

True Confessions

Neh. 9:1-5 (pray)

The first home that Janice and I ever owned was a small ranch on Long Island back in the 90's. It only had one bathroom, and the shower had a small window in it that faced our back yard. Unfortunately the water from the shower would collect in the window sill and over time the sill began to rot and eventually that began to rot the sheetrock underneath the window. It wasn't obvious at first because the shower wall tiles hid what was going on, but under those tiles the wall became mushy with rot, and there came a day when someone put a little too much pressure on the wall and a 2x2' section of the wall just kind of mushed inward. At first it was just a slight indent in the wall, but over time that indent got larger and larger until we knew it was only a matter of time before the tiles stopped holding things together and we'd have a gaping hole in the shower wall.

So one day I decided to tackle the problem and assembled all the tools I needed to fix the wall: a pair of scissors, a white garbage bag, and a roll of duct tape. Carefully I cut the garbage bag open, laid it flat over the mushy section of the wall and neatly taped all around the edges so that no more water could get in and we couldn't see the indent anymore. I remember being pretty impressed with what a good job I did, and how well the white garbage bag matched the white tiles of the shower wall. It was almost like a professional had done it!

Of course, I didn't actually fix the problem; I just covered the problem up. Covering the rot just allowed the problem to get worse. Eventually we had to have a friend rip out the entire wall –including my garbage bag repair job – and then rebuild the wall. Any true solution couldn't just cover the rot, it had to remove the rot so that what was built would be strong and sound.

Sin is a kind of dry rot of the soul. God created us in His image, but sin eats away at that image, so that the reflection of God's love and compassion and righteousness and justice and truth telling turns to rot in our souls as we grow more selfish and unloving and proud and unrighteous and deceitful. Also because of sin, we are hard wired to hide that rot, covering it from view, where it can grow unhindered. Adam and Eve hid from God in the garden, and we've been hiding ever since. True spiritual revival is always accompanied with a desire to rip off the coverings and expose our sin to God through confession. Not so that He can hurt us, or shame us, but so that He can begin rebuilding us through repentance and forgiveness.

In Neh. chapter 9 we see the continuation of a spiritual revival in the people of God that began in chapter 8. In chapter 8 Ezra read God's word to the people on the first and second day of the seventh month and they responded deeply to the word of the Lord: they weep, they laugh, they pray, and they begin to obey commandments that the Jews had neglected for a long time. One such commandment was the observance of the Feast of Tabernacles, and so they went out and collected branches and built small booths (shelters) on the roofs over their home and on the 15th of the month they moved into those booths and stayed there for seven days as a way of remembering Israel's 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. But this wasn't a sad time, it was actually a joyful time as they not only looked back on the 40 year wandering, but they also looked around and saw God's faithfulness to His people and all that God had blessed them with, and for seven days they feasted and enjoyed God's goodness to them. Finally on the 22nd of the seventh month they ended the feast and began to disassemble the temporary booths. And then we read in chapter 9 that on the 24th day of the seventh month, another wave of God's Spirit washes over the Jews, but this wave brings with it a deep sorrow and repentance over their sins and the

sins of their ancestors and with sackcloth and ashes they stand up and begin confessing their sins *out loud*. They rip off the garbage bags and duct tape that was hiding their sins and they cry out to God in true confession and repentance. Nehemiah chapters 1-7 are about rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. Nehemiah chapters 8-13 are about rebuilding God's people from a fractured and disunified crowd into a community of strong and unified believers.

There's a lot to cover in this chapter, but I want to break it down to two big points about confession of sin:

I. To see the depth of our sin, we first need to see the height of God's greatness

Here's what I love about this chapter: when you start reading it and they begin to confess their sin, you think this is going to be a chapter that is centered on their sin and failings. It's not! This chapter is not centered on sin, it's centered on God and His greatness!

In verse 5 the Levites command the Jews to "stand up and bless the Lord your God from everlasting to everlasting." And then they begin to do just that – they begin to exalt God and His greatness in specific ways and aspects in Israel's history.

1. God's greatness in creation: (vs. 6)

"You are the Lord, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, 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.

2. God's greatness in covenant (vs 7-8):

7 You are the LORD, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham. 8 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.

3. God's greatness in delivering Israel from Egypt (vv. 9-12)

9 "And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea, 10 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. 11 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. 12 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.

4. God's greatness in giving the law (vv. 13-14)

13 You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments, 14 and you made known to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses your servant.

5. God's faithfulness in providing for their needs (vv.15)

15 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.

Then, in verse 16 they shift their focus and begin to contrast God's greatness with their father's sinfulness. Their fathers were rebellious and stiff necked and disobedient. They answered God's amazing kindness to them by forging an idol out of gold and worshipping it. And that's how the rest of the chapter goes – long looks at God's greatness, kindness, faithfulness, power and glory, and then heartfelt confession of their contrasting ungratefulness, unfaithfulness, idolatry, and wickedness. They are taking an honest and humble look at their sin, but the overwhelming emphasis is on God's greatness, not their sin.

This is an important thing for the church today to keep in balance. In recent years the pendulum has swung in some church quarters, including some popular preachers and books, towards removing the concept of sin out of their teachings. The word sin is considered a bad and negative term (and it's not politically correct!) so it is replaced with more acceptable terms like pain and low self-esteem and keys to living better, more successful lives. And God is represented as the greatest motivational speaker in the world, always affirming and encouraging us – we can do it, with God's help! With scissors and garbage bags and duct tape, these preachers cover over sin and act like, if we don't mention it, it's not there.

This is spiritually dangerous ground because when we lose an honest admission of our sin and the guilt of our souls, we lose our grip on the gospel itself, because Jesus said he didn't come to call the righteous, but to call sinners (in other words, those who are honest enough to confess that they are sinners) and the very core of the gospel is this wonderful truth: Jesus died for our sins! The first step towards spiritual healing is honest confession of our sins!

But it is also possible to swing too far in the other direction where we are always focusing on our sins. We need to deal with our sin. We need to confess our sin in order to be healed. But we want to learn a lesson from the way this community of Jewish believers did it – with their gaze fixed on God and His greatness! We serve an awesome God, who is way beyond what we can even begin to imagine – but it's refreshing to our souls to contemplate His greatness and His glory and it will do far more to free us from the chains of sin than focusing on our sin will ever do!

The other day I went to Heavenly Cup to work on the message, and where I sat down, the sun was shining through the window and as I opened my computer up, the sunlight revealed something that I couldn't see before: my computer screen was covered with dust. I felt embarrassed for anyone to see how dusty it was! So I got a cloth and wiped it down.

We can't see our sin clearly until we see the glory and greatness of our God. And there's no comparing the dust on my computer with the glory of the sun. I don't want to spend the rest of my life contemplating dust, looking at dust, and filling my life with dust! I don't want to live a "dust-centered life"! I want to clean it and get on with life! With something as glorious and life-giving as the sun, why would I want to spend my life looking at dust?

God is glorious – His glory eclipses the sun. *You are the Lord, you alone.* Everything in our hearts that long for something noble, strong, courageous, good, *glorious* is longing for God. God is faithful – day after day, month after month, year after year, decade after decade, century after century, millennium after millennium, *everlasting to everlasting*, God is faithful. He will never fail His children. Never abandon His

children. Never neglect His children. Never just drop the ball on His children. Never. God is faithful. And that greatness works out in every aspect of who God is: merciful, compassionate, righteous, wise, loving, just, holy, powerful, and on and on. You are the Lord, you alone.

When we catch a glimpse through His word and by His Spirit of His greatness, we see how ungreat we are. We aren't glorious, we are weak, cowardly, un noble creatures. When we see His faithfulness, we see how unfaithful we are. We run to God when we need something and forget Him the minute the need is met. We promise our love to God, then commit spiritual adultery with the world and our pet sins. We see by the light of His greatness how dusty we are (how sinful we are), and it's painful, but it's good. It's not to condemn us but to make us aware of our desperate need for His forgiveness and mercy in our lives.

Romans 3:23 says *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* – we fall so far short of His perfect standards. But God's answer isn't to lower His standards to meet us, His answer is to raise us by *His power* through Christ to meet His standards, as Romans 3:24 goes on to say: *and are justified* (that is, made righteous in His sight) *by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...*

As God uses Nehemiah to rebuild this community of believers, He brings them to a place of confession and repentance of sin, by bringing them to a place of amazed wonder at the greatness of God. That's what we want to do: unashamedly confess that we are sinners, but never make that what we're about. Why look at dust, when there is a blazing sun to be amazed at?

II. When we uncover our sin to God through confession God covers our sin with mercy

This prayer not only emphasizes God's greatness, but also the covenant this great God makes with His people, starting with Abraham, but continued through the history of Israel. Over and over again, God is faithful to them, they are unfaithful to God, God allows their enemies to overtake them, they cry out to God, and in mercy He forgives His covenant people and saves them. Over and over again we see this covenant mercy expressed in forgiveness of their sin:

"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." Vv. 16-17

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. Vs. 27

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. Vs. 28

Over and over again they would turn from God, God would allow them to experience the rot of their choices, which would drive them back to God, tearing off the garbage bags and duct tape and crying out for mercy and help, which God would freely give. Over and over again. Why? Because God is a faithful, covenant-keeping God. Even when we break covenant, He keeps it, and when we confess our sin, He is ready to forgive.

Re:building
Allen Snapp
Grace Community Church
Oct. 20, 2013

It's a paradox: God calls us to uncover our sin – so He can cover it with that which really covers it: His forgiveness. In Psalm 32 David prays, *For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.*

It's a description of the dry rot of sin and the life-killing effects it has on our souls. But David goes on to describe the remedy: *I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.*

That is why he opens the Psalm with this declaration: *Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.*

When we hide our sins, it eats away at us, and it eats away at our fellowship with God and others. But when we come to Jesus, we take the cover off, rip the garbage bag and duct tape off the rot and expose it to God, and here's the beautiful thing: He covers our sin with mercy.

He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy. Prov. 28:13

Going to ask Steve to come and in a moment lead us in a closing song. Maybe there are some here who have tried to cover their sin rather than allow God to cover it. And it's rotting away underneath the surface. Maybe no one sees it, but God sees it, and you know it's there. And it's rotting away – that's what hidden sin does – it rots. Eventually the wall will push in and it will be obvious. But God has a sweet remedy – come to Him, confess to Him, ask for forgiveness and grace to forsake that sin and obey Jesus. He wants to rip your plastic bag covering off so that He can truly cover your sin with the blood of His Son Jesus Christ.

As we close, let's take a moment in quiet reflection, allowing the Spirit to bring sweet conviction to our souls. Confess that sin to God, bring it to the light, and experience His forgiveness full and free.