

Nehemiah 9

His Mercy is More

I wonder if you're in the habit of making New Year's resolutions
We often like to start the year positively don't we
We want to be better
We want to make changes
With a renewed conviction to improve ourselves
In 2026 I commit myself to...finish the sentence
Eat less
Exercise more
Less screen time
Read more books
Spend more time with the people I love
Learn a new skill
Travel more
Declutter

And for those of us who are followers of Christ
We might throw in a few resolutions like these:
I commit to...read the bible more
Pray more
Sin less

But if you're anything like me
By January 3 – reality kicks in

What started as a year filled with promise and potential
Stumbles on the cold hard face of reality
It's too hard to change
I'm too lazy
And all those noble resolutions end up in bin with all my good intentions
Mixed with a strong dose of disappointment and failure

And where does that leave us with God?
When you fail miserably to pray more
To read the bible more and sin less
After all, how does that saying go:
The road to hell is paved with good intentions
What happens when you fail time after time to obey God and please Him

If you relate to this then today's passage
Is a helpful reminder at the start of a new year

The context of where we left Nehemiah was in chapter 8
Nehemiah had boldly led the returned exiles from Persia back to Jerusalem
To rebuild the walls of Jerusalem
Which they achieved in a remarkable 52 days
And to commemorate this
The priest Ezra and the governor Nehemiah assembled the whole nation
And in chapter 8, Ezra reads the Book of the Law to the people

And the people are told to celebrate in response
They feast and rejoice in the strength of the Lord
Even though they remained under Persian rule.
God has brought His people back to the Land He had given them
And here they were reading His Law

But the tone is completely different by chapter 9
The Israelites once again gather together that same month
But this time the feasting with joy is replaced with fasting in grief
They wear sackcloth and dust their head with ashes
Because this is a nation confessing their sin before God

We're going to unpack this chapter together
By looking at these two statements

**The Bible reminds us that God is mighty and merciful.
Therefore, we confess our sins with honest humility.**

Let's look at that first phrase in particular
The Bible reminds us.

At the start of both chapters 8 and 9
The book of the law is read out loud to the people
In chapter 8 Ezra reads God's word for 6 hours
And in chapter 9, God's word is read for a fourth of the daylight hours which is 3 hours
And what you notice is that God's word drives the response of the people

In chapter 8 verse 9
the people were weeping as they heard the words of the law.
And then in chapter 9 the reading of the law drove the people
To confession and worship of God

And that remains important for God's people
We are people of God's word
Because God's word does God's work in our lives
We're about to run our Get Some Fun, kids holiday program in a week's time
And yes we do lots of fun games, activities dramas, crafts and songs
And I'm sure that's true of lots of kids holiday programs this summer

But the teaching of God's word is central to what we do at GSF
Because it's God's word that reveals Jesus to kids
And that word can change their lives if they come to know Him

Every Sunday we're committed to teaching God's word chapter by chapter
Why?
Because God's word convicts us of sin
And God's word brings forgiveness and eternal life in Jesus
God's word does God's work

On a Sunday, God's word drives how we choose our songs of confession and praise
God's word shapes how and what we pray for

God's word sets the agenda for our life together as a church

But what about you?

Will God's word set the agenda for your own life this year?

Why not start a bible reading plan this week?

This year as part of our preaching program at Bundy

We're going to spend quite a bit of the year looking closely at the gospel of Luke

Why not commit to studying the book of Luke in your own bible reading this year

If you use the YouVersion Bible App on your phone

Why not look for a bible reading plan on the book of Luke

I found this one by the Bible Project

Where you can read the book of Luke and Acts over 52 days

What great way to start 2026.

And ultimately the value of reading God's word

Is that God's word gives you a big view of God.

In a moment we're going to look closely at the prayer of the Levite priests

Who led the nation in this confessional prayer

And the thing about this prayer is that it is full of Scripture.

And as a result, it paints a majestic picture of God

That's what we're going to see In this prayer,

God is mighty and merciful.

Now I want to get you to observe the text of this prayer

But I want to do it a little differently.

To help those like me,

Who think visually

Before the service,

I gave out pieces of paper to you

And they have numbers on the back

So if you have one of those pieces of paper,

can I get you to come to the front of the church and to sit on one of these chairs

In order from 1 to 10, come and sit on the chairs on the stage

If you have numbers 11 – 16 please sit on the chairs on the floor

I'm going to read through the text and get you to observe what the passage says about God

That's the people sitting on stage

And then what it says about people

That's the people sitting on the floor

(Verse 5)

Blessed be the Lord your God from everlasting to everlasting."

Blessed be your glorious name,

and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise.

6 You, [a] Lord, are the only God. [b]

You created the heavens,

the highest heavens with all their stars,

the earth and all that is on it,

the seas and all that is in them.

*You give life to all of them,
and all the stars of heaven worship you.*

Creator (v.5,6)

We see from the outset in Genesis
That God is almighty creator and sustainer of the universe

*7 You, the Lord,
are the God who chose Abram
and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans,
and changed his name to Abraham.*

*8 You found his heart faithful in your sight,
and made a covenant with him
to give the land of the Canaanites,
Hethites, Amorites, Perizzites,
Jebusites, and Gergashites—
to give it to his descendants.
You have fulfilled your promise,
for you are righteous.*

God is Promise Maker and Promise Keeper

In Genesis 12, God chooses Abram out of nowhere
And promises to give him land and to bless the world through his descendants
We jump now to Exodus in the prayer

*9 You saw the oppression of our ancestors in Egypt
and heard their cry at the Red Sea.*

*10 You performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh,
all his officials, and all the people of his land,
for you knew how arrogantly they treated our ancestors.
You made a name for yourself
that endures to this day.*

*11 You divided the sea before them,
and they crossed through it on dry ground.
You hurled their pursuers into the depths
like a stone into raging water.*

*12 You led them with a pillar of cloud by day,
and with a pillar of fire by night,
to illuminate the way they should go.*

Rescuer and Leader

This reminds us of Miriam's victory song in Exodus
God rescued His people from slavery defeated their enemies
Then led them through the promised land

*13 You came down on Mount Sinai,
and spoke to them from heaven.
You gave them impartial ordinances, reliable instructions,
and good statutes and commands.*

*14 You revealed your holy Sabbath to them,
and gave them commands, statutes, and instruction*

through your servant Moses.

*15 You provided bread from heaven for their hunger;
you brought them water from the rock for their thirst.
You told them to go in and possess the land
you had sworn^[c] to give them.*

God is lawgiver

At Sinai where Moses received the 10 commandments

And God is provider

When he fed their bodies with manna and quail
And gave them water for their thirst

And here is where we start to see how people treated God

*16 But our ancestors acted arrogantly;
they became stiff-necked and did not listen to your commands.*

*17 They refused to listen
and did not remember your wonders
you performed among them.
They became stiff-necked and appointed a leader
to return to their slavery in Egypt.^[d]*

People are arrogant and stiff necked.
Like stubborn animals that would not be guided with a yoke
because their necks would not turn
The people rejected God's commands
They were stubborn and wilful
And whinged to return to slavery in Egypt

Verse 17 is I think the key verse of this passage

*But you are a forgiving God,
gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and abounding in faithful love,
and you did not abandon them.*

This is a direct quote of Exodus 34 after Israel made the golden calf and worshipped it
Rather than destroying Israel in judgement
God relented and he spared them from full destruction

*18 Even after they had cast an image of a calf
for themselves and said,
"This is your god who brought you out of Egypt,"
and they had committed terrible blasphemies,
19 you did not abandon them in the wilderness
because of your great compassion.*

The people of Israel participated in **idol worship and terrible blasphemies**

In spite of the terrible sin of His people
God sent his spirit to instruct them verse 20

And he takes his people right to the edge of the promised land

*²² You gave them kingdoms and peoples
and established boundaries for them.*

*They took possession of the land of King Sihon^[el] of Heshbon
and of the land of King Og of Bashan.*

*²³ You multiplied their descendants
like the stars of the sky
and brought them to the land
you told their ancestors to go in and possess.*

*²⁴ So their descendants went in and possessed the land:
You subdued the Canaanites who inhabited the land before them
and handed their kings and the surrounding peoples over to them,
to do as they pleased with them.*

*²⁵ They captured fortified cities and fertile land
and took possession of well-supplied houses,
cisterns cut out of rock, vineyards,
olive groves, and fruit trees in abundance.*

*They ate, were filled,
became prosperous, and delighted in your great goodness.*

This takes us into books like Joshua, Judges and 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Samuel
God helps them to possess the land He promised them

He is their **Kingdom provider**

He gave them kings

He multiplied them and made them a great nation

But how did they treat Him in response.

²⁶ But they were disobedient and rebelled against you.

*They flung your law behind their backs
and killed your prophets who warned them
in order to turn them back to you.*

They committed terrible blasphemies

The people are **disobedient, murderous and rebellious.**

Rejecting God's law and His messengers

And then the next few verses refer to Judges, Kings and eventually the exile

A cycle of people rebelling against God

Being oppressed, crying out to God then God delivering them

Only for the cycle to continue again once they forgot about God

What do we learn about God?

He delivered them, disciplined them, rescued them (v.27)

Only for the people to do evil in his sight and to act with arrogance

And disobedience to His law (v.28, 29)

And so God hands Israel over to the nations to be exiled

First to Assyria then to Babylon

And so we come now to the very time of the people of gathered in Nehemiah 9

As they look at all the past sin of Israel

They say this about God

*31 However, in your abundant compassion,
you did not destroy them or abandon them,
for you are a gracious and compassionate God.*

Patient, Gracious, Compassionate

Sounds very much like verse 17

All the way back in Exodus.

This is the God that they are now confessing their own sin to
Listen to how they approach God in prayer about their own sin

*32 So now, our God—the great, mighty,
and awe-inspiring God who keeps his gracious covenant—
do not view lightly all the hardships that have afflicted us,
our kings and leaders,
our priests and prophets,
our ancestors and all your people,
from the days of the Assyrian kings until today.*

*33 You are righteous concerning all that has happened to us,
because you have acted faithfully,
while we have acted wickedly.*

*34 Our kings, leaders, priests, and ancestors
did not obey your law
or listen to your commands
and warnings you gave them.*

Acted wickedly, disobedient (v.33,34)

They Levite priests praying this acknowledge that God was right in punishing them in exile
God has been righteous but they have acted wickedly

They have been disobedient to God

This is a very honest prayer isn't it

There is no sugar coating their behaviour towards God

And here is their situation

*36 Here we are today,
slaves in the land you gave our ancestors
so that they could enjoy its fruit and its goodness.*

Here we are—slaves in it!

37 Its abundant harvest goes to the kings

*you have set over us,
because of our sins.*

*They rule over our bodies
and our livestock as they please.
We are in great distress.*

They are slaves to Persian kings while living in their own land

In great distress because of their own sin

This is their prayer of confession to God

What are your observations?

As you look at this prayer – what does it say about God?

He is Mighty and Merciful?
So patient with His people
He could have wiped them out at any point
And yet He didn't, He was gracious and compassionate
Rescuing them
Prospering them
Blessing them

And what does it say about people?

Stubborn, Wilful, Slow to learn
Arrogant, rebellious, Contemptuous towards God
Just plain sinful

I don't know about you but when I look at Israel
I see myself – this is not just their history
It is my history
How many times have I sinned because I have taken God's mercy for granted
How many times have I rejected His commands even knowing they are for my good
And yet God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger.
Our sins they are many, but His Mercy is more

Thank you I'm going to dismiss all my helpers
You can return to your seats
You can leave the paper on the seats.

By the time we reach the New Testament,
We realise that human sinfulness has not changed
People continue to treat God with the same wickedness and rebellion
But God's Might and Mercy intensifies even more
The cross of Christ is that display of Might and Mercy

Romans 5 verse 8
While we still sinners, Christ died for us

God's mercy reaches new depths
Depths that the Law could never reach.

Romans 5 verse 20
²⁰ The law came along to multiply the trespass. But where sin multiplied, grace multiplied even more ²¹ so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace will reign through righteousness, resulting in eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The cross of Christ brings the grace of God in ways
That Ezra and Nehemiah could never have imagined
Sin and death ruled over people since Adam
And the law did not curb this sin but intensified it
And yet Grace and eternal life through Christ would rule even more
Such that God would pour out His Spirit in this new covenant

And write the law on people's hearts according to the prophecy of Jeremiah 31
And not on tablets of stone.

How awesome is God?

I mean he is awesome enough in the prayer of Nehemiah 9
But in Christ, we see even more of His Might and Mercy
Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus
Not even our Sin
Not even Death – the consequence of our sin

And on the basis of God's might and mercy

Therefore we confess our sins with honest humility

So can I encourage you that when you fail at your own resolutions
Here's a better resolution for you

Be real about your sin

We can be real about our sin individually and corporately
There is no need to pretend to God
We often feel the need to fake it til we make it with others
But we don't need to do that before God
We can be real about the many ways that we stuff up
When we have worshipped other things more than God
When we have treated others with contempt, anger, envy, lust
Like the nation in Nehemiah 9
We can say, we are in great distress because we have sinned

The apostle James tells us to not to pretend to God but to be real
James 4 verse 8

⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Be miserable and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

It sounds a bit like Nehemiah 9 doesn't it
And It's so important then, that when others share honestly with you about their sin
That you don't recoil
That you don't rush to judge
That you don't compare and gossip
Instead you should listen with humility
Thank them for sharing
And then pray with them
To help them to seek God's forgiveness for their sin
For all of us are fellow sinners, in need of God's might and mercy.
And we can be real with each other.

Finally confess your sin

Soon we will be doing that through song after the sermon
As we sing Psalm 130 – a song confessing our sin against God
And this will lead us into a time of prayer where we will be led in a time of confession
Confessing our sin is something that we ought to do on a regular basis as God's people
But here's another resolution for you

Confess your sin to God in your own prayers and in your own bible reading
Many psalms are psalms of confession
Why not make a plan to read through psalms of confession as part of your bible reading
Confession is something that we ought to do regularly
We should say Sorry to God, for like Israel
We will continue to sin against God, but he invites us to confess our sins.

1 John 1 verse 9 says
If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Through Christ, justice for sin has been met
The debt of sin paid for
And we have been cleansed,
We have been given Christ's righteousness
And yes, confession of sin does mean changed behaviour
And we will see that next week in Nehemiah Chapter 10
But what confession of sin doesn't mean is this
It doesn't mean self-loathing
It doesn't mean giving up in despair
It does mean having a bigger and deeper view of God as we have seen today
Confessions of sin, says more about God than it does about us

This is a famous photo of the lighthouse at La Jument
Of the coast of Brittany in north western France
In December 1989, a huge storm was generating 20-30 metre waves
And these waves were crashing hard into the lighthouse
Jean Guichard hired a helicopter to take photos of these waves
And Theodore Malgorn the lighthouse keeper
Heard the helicopter and opened the door to see what was happening
Just as he opened the door, Guichard took that famous photo
At the very moment a huge wave crashed into the lighthouse
And threatened to swallow up Malgorn and take his life
Malgorn, suddenly realising that a giant wave was about to engulf the structure, rushed back inside just in time to save his life. In an interview he said "If I had been a little further away from the door, I would not have made it back into the tower. And I would be dead today. You cannot play with the sea."

I want you to remember that photo as you leave today
Just as you cannot play with the sea
You cannot play with sin
Sin and its consequences, threaten to engulf and destroy you
And when you feel like you are going to be swallowed up by your own sin
Remember that God is that lighthouse in the storm
He will save you, if you take refuge in Jesus
He is your light in the darkness of your sin
He is your rock, the tower of your strength and salvation
For he is a forgiving God
Gracious and Compassionate,
Slow to anger and abounding in faithful love
So turn to him and confess – our sins they are many, his mercy is more.