extraordinary. I want to read the passage and I want you to see and what you're going to see is what really sets, I think, what helps them to see their sin is at the same time they're seeing the goodness of God, the more they see the goodness of God, the more they see the exceeding sinfulness of sin and it's like these things are woven together in the passage. So they come together. The more you see the goodness of God, the more you see the ugliness of your own sin, and you see the ridiculousness of complaining about my circumstances, the awfulness and sinfulness of accusing God of wrongdoing in my circumstances which is what we're really doing when we are indignant about our circumstances. We're accusing the Holy One of Israel of wrongdoing. What insanity. That's what sin is, sin is insanity.

So look with me at this as we read on through. I'm going to read the rest of the passage and as I do, I want you to listen for the way they describe their sin. That's the main focus, and then also the goodness of God over against the ugliness of sin, and what I want us, as I suggested to you, they're not looking back at the past and saying, "Look at their sin. Their sin has created all these problems," in a way of judging the past. They are looking at the past and saying, yes, they're calling it and confessing truth, "This was wrong. What they did was wrong." But they're not in a sense of judging them because they realize they've been doing exactly the same thing. And when you look at Ezra/Nehemiah carefully, it's exactly, it's just so clear. Like I said, in Ezra 9 when Ezra gets back they immediately realize as he starts teaching the Bible, "Man, what are we doing? We've been intermarrying. We've been doing exactly what God's word says." Then 12 years later they need another revival. They're doing the same thing again. And then God's going to move in a mighty way and then Nehemiah is going to go away for a while back to his

boss, remember he's on leave. He's one of the key advisers in Persia in the providence of God. He's the cupbearer to the king of Persia, the whole empire. He's going to go back and spend an unspecified amount of time there and he's going to come back to Judah and he's going to have to really read the riot act to the people of God even after this revival. It doesn't mean this revival isn't incredibly powerful, it is. It just shows how sin is always there and repentance is a grace that we have to take with us every moment of every day all the way to the gates of heaven.

So listen as we read for the goodness of God and the sinfulness of sin. Verse 5. We'll pick up where we left off where they begin the prayer.

5 ...O may Your glorious name be blessed And exalted above all blessing and praise! 6 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.

Knowing that God has made everything, he's made you, he's made me, he's made every single human being, he formed us in our mother's womb, every single living thing, every single living person, every single living animal, every single living spirit, he made it all. It all belongs to him. Verse 7,

7 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, And made a covenant with him

That's that covenant, the context of the covenant. He made a covenant with Abraham and all of his descendants, his physical descendants, Israel, were in that covenant, in a covenant relationship with God. The covenant was,

To give him the land of the Canaanite, Of the Hittite and the Amorite, Of the Perizzite, the Jebusite and the Gergashite To give it to his descendants. And You have fulfilled Your promise, For You are righteous. [Continue to look at the character of God.] 9 You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, And heard their cry by the Red Sea. 10 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. 11 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. 12 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. 13 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. 14 So You made known to them Your holy sabbath, And laid down for them commandments, statutes and law, Through Your servant Moses. 15 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.

Look at all the goodness of God but now look at the back, that's the backdrop now, a white backdrop of pure beautiful holiness, goodness.

16 But they, our fathers, acted arrogantly; They became stubborn and would not listen to Your commandments. 17 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; And You did not forsake them. 18 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, 19 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. 20 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. 21 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.

Isn't that awesome? All those people and their feet didn't swell. As I get older, I appreciate that a lot more than I used to.

22 You also gave them kingdoms and peoples, And allotted them to them as a boundary. They took possession of the land of Sihon the king of Heshbon And the land of Og the king of Bashan. 23 You made their sons numerous as the stars of heaven [just like he told Abram], And You brought them into the land Which You had told their fathers to enter and possess. 24 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. 25 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. 26 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. 27 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. 28 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, 29 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. 30 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. [That's the exile.] 31 Nevertheless, in Your great compassion You did not make an end of them or forsake them, For You are a gracious and compassionate God. 32 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. 33 However, You are just in all that has come upon us; For You have dealt faithfully, but we have acted wickedly. 34 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. 35 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. 36 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. 37 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.

You see the people are not complaining about their circumstances anymore, are they? They've seen God. Twenty-seven different times in that passage they describe their sin in various phrases and words. Twice they speak of acting arrogantly, verse 16 and verse 29. Verse 16, "our fathers acted arrogantly." That's the first introduction of their sin. After all those verses, the first 15 verses recounting God's goodness in creation, his goodness to Abraham to make a covenant with him, his goodness to hear the cries of the people in Egypt to deliver them, to bring them through the Red Sea, his goodness to provide for them, to be present with them in a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day. God's incredible goodness, against that finally he says, "But our fathers acted arrogantly." The same verb is used in verse 29, "[You] admonished them in order to turn them back to Your law. Yet they acted arrogantly and did not listen to Your commandments." Says, "I acted arrogantly," is a word which pictures rushing into sin. The root word is "to boil; to seethe," like a pot of water boiling and boiling over, so is the heart of the people. They see though God was so good and so kind, the fathers rushed to evil and we see in ourselves the same awful propensity to run to evil, to run to shed blood.

Three different times I read through the New American Standard and you heard "became stubborn," verse 16. Right after he says, "our fathers acted arrogantly; They became stubborn." This is one place where I think the ESV and NIV have it better and the King James too. They translate this, the NAS is translating it conceptually but not as much word-for-word as they normally do. Literally it's "they stiffened their necks." That's what it says in verse 16, verse 17, verse 29, three times. They stiffened their necks. God has spoken, God has been kind but they rush into sin and they stiffen their necks. They're not responding to God's calling them back.

They're stiffening their necks against him and running away from him. In fact, when you look at verse 29, you see he gives this word picture of what sin, the nature of sin in the hearts of the people. When you read verse 29 he says, "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." That's one place where it translates it correctly. But turned a stubborn shoulder. He's picturing the physical dimension of what they're doing. God is speaking and they're turning away from the Lord, stiffening their necks.

Verse 26, another physical description. "But they became disobedient and rebelled against You, And cast Your law behind their backs." They stiffened their necks. They turned their shoulder. They cast your law behind their backs. This is the nature of sin. In all the time God in his great compassion, in his great kindness, in his loving them, in his pleading with them, is admonishing them and the people are stiffening their necks, turning their backs, casting his law behind their backs, hating him.

Would not listen, four different times it says they did not or would not listen, and it stands in marked contrast to the readiness of God to listen to them. Verse 16 is the first time, they "would not listen to Your commandments." They acted arrogantly, they became stubborn, and would not listen to your commandments. Look at verse 17, the second time, "They refused to listen." Twice in a row he says it. They would not hear. They would not heed. Repeated in verse 29 that we just read. "[You] admonished them in order to turn them back to Your law. Yet they acted arrogantly and did not listen to Your commandments but sinned." Verse 30, different phrase but the same idea, "However, You bore with them for many years, And admonished them by Your Spirit through Your prophets." Do you see how God's patiently bearing with them, sending them prophet after prophet? Look what it says, "Yet they would not give ear." How emphatic is that and several times in the passage you heard, "But when they cried out," when God gave them to discipline them, remember he gave them to the peoples of the land to judge them, "when they cried out," what did it always say? "God heard from heaven." They would not hear but God hears.

Do you see how awful it is to not listen to a God who listens to everything that we say. We who are of yesterday and know nothing, we who are simply just dust, and he listens to us. He who is eternal, matchless in power and glory, of greater worth and value than

we can conceive, and we don't listen to him. How incredible is that that he then abides with patience little, tiny creatures like you and me defying him to his face.

"Did not remember Your wondrous deeds. Made a calf for themselves and worshiped and committed great blasphemies," is said twice, verse 18 and verse 26. Verse 18 after they've made the golden calf he says, "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." That's all leading up to then to say this, "You, in Your great compassion, Did not forsake them." The main point of that sentence is God did not forsake them in spite of their great blasphemies. The idea of blasphemy is to show contempt for God; to despise him and thus to provoke his anger and his wrath.

So they are doing things to openly provoke God to wrath and yet he in his tenderness is not, he is not unrestrained in his anger. His anger is disciplining them, loving them, leading them to repentance. The goodness of God is leading them to repentance. And when you see your sin that way, when you finally see that what God has been doing in your life in every hardship that he's ever given you, he has been calling you back to himself. Every affliction intended in the heart of a child of God is to bring you to closer fellowship with a God who loves you in spite of the fact you and I don't deserve anything from him except wrath. And everything he's doing is for your good and that is not for him just to get glory, it is for his glory but it's for your good. It's for you to know him and to experience his wondrous beauty, to see him as all that he is and to know him for all that he is, and to experience all that you were made to be by living in fellowship as less than a worm like you and me, with fellowship with the eternal glorious King of heaven. That's what's happening in your life and my life when we wonder at God's providence. When we complain about what he's doing, we are being fools. How easy it is to do that, though, and yet there he is, the greatness of his compassion wooing us back to himself.

Dramatic change. They saw themselves differently, they saw their circumstances differently, they saw their sin differently. They were no longer thinking back and blaming past generations. They saw that this is what we have done. That's what they said at the end of the prayer, "It's because of our sins. You set these kings over us because of our sins. Not just their sins, our sins. We share in all of this wickedness. What they did is what we've been doing."

Then the wonder of it, how did this come about? How did this new unveiling of sin come? Because, listen, it's so painful to see your sin but it is such sweetness to see your sin when you know that Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin, that God washes away your sins, that he sees you as if you had never sinned in Jesus, that Jesus bore these sins in his body on the cross. He's taken them out of the way, having nailed them to the cross. He's disarmed Satan to have any ground of accusation against his people. There's nothing left. It's finished. It's done.

And I think that's one of the things that's happening in this passage. We don't see it clearly because we don't know exactly what passages were preached, but the second point. A dramatic change was the first point. A dramatic change in the way they see their

sin. How did it happen? That's the question, number 2: a dynamic power. A dynamic power. How did this change happen? The word of God, the law, hours and hours of reading and explaining the word, exposed sin, unearthed iniquity, brought to light rebellion and set on display the exceeding sinfulness of sin.

How that happened, well, part of it was by the explication of God's commandments, his holiness manifested in his law, the elevation of his requirement of perfection and perfect holiness. That's how you see repentance in your life, you have to see how far you are from the standard. That's why Jesus' first sermon we have recorded in depth is in Matthew 5, the Sermon on the Mount. In the beginning of his preaching, one of the first things he goes to is he says this, "You have heard it said," and he quotes a commandment and he says, "But I say to you. You have heard it said you shall not commit murder," that's the sixth commandment, "but I say to you, you shall not," basically, "call someone a fool," because if you call someone a fool, you're guilty of murder. What he's doing is he's taking the law and he's even raising the bar. Now he's not really, he's actually showing you what it always meant. He's saying, "I know you and you tend to dumb down the law. You hear 'you shall not murder' and you think only 'if I don't kill somebody actually, I can beat them up even, and I haven't violated that commandment. I can call them a fool, I can abuse them verbally but I've not violated that commandment.'" Jesus says, "Listen, if you've harbored thoughts that are demeaning people like that, you are a murderer before God and the only way you can get into heaven is to have never done that but to only love God with all of your heart, and love people because they're in His image. How can you hate an image-bearer and love God whose image is represented in that human being?" So he raises that. He does that with adultery. "You've heard it said don't commit adultery and so you think only if you haven't actually slept with someone, you're not guilty of that. No, I tell you if you've lusted in your heart, you're guilty, the standard that has always been perfection."

That's part of how God breaks our hearts and shows us but there's something else in the law itself that I want us to look at. There's another theme in God's law, another thread woven through every page and that theme is, this thread is the dynamic power that produces, the essence of revival that produces repentance. It's not merely the requirement of the law, it is the word of the cross that is there throughout the first five books of the Bible. The message of the cross not explicitly but implicitly, unmistakably so. Theologians have called this the scarlet thread that runs throughout the pages of Scripture. Thread is probably too weak of a word. It's a scarlet binding.

Genesis 3. As they were reading the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, they were hearing about God's holiness but they were also seeing God's mercy that was going to come through a sacrifice. In Genesis 3, what happens? They sin. What do they do when they sin? They clothe themselves with fig leaves to cover their sin, to cover their nakedness. What does God do? He kills animals and he covers them with animal skins. There is a message in that, without the shedding of blood there is no remission for sins, there is no covering of sin without the shedding of blood. God kills the first animal that ever died. God killed them. A God who loves every one of his creatures, a God who said when he created the whole world, he said, "It's all good." Every animal,

there were no defects in all of creation. He didn't want to kill that animal. He had to because that's the only way sin could be dealt with, and there it is in Genesis 3. In Genesis 4, why is Cain's offering rejected, Abel's offering is accepted? Because without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins.

We could go throughout and I'm just going to hit a couple of high points but you'll see it; if you read through and you look for it carefully, it's there everywhere. It's there in the story of Noah and the ark. It's there in the offering that he makes as he gets off the ark. It's there in chapter 15 of Genesis when God walks through the pieces and Abraham does not. That's the covenant ceremony in Genesis 15. Read that, the last half. God alone goes through the pieces in the covenant ceremony which says both parties were supposed to walk through the pieces. When you make a covenant, you cut a covenant, that's the image of how people would bind themselves together. A covenant relationship. A bond in blood sovereignly administered. The greater party and the lesser party come together and they kill animals, they cut them in half, they separate them, and both parties pass through the animal carcasses with the blood in them as they recite the promises of the covenant. They make commitments to one another and they pass through the pieces, and the message is, "If I don't keep my covenant, let me be as these animals." God makes a covenant ceremony with Abram, Genesis 15, to prove to him he's going to make him a great nation, but Abram does not pass through the pieces, only God passes through the pieces. So God is basically saying, "If I don't keep My covenant, let Me be as these pieces. And if you don't keep My covenant, let the curse of the covenant fall on Me."

So they're reading the law, they're seeing these images. They come to Exodus 12 and 13, they see God deliver, he hears the cries. But they also see God deliver. How does he deliver them from Egypt? Through the blood of the Passover lamb. The only way that the wrath of God can pass over the people of God is that they are covered in the blood of the lamb. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5:7, "Christ our Passover has been sacrificed." It was a type of Christ.

Leviticus chapters 1 to 5, after God shows up and begins to lead them through the wilderness, the pillar of fire by night, the pillar of cloud by day, he gives them instructions for the tabernacle. They make the tabernacle. Then he gives them instructions for offerings. The first five chapters of Leviticus, the burnt offering, the peace offering, the sin offering, the guilt offering, the fellowship offering. Then he tells them three times a year they're to come to Jerusalem to make offerings. And so animal blood is being spilled every day in the temple. I did some figuring on this. If there was just 2 million people, which is a low number for the people, and you had 8 people in a family and they had one offering a year, which would be a low number for what they should have done based on your need for a guilt offering, a peace offering, a sin offering, a burnt offering, if they just did one a year, there would be a death happening in the temple every 60 seconds. An ox, a lamb would be killed for a 12 hour day, 7 days a week, all year.

God meant his tabernacle to be a bloodbath. What is up with that? And you look at that and they read that, and they had the same initial reaction we did. They would say this, this is what a sinner does looking at that, "Why is God so hard? Why would he require

this?" Our indignation is misplaced. The indignation is what is wrong with us that would make this the requisite for a good God who made all of these animals to need this, to be able to stomach looking at us? That's what we should be thinking. And so that's what the law as they read it, they're seeing that but they're not just seeing how ugly is their sin, they're seeing God is going to make a sacrifice. God's going to do it.

In Genesis 22, one of the most difficult passages in all of Scripture if you read your Bible with asking questions and thinking about it as you read it, this is just the first, we haven't gone through Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, the first three books. There's a whole lot more than this but in Genesis 22, God comes down to Abraham. Abraham is well over 100, he's about 110 or 115 now, we don't know exactly. Isaac is probably somewhere around 10-12 years old. God comes to Abraham and he says, "Abraham, I want you to go to a mountain I will show you and offer your son Isaac as a sacrifice on that mountain." Abraham had waited 25 years after God promised to make him a great nation to get a son. He named him Isaac, laughter, because God made their hearts laugh in giving them Isaac in their old age. He was a miracle child. He was the one who through the promise was going to come, and now God told Abraham to go and offer him as a sacrifice. Kill him.

And you look at that and you read that and, listen, the language, you read it in Genesis 22. He says, "Take," listen to what God says, "Take your son, your only son whom you love." He didn't say, "Take Isaac." He said, "Take your son, your only son whom you love." It's as if God is turning the knife on Abraham as he's telling him that. "Take your son, your only son whom you love and go to the place I will show you and offer him as a sacrifice." Abraham arose early the next morning, saddled his donkey, took two servants with him, loaded wood on, took a knife. They go and they go to a far distance. They come to the vicinity what would later be Jerusalem, Mount Moriah, and he tells the servants, "Stay here and I and the boy are going to worship and return to you." Abraham had faith already right there. "We are going to return."

He walks over there and can you imagine the heartache of this man and the crisis of faith this is creating as he takes this 12 year old boy and he walks with him, and then agony becomes greater when Isaac says, "Father, I have a question. We have the knife, we have the fire, we have the wood, where is the sacrifice?" And Abraham says, "The Lord will provide." He walks the rest of that way with his son. He sets the wood for the fire. He's waiting for God to provide. God's not doing anything and he binds his son Isaac, lays him on the wood, raises the knife, and God says, "Abraham, Abraham!" He stops him from offering the sacrifice. Why? Why do that, Lord? Why do that awful providence to Abraham? Why treat him so harshly?

That's how we think, isn't it? Because God using that language "your son, your only son whom you love, your son, your only son whom you love, take him and offer him." And Abraham when God says, "Don't kill the boy. I now know that you worship Me." And he sees in the thicket a ram. He offers the ram in his place and the author of Hebrews tells us in Hebrews 11 that when he took Isaac off of the offering place and offered the ram, when he took Isaac, he knew God would raise Isaac from the dead because God had said, "Through Isaac your descendants will be blessed." Abraham knew that, "If I kill him,

You're going to raise him because You keep Your word." That's why he said, "We're going to worship and come back. We're coming back." Because God said he's going to bless the world through Isaac and God doesn't lie. But still how his heart must have been just wrecked by this.

So now it says when he took Isaac back off of the altar that he's made, he received him back as a type, the author of Hebrews says. What happens is Abraham suddenly in this moment sees ahead into the future and he sees that his son, his only son whom he loved must be offered up to make him right with God. No, in reality it's God's Son, God's only Son whom he loves whom he will not spare, must be offered. And he sees into the future, he sees the glory of Christ and if you ask Abraham was it worth it? "Yes. A million times. I saw Christ." God is the one who loves us so much that he gave his Son, his only Son whom he loves.

So you see these people in Ezra/Nehemiah, when they heard the law preached, they didn't just hear the 10 Commandments, they saw the grace of God, they saw the word of the cross. They saw God's perfect standard and they saw God's perfect provision merged in the preaching of the law of God, and they saw this is the way to be saved. And when they saw the glory of God's love what they said, "Listen, if it took that, if it took God sending His Son, His only Son whom He loves, not sparing Him, He did not spare His Son but delivered Him up for us all, how shall we not together with Him freely receive all things?" God did not spare his own Son. That's how much your sin and my sin cost. God could not bring us to himself. In his holiness, though he is so full of compassion, so ready to forgive, so ready to be patient, his holiness demands justice. He could not bring us to himself without sacrificing his Son. Your sin, my sin, cost Jesus the cross. If my sin is that ugly, I should hate it in a way I never have before. You should hate it.

That's how ugly it is and that's why it's the dominant problem in every circumstance. It's not what's going on around me, it's my own sin and my need for Christ, and in the context of that, the ugliness of sin, a continual repenting, and yet a continual delighting in the love of God and the salvation that Jesus Christ has made known. That's the gospel. That's how God wants us to live. Isn't he good? Isn't he worthy?

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Our Father, we rejoice in Your great goodness, Your immeasurable kindness. We say with the Apostle Paul, "Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift." Words cannot convey, unworthy to try to even describe the magnitude of Your love, the infinitude of Your goodness, Your kindness, and at the same time the awfulness of our sin. God, make us hate sin. Help us, those who belong to You already to hate it more and more and more and to cling to Christ with more joy, more fervency. And for those that are here that have not truly trusted, O God, help them today. Grant them the grace of repentance to see their sin as it is in all of its ugliness, and to see Jesus as He is in all of His beauty, goodness and sufficiency and bring them home. We pray that You'll do this for Your glory for You are worthy. In Jesus' name. Amen.