

“You have dealt Faithfully, We have acted Wickedly”

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 26 October 2025

Preacher: Joe Hall

[0:00] How did we get here? How did we get here? That's the question I think the people of God are asking at this point, and possibly the question that we're asking as we open up the book of Nehemiah, how did we get here?

Remember, the wall project is finished, so maybe it feels a bit of a gear shift to suddenly find God's people wearing sackcloth and with earth on their heads and fasting.

But this has been coming for the best part of a month since Ezra, the priest and the scribe, read from the book of the law for everyone who could understand it.

And we find that was the first day of the month, the same month, and it made a really big impact. We read all the people wept as they heard the words of the law.

They were words that perhaps they'd never heard before in their whole lives. It's the first time for generations that God's word is being heard in God's city. And as we'll see in our passage today, it had some really hard truths to lay down.

[1:14] But at that point, Ezra and all of the priests told everyone, do not mourn, stop crying. Because it turned out that day was a feast day, a day for rejoicing and sharing and celebrating God's goodness.

Do not be grieved, they said, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. That was followed quickly by another festival, the Feast of Booths, which lasted a whole week.

So the people didn't really have time to properly process their grief over what they had heard from God's word. And so we're told, 9 verse 1, that a couple of weeks later, the 24th day of that same month, they came together ready to lament and to repent.

Wearing uncomfortable, itchy clothes, going without food, covering themselves with dirt, they were signs that they were prepared and committed to responding rightly and fully to God's law with wholehearted repentance.

Now perhaps we wonder, did they really need to go back and do that? I mean, hadn't the people told them, don't cry? But notice the Levites didn't say that they were wrong to be upset or moved before, only that it was the wrong day to be upset.

[2:42] And now the feasts are over, it's the Levites again, verse 5, who now lead their corporate confession. So really this is a timing issue, or we could say a gospel grammar issue.

They did need to be cut to the heart. They did need to confess their sin, to turn their lives around. But first of all, they needed to know the grace and peace and joy of the Lord.

It's getting the order right, isn't it? It's grace, law, grace. Not law, grace, law. Grace comes first. And so it is in light now of God's grace that they set aside another day to let their godly grief lead them to repentance.

For a quarter of the day, they listen again to the book of the law being read, and for another quarter of the day, they made confession and worshipped the Lord. Whichever way you count it, whether you count the day as being, you know, 24 hours sunrise to sunrise, or just the daylight hours of sunrise to sunset, a quarter of the day is still four to six hours.

So this was not a quick, sorry God. Rather, I take it that chapter 9 represents a part of, or maybe a summary of, what was said in that eight to 12 hour worship service.

[4:11] But before we dig in, we won't grasp why it's being said, I think, until we see the question it's all here to answer. We get that at the end of the prayer, so verses 36 and 37.

Just have a look. It's not phrased as a question, but there is a question behind it. Behold, they say, we are slaves this day. In the land you gave our fathers to enjoy its fruits and its good gifts, behold, we're slaves.

And its rich yield goes to the kings you've set over us because of our sins. We're in great distress. See, the question, God, you gave us this promised land to enjoy, but we are living in it as slaves of a foreign empire.

You hear the silent question, how did we get here? How did we get here? I think that's the question this National Day of Repentance is set up to answer.

It's what this prayer is all about. And the short answer that they land on is found in verse 33, when they say, Lord, you've been righteous in all that's come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully, and we have acted wickedly.

[5:25] And so this prayer is an outpouring of praise to the faithful God, and it is a prayer of confession for their sins against him.

And it all takes the form of a kind of potted history of God's covenant. So let's begin there, before we turn to draw out the lessons and the implications for us now.

A potted history of God's covenant. You can tell, can't you, they've been doing their Bible overview, because the prayer that they pray is not vague or rambling or selective.

Rather, it is clear, it's specific, and to the point. It begins at the beginning, verse 6. You are the Lord, you alone. You made the heavens and their host, the earth and all that fills it, the sea and everything in them.

Now they know, if they didn't before, that they are not worshipping a small, provincial, little G God of a patch of land somewhere in the Middle East.

[6:27] No, the Lord, their God, is the creator of all things seen and unseen, from angels and galaxies and oceans, to birds, bees, and babies.

He is not a God like the idols of the other nations. In fact, they say all human beings, all creatures on earth only exist, because you preserve all of them.

And far from being a greatest God of the year competition, the host of heaven worships you. The Lord alone is God.

But very quickly, we get to the point, don't we? The great God, the only God, made a covenant with a man who he gave the name Abraham. He did that by making promises to him.

And in this prayer, the focus is on the promises of children and land. See that verse 8? You made with him the covenant to give his offspring, the land of the Canaanite and those other nations.

[7:29] And here comes the first part of the answer to that question. You have kept your promise, for you are righteous. Children in a land, how have we got here?

Well, part of the answer is that God has kept his word. He's been faithful to his promise. And the rest of the prayer really follows the thread of that covenant promise to their present.

The story continues, verse 9, with the Exodus. And even if you don't know the story, what happened, the verbs here, they tell the story. This prayer just piles up doing words.

And notice, who did all of them? The Lord, their covenant God. What's the story? You saw. You heard.

You performed signs and wonders. You knew. You made a name for yourself. You divided the sea. You led them. You came down on Mount Sinai.

[8:32] You spoke to them from heaven. You gave them right rules and true laws and good statutes and commands. You made known your holy Sabbath. You gave them bread from heaven.

You brought water out of the rock. All leading up to verse 15, you told them to go in to possess the land that you had sworn to them.

Who was it who had brought them from being one man holding on to a promise of land to a nation about to take possession of that land? It is the Lord.

He did it all, beginning to end, even going to the lengths of rescuing them from slavery to a foreign power. However, his people have studied the records in depth and they confess now that they did not contribute one single thing to God delivering on his promise.

Now, if only that were the end of the story and our Bibles were that thick, but no, sadly it isn't. There is a big but in verse 16. What's the first thing that God's people do contribute to the story?

[9:43] But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments. No sooner had God rescued his people out of slavery, taken them to himself, than in verse 18, they made for themselves a golden calf and said, this is your God who saved you out of Egypt.

The God who created, who spoke, who saved a cow statue. It's such a slap in the face to God, isn't it?

It's hard to know what to say. But what did God say? What did he say to that? We heard it earlier in our service. It's repeated there in verse 17.

The Lord, the Lord, a God who is ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, in your great mercies, they pray.

You did not forsake them in the wilderness. Fast forward 40 years and we read, you gave them kingdoms and peoples allotted to them every corner.

[10:53] Verse 23, see that thread, you multiplied their children as the stars of heaven and you brought them into the land that you told their fathers to enter and possess. So the descendants went in and possessed the land.

promise made, promise remade, promise kept. And it wasn't an easy promise for God to keep. There were big and strong nations living in the land, but God had promised.

And so, his people took possession of houses full of good things. Cisterns already cut, vineyards, olive orchards, fruit trees in abundance.

They didn't have to plant these things, build these houses. They were there waiting for them. So they ate and were filled and delighted themselves in God's goodness. And they all lived happily ever after.

Not quite the end. We hit another really big but, don't we? Verse 26, nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets who had warned them in order to turn them back to you.

[12:08] Can you believe it? The Lord rescued them from slavery. He forgave their idolatry. He's given them this good promised land.

And this is how they treat him. Promised children in a promised land and they say, thanks God, but now you can get lost.

We don't actually want you living here with us. We'll take the trees, the nice houses, everything that you've given us that's really good, but you can shove off.

It's incredible, isn't it? But isn't this even more incredible? He handed them over to their enemies, but when they cried out to God, he heard. And verse 27, according to your great mercies, you gave them saviors who saved them from the hand of their enemies.

Unspeakable grace. Incredible grace, isn't it? But the very next word, but after they had rest, they did evil again before ye. And we watch, don't we, this spiritual wrestling match in open mouth disbelief.

[13:19] Every move is more dramatic, less expected than the last. It's unspeakable sin met by unspeakable grace. But we see, don't we, over time, the corkscrew gets tighter and tighter.

God saves them by grace. They turn back to sin. Saved by grace, back to sin. Saved again, sin again. Saved, sin. Saved, sin. And that is a problem that couldn't go on.

And so through this section, the word is repeated four times, warning. Warning. Warning. Warning. Look at verse 30. For many years you bore with them and warned them by your spirit through your prophets.

Yet they would not give ear. So that the story ended not happily ever after, but in complete tatters. Therefore you gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands.

God had promised in a very graphic and a very memorable way that this is how it would end if his people refused to listen to him. At a certain point, he said the land would vomit them out.

[14:27] And that is what happened when he sent them away into exile. But this is where we catch up with the story. And Nehemiah and Ezra's generation comes into it, verse 31, that nevertheless, in your great mercies, you did not make an end of them or forsake them for what?

You are a gracious and merciful God. That's the only reason, ultimately, why they're praying this prayer at all, isn't it?

Because the Lord faithfully, graciously, and mercifully kept a remnant of his people alive and has brought them back into the land to rebuild his city and to renew them as a people.

He's doing that as they speak. But now that they and we know the backstory leading up to that point, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that they reach, isn't it, in verse 33.

How have we got here? You have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have acted faithfully and we have acted wickedly.

[15:39] That could be a very short but a very fair summary of the whole Old Testament, couldn't it? Which, here is effectively what it is. Their prayer is the Old Testament in a nutshell.

It's a potted history of God's covenant. And here it is in eight words, the whole Old Testament. You have dealt faithfully, we have acted wickedly. Now before we pull out some of the lessons from that history, just in passing, let me say if you're new to church or you're just beginning to get to grips with the Bible or want to know what it's about, Nehemiah chapter 9 is a great one-page summary of the story up to Jesus.

So you can come back here and use it as a road map. If you're feeling a bit lost in the story or you're confused in some of the bigger books of the Old Testament that can be long and complicated, come back here and get the big picture and you'll be able to navigate through it.

Right? This is the Bible's giving us a summary of itself. So if that's you, let me encourage you to use this big road map. And since it is the Old Testament in a nutshell, let me also say let's not believe for a second the myth that the Bible is an old, dusty, boring book.

There could not be, could there a story more breathless, a roller coaster of drama, a turbulent love affair. But best of all, it is a true story. It is a real history that finds its final resolution in Jesus and it is all wrapped up in one God-given book.

[17:22] So let me encourage you, whoever you are, start here with the big picture of God's story and you're not going to go far wrong. But it's not just here to be a history for us, is it?

There are proper life-changing lessons and we can't leave it before we draw them out. So let's turn to them now before we press them home into our lives.

So this is point two, lessons learned. Lesson one, the Lord is constantly righteous. I wonder how you'd finish this sentence.

You have kept your promise for you are what? I think we would want to reach for the word faithful, wouldn't we?

And that would be a great word to finish there. God is faithful. But what's the word that they reach for? End of verse eight, you have kept your promise for you are righteous.

[18:22] And they go there again, verse 33, you've been righteous in all that's come upon us for you have dealt faithfully. So God is faithful, but the point here is that by being faithful to his promises, he's proved himself righteous in all that he has done.

They're saying his record of his dealings with them is perfect. As they hold up God against his own word, they can see that he has only ever done for them what is right.

In the last thousand and a half years, as long as they have been a people, there is no point at which they can say, the Lord got it wrong or made a mistake or fell short.

Now isn't that incredible? If you've ever come up against that question in your own life, how have I got here? Through difficulty at work, family strife, health scares, doubts in your heart, and your faith feels like it's hanging by a thread, you know how hard it is to stand firmly on that truth that whatever has gone wrong, God has only ever done what is right.

But as these people stand back in slavery again in so many ways, back where they started, they've come full circle and they're looking at the loose ends of God's promise and wondering how they're ever going to get tied up again, God's people in Nehemiah's day plant their feet firmly on that truth, don't they?

[20:00] God, you are righteous. Because they weren't just looking at their circumstances they were in, but they looked at the record of God's faithfulness in history and say, you've never let us down, and so you're not going to let us down now.

And we have even more history behind us than they did, don't we, brothers and sisters? For in the coming of Christ 400 years later, Paul can say in Romans 3, now the righteousness of God has been revealed apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the Old Testament, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

What's he saying? You want to be sure that God does right by his word, that he is constantly righteous? Look at the manger. look at the cross.

Look at the tomb. Look at the right hand of God. Look at Christ and see the righteousness of God revealed for our faith, for he has dealt faithfully with us by his word in his son, and he has never let us down.

He is constantly righteous. Lesson two, the Lord is continuously merciful. There are multiple points in this potted history when God could have cast his people off completely.

[21:36] They couldn't have said they didn't deserve it. The covenant God, a golden calf? Come on. But again and again, God's people come up against the mercy of God.

in your great mercies, verse 19, according to your great mercies, verse 27, according to your great mercies, 28, in your great mercy, verse 31, you did not forsake them, you gave them saviors, you delivered them, you did not make an end of them, and all flowing into in and out of that covenant creed in verse 17, who is God?

The Lord, the Lord, a God, what? What would we put there, I wonder? A God always finding fault? A God always unimpressed, never satisfied?

But what does God have to say about himself? The Lord, the Lord, a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfastness, love?

This busts another myth of our day, doesn't it? That the God of the Old Testament is all about judging people, but Jesus is all about forgiveness and love. Friends, Jesus is the God of the Old Testament.

[22 : 58] He was no less ready to forgive then than he is today. The difference is that now he's paid for our forgiveness by his blood. Back then, the mercy he showed his people in history was given on credit as they hoped in his promises.

The mercy he shows to us today is given on debit as we trust in his finished work through his death and resurrection. So how much more reason than they did do we have to say of the Lord, he has shown us great mercy?

you know, perhaps as you feel the weight of your own sins and you read your Bible, rather, maybe you feel that the God of the Old and the New Testament is united in his judgment.

He's always on your back. He's constantly getting at you. One day, he'll just be finished with you. We at home have these magnetic, these colored plastic tiles and if you hold them up, you can kind of see through them but they color everything, red or blue or green or whatever the colored tile is.

And brothers and sisters, we can do that, can't we? With the changing lenses of our own heart, we hold them up against our eyes and as we are overwhelmed by guilt or shame or anxiety, doesn't that color our view of God and we see him through the lens of our sin, through the lens of our guilt or our anxieties when in fact, God has revealed himself to be gracious and merciful, ready to forgive.

[24 : 37] That's how he wants to be known. He wants us to see him like that and as we look at him through the eyes of faith, we see him truly as he is, not a God ready to bring down the hand of judgment.

But a God who holds out to us the hand of forgiveness and grace and mercy. He is continuously merciful. And that's just as well because lesson three, his people are stubbornly sinful.

The Lord gave them right rules, true laws, good commandments. They were a gift to his people as JT helped us see last time that these things were meant to be both a duty and a delight for God's people to live under his good governance.

But they didn't obey God's commands. In fact, we read, they refused to obey. It wasn't just carelessness, it was defiance. They stiffened their neck, they turned their shoulder, that speaks to their stubbornness.

They acted presumptuously, it says. And even if we struggle as we do to fully grasp the evil of sin, I think we can all resonate with the wrongness of this, that instead of wanting to love God and thank him and live their lives for him because of all the good that he'd done for them, they said to themselves, well, you know, God will just keep being good and gracious and forgiving and loving to us, so, you know, what's the point of living for him or following his commandments?

[26:10] You know, they took God's grace for granted as if he were a vending machine that just dropped down forgiveness whenever they put a prayer in the coin slot instead of knowing him as their God to love and their Savior to thank and their King to obey.

And even when God sent prophets and graciously warned them that it couldn't stay like that, they killed the prophets and so silenced his message. Now, brothers and sisters, I trust that you've not killed preachers in your time, but to the degree that we have knowingly rejected God's commands and tried to silence his voice in our lives and presumed on his grace instead of responding in loving obedience to him, we are no better than his people back then, are we?

Think of it, we live this side of the death and resurrection of God's Son who was delivered up for our sins and raised for our justification. Many of us have placed our trust in his saving work for our right standing with God today and yet we continue to sin against him.

We do what he has told us not to do, we don't do what he has told us to do. And not only in our behavior, our relationships, but in our words, our thoughts, our very feelings.

It's easy for us to have read a chapter like this and to think, we're not like that. I'd never do that. Wouldn't we? Haven't we?

[27:49] We are no more deserving of God's grace than these people were for all his work in our lives. We are no more deserving of his love than we were on the day that we were saved.

If we're Christians, there will have been real transformation in our lives from our heart outwards, but our sin is stubborn. It clings so closely. And time, history, willpower, economic growth, technological progress has not freed us from their problem, which is our problem, which is our heart.

You know the saying, those who don't learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them. Friends, here are three lessons that we cannot afford not to learn. God is constantly righteous, continuously merciful, but oh, we are stubbornly sinful.

And so as we close, what now? Two big implications. Firstly, we confess our sins. We need to do that. And like them, we do that corporately, and we want to do that seriously.

Since the summer, we've used a corporate confession of sin in our services to help us to get our hands under the skin of that. I wonder how you're finding that. It's easy with any prayer to become just words, a liturgical nod towards our sin, a quick sorry God at the start of our service, rather than a wholehearted acknowledgement of our wrongdoing.

[29:28] You're granted that these guys had a lot of catching up to do. It was right for them to set apart half the day and come in sackcloth and ashes. But the seriousness of our confession doesn't depend on the length of time we take to do it or what we wear to do it, but rather the state of our hearts as we do it.

Are our hearts prepared to come confessing our sins on a Sunday? Does it take us by surprise or are we ready, eager to get it all off our chest?

Are the words we have sinned a weight lifted or words mumbled? Of course, part of what our service is designed to do is to train us to live our lives as worship for God.

If Sunday morning is the only time we find ourselves saying sorry to God, well, it's no surprise if it won't really mean much. Indeed, we want what we do on Sunday to shape our posture towards God for the whole rest of the week.

And so, not only corporately but personally, privately, are you coming queen in prayer to God about your sins? But what if I don't have anything to confess?

[30:45] Well, that's what God's people thought before they opened their Bibles. But when they opened the book of the law, well, they realized that they had a need to confess. And so, I wonder if that's ye.

How's your Bible reading going? Are you listening to God's word? We might say, well, we're not the Israelites. What does their history have to do with us? But if we're Christians, this is our history.

This is our life. We've been adopted into this family. We've been grafted into this legacy which we share. And it is a legacy of failure, falling short, disobeying God.

We have inherited our first father's sin and his family has repeated it, lived out of it, in every generation right up to today.

And as we read our history in Scripture, we are confronted time and time again with our need for God's grace and therefore our need to confess to him and receive his forgiveness.

[31 : 48] And that's exactly what we find, isn't it, when we confess to him that he is ready to forgive. He is more ready to forgive than we are to confess.

And so, we, like his people back then, must be ready and eager to confess our sins sincerely and seriously before him. But finally, let's end here.

we worship our Lord. Because that dark backdrop of sin in this prayer, it actually serves, doesn't it, to allow the Lord's character to shine even brighter, set over against it.

You get the sense, don't you, that they're at least as much in awe of God's grace and faithfulness as they are ashamed of their sins. Their prayer begins with the words, blessed be your glorious name which is exalted above all blessing and praise.

But isn't that exactly when we feel most unworthy, that's when we're tempted, isn't it, to shrink away from worship and prayer and fellowship.

[32 : 53] When sin looms large in our lives, that's when we don't want to come to church or have anything much to do with God's people. And yet, brothers and sisters, it's when these guys felt their unworthiness most keenly that that is when they came.

And that is when we most need to come to lift our eyes to the one who gives more grace. Because as these guys do that, they lift their eyes to the Lord and he begins to seem great to them again, glorious.

Let us come to worship. For as much as we need to confess our sins, surely we worship the Lord for his righteousness, mercy, and love in which he meets us at our lowest point and lifts us out of the depths of our grief and rebellion.

Brothers and sisters, that is what we come here to do Sunday by Sunday, not to thank God for giving us a perfect life, but to praise God for sparing us from the consequences of our sins through the death of his Son, and not because of who we are, but all because of who he is, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love.

Let's encourage each other to come and worship, and let's do that as we pray. Let us pray. Great and mighty and awesome God, we fall before you in our hearts because you are so kind to us when we do not deserve it.

[34 : 33] you don't treat us as our sins deserve, but Lord, forgive us when we are not amazed and in awe that you have removed our sins from us as far as the east is from the west through the death of your Son, Jesus.

Father, we pray that your grace and mercy would lead us to confession. Father, we pray that in your love that you would not leave us as we are, but lead us on to him, conform us to the image of your Son, we pray, and help us to go willingly and not to cling, Lord, to the sins and the habits of our old life.

Father, how we thank you that the God we meet in the Bible and in Jesus is one who is ready to forgive. So forgive us, we pray, and lead us back to you humbly and freely, we ask in Jesus' name.

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