

NEHEMIAH 9

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Beloved congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ:

Introduction. Last week I spoke about the great consternation which the people of Israel felt when the law of God was read and explained to them. They knew that they deserved the curse of the law. And the reading of the law led to great mourning, weeping, and grieving. But we also read how Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites convinced the people that they should not grieve at this time, for that day was “sacred” to the LORD. It should be a day of celebration, a day of jubilation.

We also read how the Israelites responded joyfully to this exhortation. They celebrated the feast of booths as never before, thus experiencing that they were indeed the people of the LORD. This feast reminded all the Israelites of their deliverance out of Egypt. As a redeemed people they could live before God’s face.

But the reality of past and present sins must be dealt with in a proper manner. And so we read in chapter 9 about a day of penance, of confession of sin. There is this lengthy and moving prayer which we read, in which almost the entire history of Israel is recounted, and all the sins of God’s people are listed.

There comes a time when you have to take stock, when you have to take a close and honest look at your life. There are times when sincere self-examination is required. But it does matter how you do this. You may take a good and close look at yourself, your history and life, but you must do this in the light of God's covenant. A review of the history of the church shows us not only the line of our sins, it also makes quite clear to us the line of God's grace. How could we ever face the one reality, that of sin, if it were not for the other reality, that of grace.

Today in the afternoon service we will witness the profession of faith of many young and older members. In the *Form for the Public Profession of Faith* we find the two lines that I just sketched out, the line of sin and the line of grace. It will be asked (second question): "do you truly detest and humble yourself before God because of your sins?" That is the one line. But the question does not end there. It goes on: ". . . and seek your life outside of yourself in Jesus Christ?" That is the other line. We do not just confess our sins but we also profess our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Last week someone asked me if there is a difference between the two words "*confession*" and "*profession*." Do they actually mean the same? We seem to use them indiscriminately, but is that proper? Do we this afternoon have a *confession* or a *profession*? It was suggested by someone that *confession* is more a matter of admitting your *sins*, but *profession* is a matter of speaking about your faith, God's grace. The question is, of course, whether we should so strongly distinguish between the two. Does it really matter?

The word "confession" ("con" means "with," perhaps indicating one's conscience) means to speak out formally, and indeed it is most often associated with admission of wrong-doing and guilt. One "confesses" to sin. The word "profession" ("pro" means "before", or publicly) is most often used to describe a public declaration of faith, making a religious commitment before witnesses. One "professes" the faith.

That will receive the emphasis this afternoon, as the Form is properly called the Form for the Public *Profession* of Faith. These

brothers and sisters will make a public declaration of their faith and so commit themselves fully to a life of serving God.

But we realize that the two matters cannot be separated. Confession of sin and profession of faith belong together. In fact, the one leads to the other, and the other never goes without the one. This is something that becomes very clear in the prayer of penance which Israel is taught to pray in Nehemiah 9.

This morning we cannot deal with all the elements in this prayer. The problem with a series on lengthy chapters is that the treatment of the text becomes almost cursory, but we'll have to live with that for now. I want to show you this morning something of those two lines, the line of sin on the one hand, and the line of grace on the other. That may lead us in to the public commitment which will be made later this afternoon. The theme is as follows:

A sincere confession of sin is at the same time a true profession of faith in Him Who forgives sins.

The Israelites gather together on the 24th day of the same month. It appears to have been a well-organized, well-prepared gathering. They all knew the purpose of this gathering, for we read in verse 1 that they gathered "fasting, wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads." This is the visible evidence of their coming confession. I think that these things are to show the unworthiness of sinners. No delicious food, but fasting. No festive garments, but sackcloth. No crown of gold, but dust, the dust and filth of the earth. Here comes a people that visibly admits: we have by our sins forfeited everything and deserve nothing but death: we have sinned; from the dust we were taken and to dust we shall return. All this is symbolic of the state of spiritual death in which the people find themselves.

So all this is a sign of humility before the LORD. It then says in verse 2 that they separated themselves from all foreigners. This is not a matter of racial discrimination, but a recognizing that what follows

pertains in a very deep way only to Israel, because Israel is the covenant people of the LORD. Foreigners are not lesser or greater sinners, but the point is: here with Israel the covenant of God is at stake, and “foreigners” have at this time no part in that covenant. The sins of covenant children, of church members, are more serious than those of others, and require also special treatment. All sin is serious, but that of covenant breakers is the more weighty. This is made clear in our baptism. And did not also the Lord Jesus Christ say that it would be more tolerable on the day of judgment for Sodom and Gomorrah, Tyre and Sidon, than for the cities of Israel?

Now whenever people come with a great outward display (here sackcloth and ashes), it does not always mean that there is the proper inward disposition. It could be a formality rather than a reality, a false demonstration rather than a true indication of repentance. But here this is not the case. In verse 2 it says: “they stood in their places and confessed their sins and the sins of their fathers.” They stood where they had to stand, that is, with their families, parents and children, together in their generations. For they will confess not only the sins of their own lives but also the sins of their fathers. That means: they will look at their entire history as a people and take upon themselves the responsibility for that history as a covenant nation.

A generation, we learn here, never stands on its own. Our present is connected to our past, and the future is determined for a large part by what we do today. Past sins, unconfessed and not corrected, will devastate present and future generations. If we want to take our history as a guideline how things should be done today, be sure that we do not repeat the sins of the fathers.

They “confessed,” it says. The Hebrew word that is used here for “confessing” comes from a root verb that means “to know.” In this sense: when someone points out to you an error which you made, and you know yourself it was wrong, you say: I know, I know! The verb form is intensive and somewhat reflexive, meaning: these people do not just say something, but they deeply know and fully admit: what we and our fathers have done was wrong; it was utter and complete sin before

the LORD. There is here an overwhelming knowledge of their sins and sinfulness.

I read somewhere that this form of the verb “confess” means to “tell it like it is,” to say something in the conviction that this is the full truth. Notice as you read the prayer that follows, the actual confession, how accurate it is! They do not lightly skim over their history or conveniently forget certain items, but they list clearly in an orderly manner their sins, past and present. This is the hallmark of true confession of sin: you tell the whole truth, as it happened, no matter how incriminating it is. Not half a story, not the facts twisted to your benefit, but the whole truth.

Telling the truth. And then not just about yourself and what you did, but also about God and what He did. For sincere “confession” of sin always acclaims the righteousness of God! He kept His covenant. Look for a moment at verse 33: “In all that has happened to us, you have been just; you have acted faithfully, while we did wrong!” That’s indeed the truth! We’ll get back to that in a few moments, but we note it now already.

First, however, we did wrong. We have sinned. There is no attempt here to minimize the evil of what was done. There is no hint of passing on some of the blame to others. There is no comparing with what other persons or peoples have done so as to diminish the seriousness of your own deeds. We all know the way it often goes with confessions. Yes, I did that, but you see, I couldn’t help it because Yes, I did that, but it is because he/she did that first Yes, I did that, but it’s nothing compared to what so-and-so did . . . and so on. How remarkable is it that when we do finally confess we still do not own up to the real and full truth. No wonder that so many sins are never fully cleared up or completely taken away.

We did wrong, and no one else is to blame; especially not God who has always (look at verse 32) “kept His covenant of love.” Confession is this: I take full responsibility for my *own* sins, and I even see the roots of those sins already in the sins of the fathers. I use that not as an excuse, but as further implication. Look at your life and the life of the

fathers as they really happened. The facts do not lie; even when minimized, covered, excused, and explained away, the facts, our own deeds, remain. Once we stop minimizing our sins, we get a true picture of what really happened. Also, once we start truly confessing, there's almost no end to the confession. I once read in a police novel that the purpose of police interrogation is to get a suspect to confess to one clear and specific item, for when the suspect is over the hump, so to speak, and admits one crime, usually the rest follows because everything is related. Here lies indeed the difficulty: admitting to one specific sin means admitting to other sins, because we remain sinful to the core. Sometimes – don't I know it – we block out certain sins because they remind us of other sins, and the burden becomes so heavy then that it is unbearable. Don't think about it, we tell ourselves, but that does not really make it go away.

When with this understanding we look at the prayer which is written here in Nehemiah 9 we see that it is indeed a complete confession. It begins with God's glory at creation (verses 5 & 6). God who alone is LORD has created everything perfectly for His glory. We have ruined all things. Start at Genesis 1, will you? See how God out of that fallen humanity chose a people unto Himself, beginning with Abraham (verse 7), and made a covenant with him and his descendants. But what happened? Did that people appreciate God's work and promise in their lives? No, time and again, without provocation from God's side, against all expectations, this people rebelled against God and rejected Him. Sin is a breaking of the covenant, an engaging in lawlessness, a denial of God's love.

Look at the words used to describe Israel in this confession of sin. Verse 16: arrogant and stiff-necked, disobedient. Verse 26: disobedient and rebellious. Verse 29: arrogant and disobedient. The hostility against God grows through the ages, the sins become more gross all the time. It is a non-ending, escalating line of evil, so gross that in the end Jerusalem, the city of peace, is a city of violence, immorality, and idolatry.

The whole history of Israel passes before their eyes, and it is one litany of arrogance and rebellion, of idolatry and immorality. The end

the people of Nehemiah's time include themselves, see verse 37:

"Because of our sins, its abundant harvest (of the land of Israel) goes to the kings you have placed over us." Because of our sins, we are in great distress. So ends the confession: because of our sins, we are in great distress!

The sins of the people in Nehemiah's time do not stand on their own. There is personal guilt, yes, but there is also collective guilt. In one way or another, every generation continued in the arrogance and stubbornness of the fathers. In this sense there is never a "generation gap." The two words "arrogance" and "stubbornness" are important here. They show the terrible character of sin: arrogance, a haughty seeking of oneself, not caring about God and the neighbour. Then, when this sin is pointed out, stubbornness; there is the constant refusal to repent: we shall continue to go our own way.

I think we can safely say that it is still the same today. It shouldn't be so after all that we have learned from Scripture. Yet it is. Every covenant generation again is called to do away with this arrogance and to walk humbly with God, to lay down this stubbornness and to do right. To love God with all faculties and resources, and to love the neighbour as oneself. That is the calling which the Lord places on each generation in their baptism.

Now, after reading about all these sins, this gruesome inventory of evil, one might get the impression that there is no hope. But it is remarkable, as one explainer points out, that the theme of this chapter is not so much our sins but the evidence of God's grace! You must indeed see your sins and sinfulness, but you must also, when reviewing the past and regarding the present, see the evidence of God's grace in the lives of sinners. If we could only talk about sin it would be hopeless, but the point is, as Paul writes later to the Romans, where sin abounded, grace abounded even more!

From this angle, let us look again at this amazing prayer here in Nehemiah 9. It is a confession of sin, yes, but at the same time a profession of faith. Every time again the prayer focuses on God's mercy

and patience, His never-ending grace. The reality and effect of sin is offset by the presence and power of God's grace.

End of verse 8: you kept your promise, because you are righteous! God was always faithful to His given Word and covenant. We did wrong, but God did right. Look at the fatherly care which God showed to his people: deliverance from slavery (9 – 12), protection in the wilderness (13 – 21). God came to them on Mount Sinai and personally gave them His law. He cared for them in all things material and spiritual. They lacked nothing.

Arrogance and stubbornness are costly, yes. But notice that each time Israel's sin is confessed, a profession of grace follows. At Sinai, because of their idolatry with the golden calf, God could have wiped them out. Verse 17: "But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love." Who does not think of Psalm 103?

Verse 19: because of your great compassion, you did not abandon them in the desert. Verse 20: you gave them your Spirit, and food and water. You attended to all their needs. And you brought them into the promised land (verse 22 – 25). They were given a rich and prosperous land. Were they thankful? No (verse 26): they were disobedient and rebelled against you. They still had not learned. Did God then cast them off? Well, He did bring over them oppression, but (verse 27): in your great compassion you gave them deliverers.

Then they rebelled again, but God still remained merciful; verse 28: in your compassion you delivered them "time after time." Psalm 106 indeed: time after time He set them free. Again the people became arrogant and stiff-necked, refusing to listen even to the prophets, but (verse 31): "in your great mercy you did not put an end to them . . . for you are a gracious and merciful God." In verse 32, the gathering has come to their own time. The exiles returned from Babylon after much hardship. And, again, what little have they really learned. But now they ask (verse 32): "Now therefore, O our God, the great, mighty, and awesome God, who keeps His covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes. . . ." We do not deserve it, but

according to your mercy, look upon us in this present distress. Verse 36: we are, in fact, still slaves in our own land, exploited and subservient to others – and it is our own fault, we are in great distress: please, be merciful again. As you have shown your mercy in the past, show it again, also to us today.

What stands out is God's love and mercy, His patience and care, His never-ending work of restoration and reformation, indeed His boundless grace! It is a miracle of grace that after all those centuries of sin and evil God's people still exist, are even back in their own land; what more proof does one need that God is patient, gracious, and forgiving?

Is this prayer a confession of sin? Yes! But even more: it is a profession of faith in Him whose mercies are never-ending and are new every morning. It is so because this is how our God is, kind, merciful, patient, and gracious. So He has shown Himself in the past, so He is today and tomorrow, for He does not change in His covenant faithfulness and care.

We have to look at the total picture. Everything must come to stand in its proper place. There are our sins; the damning evidence is there, loud and clear. But now comes also the rest of the (his)story: the boundless grace of God. The history of God's people, of His church, and of our lives is this: that God forgives and overcomes our sins by the power of His grace.

True confession of sin does not lead to despair because it clings by its very nature to God's grace. I spoke earlier about the fact that we have a tendency to block out sins because we cannot face their reality. If I look back over my life . . . I do not dare face the facts. Even as elderly people, we can struggle with sins of long, long ago. But when we look back, we should not only see the evidence of sin but also the clear and powerful reality of grace! Were it not for God's patience, love, kindness, and mercy, I would have perished long ago. The very fact that we are still here, still serving the Lord, still seeking His will, still praising His Name, that is a miracle in itself.

And even when today we experience distress, we may know: whatever reason there is for the distress – and never discount your sinfulness and sins as the cause – in all present distress we may still call upon the grace of our God. That grace still functions: it is the basis of our lives, and it is promised still today from the very beginning of our lives, signified and sealed in Holy Baptism.

This is even clearer today than in Nehemiah's time. For why could God in all those times restore and renew His people? What is the basis for this forgiveness, the fountain of this grace? We know: the grace of God leads to Golgotha. Sin can be forgiven only through atonement. God's justice must be satisfied, His righteousness maintained. A confession of sin is only then a true confession of sin if it clings to Christ on the cross. To confess sin is one thing; we are not to wallow in those sins. To confess sin in a true Biblical sense you must also profess Christ as the Saviour from sin. Sin is not the only reality of life. It is only part of the story; the other reality is God's grace manifest now in Jesus Christ! That is the rest of the story, and without it the picture of my life is not complete.

Actually, the work of Christ must receive the full emphasis. That begins already at baptism. The life history of the child that was baptized this morning will contain much evidence of sin, just like the lives of the fathers before her. But the promise is: this child's life will also contain overwhelming evidence of grace, grace through Christ in whom we are sanctified.

Confession and profession go together. Nehemiah 9 teaches us this in clear terms. Never confess your sins and then sit there wallowing in them and in the distress they caused, but when confessing sin always also profess Christ, God's grace in Him, for then you will take courage, and continue, seeking to serve the Lord. We must apply to our lives the full Word of God, and not a part of it. Sincere *confession* of sin – in a Biblical sense – is at the same time a true *profession* of faith in Him who forgives sins. That is the whole truth about the church, and about

me. The damning evidence of sin has been overcome by the redeeming power of God's grace in Christ, through the covenant love that never varies.

The story of my life begins and ends with Christ.

AMEN.