



## “A Shameful State”

Nehemiah 1:1-3

**Idea:** Sin brings only shame and disgrace.

**Intro:** Why? That is the question parents usually hear in response to the directives they give to their children.

“Matt, please clean up your bedroom. Why can’t I wait till later?”

Emily, you need to take the toys upstairs. Why can’t Johnny take them upstairs?”

“Sam, your curfew is 10:30pm tonight. Why so early, all my friends get to stay out till midnight?”

Does this sound familiar to anyone? I have realized that the older I get, the more I do what I said as a teenager I’d never do. My response to my kids’ question of why is a simple, “Because I said.” It used to drive me nuts when my parents would say that. Now as a dad of three kids, I find myself using it on a daily basis. When they ask why, the best response I know to give them is because I said...case closed. I said it. I am the parent. I know what is best for them. And I love them. Therefore, what I tell them should be obeyed without question.

What should be true in our parent/child relationships should also be true in our relationship with God. Oswald Chambers once said, "The best measure of spiritual life is not ecstasies but obedience." Unfortunately, we all have an obedience problem because we all have a sin problem. What is sin? Robert H. O'Bannon said, "Sin is not misfortune; sin is not error or ignorance. Sin is a choice against what you know pleases God." Sin is what Adam and Eve committed when they willingly rejected God's command to not eat from the tree in the center of the garden. Their intentions were to enjoy the blessings that God was withholding from them (Gen 3:6). Instead, they experienced only the consequences God told them would come...shame and death (Gen 3:7-8).

Sin will always carry you further than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you're willing to pay. Sin always leads one to a place of shame and disgrace. Many times God warned His people to not stray from His Word. He warned Adam. He warned Israel through Moses and the prophets. As the nation was preparing to enter the Promised Land, God spoke through Moses a stern warning and a call to obedience.

Read Deut 4:25-28.

Israel did not heed the warning or keep the commandments. Following the death of Moses and Joshua, they quickly chased after the foreign gods of the surrounding nations. They were determined to live life their own way. So during the days of the Judges, they syncretized their beliefs with those of the peoples in the nations they were to drive out. Morality sank lower and lower, and the activity of God dwindled. Revival came to Israel through the leadership of Samuel the priest and King David, but it soon deteriorated with subsequent kings. God sent prophet after prophet to His people to warn them of their fate. Amos, Micah, Zephaniah, and Hosea are four of the prophets God sent to them.

*1 Hear the word of the Lord, O children of Israel, for the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land.*

*There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land;*

*7 The more they increased, the more they sinned against me; I will change their glory into shame. – Hosea 4:1, 7*

God pronounced judgment upon His people. Israel and Judah both were conquered and carried into exile because of their rebellion. Israel, the ten northern tribes, was defeated by Assyria in 722 BC. They were removed from the land and never formally returned. Judah was finally defeated by Babylon in 586 BC. God scattered His people among the nations just as He had warned (Deut 4:27).

But God never forgot or forsook His people. The promise found in Deuteronomy 4:29-31 came to fruition. God stirred the hearts of Ezekiel and Daniel to lead the people back to faithfulness. Daniel was used to bring a sense of understanding to the seventy years of shame they were living through.

*7 To you, O Lord, belongs righteousness, but to us open shame, as at this day, to the men of Judah, to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to all Israel, those who are near and those who are far away, in all the lands to which you have driven them, because of the treachery that they have committed against you. 8 To us, O Lord, belongs open shame, to our kings, to our princes, and to our fathers, because we have sinned against you. – Daniel 9:7-8*

When the seventy years of exile concluded, God began to bring His covenant people back to the land of His promise. This took place in waves. The first wave of exiles to return was led by Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel (538 BC). They rebuilt the altar and began to rebuild the temple. Ezra, who came by order of King Artaxerxes I, led the second great wave (458 BC). The Persian king sent him to restore Yahweh worship in Jerusalem (Ezra 7). Nehemiah led a third great wave thirteen years later (445 BC) to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. These men were used by God to lead people back to God and out of their shame.

The story of Nehemiah is one that is timeless. From this great man we deepen our understanding of God, grow in our love for Scripture, learn how to pray, and develop as a leader. We find in Nehemiah and his leadership the antithesis of what is largely found in the characters and leadership of those in Judges. They said, “I’ll have it my way.” Nehemiah taught the people to say, “We’ll do it God’s way.”

**Inquiry:** We begin our journey in Susa, in the luxurious surroundings of a Persian court, as Nehemiah learns of the shameful state of his people in Jerusalem.

Read Nehemiah 1:1-3.

Hanani informed Nehemiah of the awful conditions their brethren faced at home. Many of them had survived through the exile and escaped. Hanani was not saying they had fled Persia; it was the way he referred to those who had returned to Jerusalem with Sheshbazzar and Ezra. Exile was regarded as a great shame for the Jewish people. If they returned to the Holy Land, it was interpreted as an escape from shame (Ezra 9:13-14). As Nehemiah listens to Hanani’s report, he learns that his brethren are in a shameful state.

What do these verses reveal about Nehemiah and the shameful state of Judah?

### **1. Sin and rebellion brought shame and disgrace.**

Sin often appears harmless and exciting. It grabs the attention of our eyes. It pulls at our hearts. It dazzles and wows us without ever revealing the dangers that lurk underneath the glitz, glamour, and promises of something better. Its allurements and seductions leave most bewildered by the bite that comes after.

“All human sin seems so much worse in its consequences than in its intentions.”

– Reinhold Niebuhr

Nehemiah understood why Judah had been carried away into exile. He knew the reason for their banishment and why they were a conquered people. He was familiar with the prophecies and words of Ezekiel against Jerusalem. The only explanation for the shame and disgrace of God's people was their own sin. They had brought it upon themselves (Deut 4:25-28). Like Adam and Eve, they chose to rebel against God's commands and sinned; therefore, they brought shame and disgrace upon themselves. There was no one to blame but themselves.

## **2. Genuine concern led to prompt action.**

Nehemiah's life in the service of Persia was infinitely better than those who lived in Jerusalem. He had a great career, good salary, and a place of prominence in the kingdom. Even though Nehemiah had been born during the exile and had never lived in the Holy Land, he still had a deep concern for his people and his home. That concern led to his prompt action. As soon as Nehemiah learned the status of his people, he began to act.

## **3. The welfare of people was more important than the welfare of the city.**

We learn of Nehemiah's priorities in these verses. In his mind the Jewish remnant took precedence over Jerusalem, and his visitors agreed. In verse 3 they describe the people as being in great trouble and shame. The economy was poor. Food was scarce. Work was hard to find. They were still feeling the affects of their sin; because even though they were back in the land, the land was not what it once was. On top of that, the walls of Jerusalem were broken down and the gates had been destroyed by fire. They were in danger of attacks by their enemies. Nehemiah's concern for and desire to

rebuild the walls was rooted in his concern for the people.

### 3 Applications:

#### **1. Learn from the past so that it does not become your future.**

Many of the people we read about in the Old Testament prior to the exile never thought their sin would result in their destruction and banishment from the land. They had heard about how God had patiently withheld His judgment from their ancestors when He could have easily judged them. They had heard the stories of how even in the judgment of the wilderness wanderings, God had sustained them with food, water, and protection from their enemies. They knew God to be good, forgiving, and longsuffering.

His goodness and longsuffering is why the Lord sent prophet after prophet to warn the people of the impending judgment. He called them to repentance. He gave them opportunities to forsake their sin and return to Him, but they presumed upon His grace. They figured there would be ample time for repentance. Or they thought God was too loving of a God to judge their sin. But the day came for judgment to come to the House of God...to the people called by His name.

Today, let us learn from the past so that it does not become our future. God will judge your sin. In fact He already has. Apart from Jesus Christ, you are condemned in your sin, and there is coming a day when judgment will be fully experienced in a place called hell. For believers who think God doesn't see or doesn't care about your besetting sins, He sees and cares and judges.

*Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. – Gal 6:7*

## **2. Look after the welfare of others.**

Like Nehemiah who was concerned about his countrymen, we too should be deeply concerned when we see others struggling. It should bother you as a Christ-follower to see others in need. Your heart ought to be gripped when you learn of others bogged down in sin or in physical need. You should be moved to action to help those in need.

## **3. Hold material things in this life loosely.**

I have discovered that prosperity and prominence have a tendency to blind us to the needs of others. This happens in at least two ways. First, prosperity causes a person to become so fixated on their life and the things in their life that they don't notice those who don't have what they have. They literally are blind to it. This is one of the reasons I love to take people overseas on mission in a third world context. The experience in that setting many times opens their eyes to the great needs in the world today. They come home with a new perspective.

Second, prosperity causes a person to have no care or concern for the less fortunate. In fact they will even take from the poor in order to add to their wealth. They will step on others in order to move up the ladder.

Nehemiah was blessed with the best that the Persian Empire had to offer. He had a prominent and influential position before the king. Therefore, it is an amazing testimony to his faith that he inquired about those living in Jerusalem. But he went a step farther; he wanted to help them. Nehemiah could easily have dismissed the plight in Jerusalem because he had it so good in Susa. Instead, he was willing to lay everything on the table for God. He was willing to give up his

comfort and stability in order to meet the needs of his brethren.

Most of us have it really good. We are blessed. But don't ever forget that God has blessed you so that you can be a blessing to someone else. Therefore, hold the material things in your life loosely. Live with palms up because what you have is not yours to begin with; it all belongs to God.

**Conclusion:** Why? This is the question that our humanity is constantly asking. Why does my allegiance have to be to Jesus alone? Why do I have to follow His Word? Why can't I do what I want to do? The answer is, "Because He said." He is Lord and Savior. He is our Good Father, who knows what is best. He loves us supremely. Therefore, we should obey Him completely.

Sin will always carry you further than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you're willing to pay. It boasts of much but brings nothing but shame and disgrace in the long run. On the other hand, obedience and faithfulness bring a deep satisfaction and the blessing of Almighty God.

I would rather hear the words "well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your inheritance" ring out over eternity, than anything temporal this sinful world has to offer. So let's hear and heed the warnings of the past regarding sin. Let's confess, forsake, and receive forgiveness for it. God wants to turn your shame into glory.