

True Confession

Nehemiah . . . Memoirs of an Ordinary Man – Part XIV

Nehemiah 9

Introduction

In an article entitled “Playing Charades,” from *Citation*, by Dr. Perry Buffington, he released the findings of his research on the lack of transparency in people during certain circumstances. He found that the average person puts on airs or acts outwardly differently than he actually feels or thinks inwardly most often in three situations.

1. The first situation is when individuals walk into an automobile showroom. They will hide their true emotions in an attempt to protect themselves from being an easy mark to the salesmen. They will tend to act unaffected with what they see, even though their heart may be racing.
2. The second situation is when individuals walk into the lobby of an upscale hotel. They will act with an air that is not their true self in an attempt to come across as a person comfortable and at home in lavish surroundings.
3. The third situation is when individuals enter a church. As they take their seat in the sanctuary, they will act with an air that they have nothing to hide from God and fellow worshippers. They will put on a sacred air in their conversations even though they are uncomfortable with who they know they truly are on the inside.

In other words, we have become skilled at acting authentic, faking our fellowship with God, impersonating the saints and simulating spirituality.

And do not ever let anybody see that you do not have it all together.

Like the true story of a rather single-minded, self-confident businessman who always seemed to have it together. Even though he worked seventy-and eighty-hour weeks, he was a man who seemed organized. The article I read told that he had a cottage built on a nearby lake to use as a weekend retreat. To make his plan even more efficient, he learned how to fly and kept another car, for weekend transport, at the airfield nearest the lake. But that plan was not quite efficient enough, so he further fine-tuned his plans by fitting his plane with pontoons so that he could land on the lake and actually taxi right up to his newly constructed pier.

On his first trip in the newly rigged plane, he flew, by force of habit, straight to the rural airport and started his descent. “What are you doing?” His wife suddenly screamed, “There aren’t any wheels on this plane!”

It was just enough time for the man with the plan to pull up before touching down. Somewhat shaken, he flew on to the lake and made a perfect landing. As the plane drifted to a stop at the pier, he turned to his wife and said, “I’m sorry dear. I did know what I was doing . . . just lost my thought for a moment there. I should have planned more carefully and built in reminders about the change in flight plans. It won’t happen again.”

Then, he opened his door and hopped confidently out of the plane and directly into the lake!

The moral of the story is to never let anybody see you for who you really are – including your spouse.

You must come across before people, at all times, as having life under control.

For your information, that happens to be a self-centered, naturally depraved philosophy of life. And, it happens to inhibit communion with others, and especially with God.

Another word for Christianity is exposure. You became a Christian after being exposed as a sinner. You grow as a Christian after being exposed in some area as an infant. Left alone, we would never achieve growth and revival.

One of the chief obstacles to revival in our personal lives is that we are encouraged by both our culture and our sinful nature to cover up, to fake it, to walk into a church and put on airs. And most of all, to never expose to anyone, even to God, our guilt and sin.

But suddenly, our lives are intersected with the living Word of God which, according to Hebrews, chapter 4, verse 12, is powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword – we read it, and it cuts through and penetrates our true thoughts and true intentions. There is no room for charades when revival comes. The Word of God pulls us off the stage, takes off our masks, and demands radical change.

In our study of Nehemiah, chapter 8, we observed the Jewish people hearing, for the first time in their lives, the Law of Moses. They began to weep and to mourn. There was no need to fake anything. The Law of God's Word was a plumb line; and, as they held it up to themselves, they realized how crooked they were, how sinful.

Revival Involves

It was true then, as it is to this day, true revival comes from an encounter with God's revelation; when God's Word exposes us for who we truly are. It is a time when you discover the truth of scripture and radically apply it to your life. Revival is indeed a time when a person is literally "re-Bibled".

In Nehemiah, chapter 8, that process had already begun.

The Confession of True Revival

In Nehemiah, chapter 9, something interesting took place that was not a part of the Jewish calendar. Notice verse 1.

Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt upon them.

What strikes me about this action is that it was not prescribed. It was not commanded by Nehemiah or Ezra. It was the outflow of true revival. What I have discovered in this chapter is nothing less than a model of confession.

If you want to be real, if you want to stop pretending, if you want to cease the charades, if you want to be "re-Bibled," there are lessons here to teach you how. One of the wonderful things about God, our Teacher, is that He shows us how often, as much as He tells us how.

Recently, I got a call from the lady who lives across the street from us. Their nine-year-old son and my six-year-old daughter play together quite often. He was having his end-of-the-year party at school, and part of the festivities was a show-and-tell. When his mom asked him what he wanted to bring for show-and-tell, he thought for a moment, and then said, "I want to bring Charity."

He wanted to bring my daughter for his show-and-tell! For the right price! No, it was actually a very nice compliment! And my daughter thought it was great – she got ice cream and cake.

Well, the people of Israel are God's show-and-tell. Do you want to know how to confess? Do you want to know how to be "re-Bibled"? God says, "Here, watch them – they'll show you how."

Nehemiah chapter 8 was the lesson of revival. Nehemiah chapter 9 is the model of confession that results from revival.

A humble . . . (9:1)

1. The first characteristic of true confession is, a humble approach to God's presence.

Did you notice, in verse 1, that they came clothed in sackcloth and with dirt on their heads and shoulders? There was no charade of saintliness here; no pretending. In fact, the dirt was a way of exposing and admitting to God that they knew they were sinners. The dirt on the outside was an illustration of the dirt on the inside that they were willing to expose to each other and to God.

A complete . . . (9:2)

Notice verse 2.

And the descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.

By the way, one of the characteristics of true confession is that you do not blame your sin on the sin of your parents. You confess both your actions and your parents' actions as sinful and admit that both parties have sinned.

2. The second quality of true confession for us to model is this, complete admission of personal sinfulness.

Continue to verse 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 [three hours]; and for another fourth [three hours] they confessed and worshiped the Lord their God.

James Montgomery Boice was asked, a few years ago, if he believed America was experiencing revival. He responded by writing,

Whenever I have been asked that question, my answer has always been, "No." The reason I say, "No," is quite simple – there is not national consciousness of sin. In fact, there is hardly any consciousness of sin. When revival sweeps over a people, the first evidence is a profound awareness of sin and sorrow for it.

In other words, confession includes admission. And admission is an evidence of revival.

G. K. Chesterton, a famous philosopher and theologian, once read a series of articles entitled, "What's Wrong with the World?" According to the story, "The Lostness of Humankind," told by Ravi Zacharias, in a *Preaching Today* tape, Chesterton sent a short letter to the editor.

Dear Sir: Regarding your article, "What's Wrong with the World?" I am! Yours truly, G. K. Chesterton.

I John, chapter 1, verse 8 says,

If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

Skip to verse 10.

If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.

Now go back to verse 9.

If we confess our sins, . . .

"Confess," is "homologeo" – to say the same thing about our actions as God says; to agree with God. He says it is sin, and we agree, "Yes Lord, it is indeed sin."

Then, continue to the last half of verse 9.

. . . He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

By the way, I believe the most miserable person on planet earth is a believer in sin. He cannot fully enjoy his sin because of his guilty conscience, and he can no longer enjoy fellowship with God either.

Like the preacher who called in sick one Sunday morning and had one of his associates preach for him, but he actually went golfing. He is out there golfing on Sunday morning, and the angels are watching and so is the Lord.

The Lord said to his angels, "I'm going to make him very unhappy."

The preacher teed up and knocked a hole in one. A hole in one!

The angels said, "Lord, that's misery?"

And the Lord said, "Who can he tell?"

Would you like to hear from the diary of a believer who was caught in the guilt of sin and the misery of refusing for a time to confess? Listen as David writes in Psalm, chapter 32, verses 3 through 5.

When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to Thee, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord"; and Thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin.

Here are the people of Jerusalem, being led by priests who, for three hours, verse 4b says,

. . . they cried with a loud voice to the Lord their God.

A clear . . . (9:5-31)

3. The third quality of true confession includes, a clear acknowledgement of God's greatness.

The prayer in Nehemiah begins by elevating God, in verses 5b to 6a.

. . . O may Thy glorious name be blessed and exalted above all blessing and praise! Thou alone art the Lord. . . .

This is putting God in His proper place. Now it is a lot harder for us to pray to Him as if He were a

doting grandfather or a genie in a bottle who will grant us three wishes. No, He is the God who reigns in the heavens; majestic in splendor; sovereign in all things.

This mirrors the way the Lord taught us to pray, in Matthew, chapter 6, verse 9, when he told us to begin praying by acknowledging the greatness of our God.

Our Father, who art in heaven . . .

That is not a reference to His address, but His attributes. "In heaven," literally refers to His elevation above all creation. He is transcendent; above; sovereign; majestic. Although we come to a loving, caring Father, we also acknowledge His greatness. So, when you begin your prayer with the words, "Heavenly Father," you are actually saying, "Majestic, Holy, Sovereign, Creator, Eternal Father."

True prayer does not trivialize God, it pays tribute to God.

Now notice how this prayer of Ezra, in chapter 9, verses 5 through 38, acknowledges the greatness, goodness, and sovereign power of God,

- First, in His superb creation of the universe, verses 5 through 6.
- Secondly, in His sovereign calling of Abraham, verses 7 through 8.
- Thirdly, in His supernatural conquest over Egypt, verses 9 through 12.
- Fourthly, in His scriptural commands from Mount Sinai, verses 13 through 18.
- Fifthly, in His satisfying covenant with Israel, verses 19 through 25.
- Lastly, in His steadfast compassion towards His people, verses 26 through 38.

I had planned to preach my way through this prayer. It was prayed by Ezra, and it reviews the sin and failure of God's people and the sovereignty and faithfulness of God. However, the more I studied what to mention, what part of it to draw your attention to, what to leave out, I was impressed, I believe, by the Lord, to just read the entire prayer.

Let us join this scene as much as possible. I will play the part of Ezra and read his prayer, in verses 5 through 38.

O may Thy glorious name be blessed and exalted above all blessing and praise!

Thou alone art the Lord. Thou hast 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. Thou dost give life to all of them and the heavenly host bows down before Thee.

Thou art the Lord God, who chose Abram and brought him out from Ur of the Chaldees, and gave him the name Abraham.

And Thou didst find his heart faithful before Thee, and didst make a covenant with him to give him the land of the Canaanite, of the Hittite and the Amorite, of the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite – to give it to his descendants. And Thou hast fulfilled Thy promise, for Thou art righteous.

Thou didst see the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, and didst hear their cry by the Red Sea. Then Thou didst perform signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his servants and all the people of his land; for Thou didst know that they acted arrogantly toward them, and didst make a name for Thyself as it is this day.

And Thou didst divide the sea before them, so they passed through the midst of the sea on dry ground; and their pursuers Thou didst hurl into the depths, like a stone into raging waters.

And with a pillar of cloud Thou didst lead them by day, and with a pillar of fire by night to light for them the way in which they were to go.

Then Thou didst come down on Mount Sinai, and didst speak with them from heaven; Thou didst give to them just ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments.

So Thou didst make known to them Thy holy sabbath, and didst lay down for them commandments, statutes, and law, through Thy servant Moses.

Thou didst provide bread from heaven for them for their hunger, Thou didst bring forth water from a rock for them for their thirst, and Thou didst tell them to enter in order to possess the land which Thou didst swear to give them.

But they, our fathers, acted arrogantly; they became stubborn and would not listen to Thy commandments.

And they refused to listen, and did not remember Thy wondrous deeds which Thou hadst performed among them; So they became stubborn and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. But Thou art a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness; and Thou didst not forsake them.

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,

Thou, in Thy great compassion, didst 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.

And Thou didst give Thy good Spirit to instruct them, Thy manna Thou didst not withhold from their mouth, and Thou didst give them water for their thirst.

Indeed, forty years Thou didst provide for them in the wilderness and they were not in want; their clothes did not wear out, nor did their feet swell.

Thou didst also give them kingdoms and peoples, and Thou didst allot them to them as a boundary. And they took possession of the land of Sihon the king of Heshbon, and the land of Og the king of Bashan.

And Thou didst make their sons numerous as the stars of heaven, and Thou didst bring them into the land which Thou hadst told their fathers to enter and possess.

So their sons entered and possessed the land. And Thou didst subdue before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and Thou didst give them into their hand, with their kings, and the peoples of the land, to do with them as they desired.

And they captured and 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 Thy great goodness.

But they became disobedient and rebelled against Thee, and cast Thy law behind their backs and killed Thy prophets

who had admonished them so that they might return to Thee, and they committed great blasphemies.

Therefore Thou didst deliver them into the hand of their oppressors who oppressed them, but when they cried to Thee in the time of their distress, Thou didst hear from heaven, and according to Thy great compassion Thou didst give them deliverers who delivered them from the hand of their oppressors.

But as soon as they had rest, they did evil again before Thee; therefore Thou didst abandon them to the hand of their enemies, so that they ruled over them. When they cried again to Thee, Thou didst hear from heaven, and many times Thou didst rescue them according to Thy compassion,

And admonished them in order to turn them back to Thy law. Yet they acted arrogantly and did not listen to Thy commandments but sinned against Thine 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.

However, Thou didst bear with them for many years, and admonished them by Thy Spirit through Thy prophets, yet they would not give ear. Therefore Thou didst give them into the hand of the peoples of the lands.

Nevertheless, in Thy great compassion Thou didst not make an end of them or forsake them, for Thou art a gracious and compassionate God.

Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who dost keep covenant and lovingkindness, do not let all the hardship seem insignificant before Thee, which has come upon us, our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and on all Thy people, from the days of the kings of Assyria to this day.

However, Thou art just in all that has come upon us; for Thou hast dealt faithfully, but we have acted wickedly.

For our kings, our leaders, our priests, and our fathers have not kept Thy law or paid attention to Thy commandments and Thine admonitions with which Thou hast admonished them.

But they, in their own kingdom, with Thy great goodness which Thou didst give them, with the broad and rich land which Thou didst set before them, did not serve Thee or turn from their evil deeds.

Behold, we are slaves today, and as to the land which Thou didst give to our fathers to eat of its fruit and its bounty, behold, we are slaves on it.

And its abundant produce is for the kings whom Thou hast 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.

Now because of all this we are making an agreement in writing; and on the sealed document are the names of our leaders, our Levites and our priests.

Application: The Importance of Confession

Confession is a reminder of personal . . .

They were blasphemous, stubborn, arrogant, refusing to listen to the scriptures, stiffening their necks, closing their ears, becoming disobedient, rebellious, scorning the Law, refusing to pay attention to the Law, commandments, and ordinances of God, refusing to serve God, refusing to repent. There are no charades here. In this model of confession, sin is exposed for what it was and God was pled with to be forgiving and gracious once more.

Confession is a reminder of personal corruption and guilt.

The average Christian is in need of revival, because he has learned how to manage his sin rather than confess his sin. We learn to live with as much sin as our consciences will allow. We sugarcoat our selfishness, rationalize our disobedience, justify our arrogance, we excuse our lack of obedience to the Law and commandment of God.

We manage our sin – we do not confess our sin. We have forgotten how heartbreaking, how grievous sin, in the life of a believer, is to our Heavenly Father.

A pastor recently sent in a rather interesting article on a problem they were having in a middle school in Oregon. A number of girls were beginning to use lipstick and would put it on in the girls'

bathroom. After they put on their lipstick, they would press their lips to the mirrors leaving dozens of little lip prints.

Finally, the principal decided that something had to be done. She came up with a rather ingenious plan and told her custodian exactly what to do.

She called the girls to the bathroom and met them there with the school custodian. She then explained that all these lip prints were causing a major problem for the custodian who had to clean the mirrors every day. To demonstrate how difficult it was to clean the mirrors, she then asked the custodian to show the girls how he had been cleaning them. He took out a long-handled brush, dipped it into one of the nearby commodes, and then scrubbed the mirror.

Since then, the lip prints have disappeared.

The pastor then applied the story this way, saying,

Try thinking of this story when you're tempted to sin . . . if you could only see what you're really kissing up to, you might not be attracted to it after all.

Confession is the fresh realization that sin is corruption and filth. You shudder to think what you have been kissing up to. And, the justification stops; the rationalizing stops; the believer mourns and laments and pleads to be rescued from sin's allurements – because it no longer looks appealing.

But if that was all confession was, we would be led to despair.

Confession is a reminder of God's . . .

Confession is not only a reminder of personal corruption and guilt, it is also a reminder of God's character and grace.

Look at verse 17b.

. . . But Thou art a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness . . .

Skip to verse 28b.

. . . and many times Thou didst rescue them according to Thy compassion,

Now look at verse 30a.

. . . Thou didst bear with them for many years . . .

Skip again to verse 33.

However, Thou art just in all that has come upon us; for Thou hast dealt faithfully, but we have acted wickedly.

Anyone in tune with God is struck by his own guilt and by God's grace.

Revival commences with the content of scripture, as in Nehemiah, chapter 8. Revival continues with the confession of sin, as in Nehemiah, chapter 9. Revival will be confirmed by the commitment of servanthood, in the next chapter of Nehemiah, chapter 10.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 6/11/2000 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 2000 Stephen Davey

All rights reserved.