



“A Repentant Response”
Nehemiah 1:4-11

Idea: God responds to repentance.

Intro: The city was saturated with travelers who had come to celebrate the annual feast and to enjoy the accompanying festivities. Men, women, and children had traveled long distances from every nation in the known world to observe the religious holiday. And while the city was teeming with visitors, 120 people secluded in the upper story of a local high-rise were fervently praying. They had been on a spiritual roller-coaster the last six weeks. Their leader had been killed, and then he showed up in their midst again. Two women saw him a few days after His death outside the tomb. A couple guys found themselves walking and talking with Him on a short journey. Several of them witnessed His sudden appearance in the room where they were staying. Some had breakfast with the leader on the shore of the lake one morning. He came and went for forty days before ascending into heaven one day. Just before He left for the final time, the leader told His followers to go back to the city and wait for what He had promised them.

During the annual feast, with the city full of visitors, the promise came. Suddenly, a loud sound came from heaven and rushed upon the house where the 120 were staying. Tongues of fire rested upon each of them, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit. They began to speak of their leader and His sacrifice in all the languages of the visitors in the city. The people heard their proclamation. Many were confused, amazed, and astonished all at the same time. There were a few, though, that mocked them.

Then, Peter, the leader of the 120, lifted his voice and told the growing group of people who were gathering around them about the Man they were proclaiming. He told them that the prophets of old had spoken of His leader and of His coming. He told them that God had given them a wonderful gift in this leader. He also told them that they had rejected the wonderful gift when they murdered Him. Then He told them that his Leader was no longer dead but was alive and working the lives of men. He told the people that He was Lord and Messiah.

Listen to how they responded. [Read Acts 2:37-39.](#)

When the people heard and understood the good news of who Jesus is and what He had done for them, they couldn't help but ask what their response should be. Peter told them to "repent and be baptized."

What does it mean to repent? Is it the same as remorse? Repentance is a change of mind. In many ways remorse and regret are aspects of it, but repentance goes much farther than mere remorse. In a biblical sense repentance refers to a deeply seated and thorough turning from self to God. Repentance is the absolute surrender to the purposes of God and to live in this awareness. It is an experience in which God is recognized as the most important fact of one's existence.

The Jews who were in Jerusalem for the feast were cut to the heart by the gospel that Peter proclaimed. They saw and understood the shameful state of their lives. In response to the

message, they repented of their sin and surrendered themselves to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. They turned from sin and self to the Savior. Three thousands souls were saved that day.

In another city and in another era, a man named Nehemiah was given a report about the condition of his countrymen and his homeland. Nehemiah lived in Susa. He served in the presence of King Artaxerxes of the Persian Empire. Hanani told him that the people who had returned to Jerusalem were in great trouble and in grave danger. The Jews had been in exile for seventy years because of their rebellion against God. Even now as they returned to the Holy Land, the shame of their past hung like a fog over their heads.

In response to the shameful state of his people, Nehemiah did the only thing he could do. He repented. We find in our passage today a repentant response to the shameful state.

Read Nehemiah 1:4-11.

Inquiry: John Calvin said, “Without hatred of sin and remorse for transgressions, no man will taste the grace of God.” We find both in Nehemiah’s response to the Lord. He projected a strong hatred for sin and a deep remorse for transgressing God’s commands (vs. 6-7). This response of his that we have before us is an incredible blessing and asset. As we look at a repentant response, we discover in his prayer several characteristics of God that reveal the “why” of our response. We also learn what is involved in a repentant response. And then we see what steps to take to respond in repentance.

First, it is important to know the “why?”. Nehemiah responded in repentance, but why? Who and what is God like? Why did he need to repent?

9 Characteristics of God

- 1) He is universally supreme.
Nehemiah fasted and prayed before the God of heaven (vs. 4). He was in Susa and his problem was in far-off

Jerusalem, but both cities – one rich the other poor, one strong the other weak, one proud the other broken – were like tiny specks of dust under the vast canopy of God’s heaven. Nehemiah was deeply troubled, but he affirmed his commitment to the God of heaven, knowing that life’s bewildering adversities are all under His sovereign control. God is supreme over all things.

2) He is intimately present.

Nehemiah understood that God is sovereign, but he also understood that God is not remote or distant. He prayed in verse 5, “O LORD God of heaven...” Nehemiah invoked the covenant name of God (יהוה). God had made a covenant with Abraham, Moses, and David. He had tabernacled with His people. He is an ever-present help (Ps 46:1).

3) He is great.

Nehemiah knows His God is almighty (vs. 5). His power had been demonstrated and evident throughout Israel’s precarious history. His power transformed Jehoshaphat’s crisis into a triumphant victory (2 Chron 20), Jonah’s plight into a psalm of thanksgiving, Daniel’s adversities into persuasive testimony, and Ezra’s formidable mission into impressive service.

4) He is awesome.

As Nehemiah enters the presence of an awesome God through prayer, he understands that not only is God great but holy. This is the characteristic of God that defines all the others. And it is the holiness of God that gives definition to mankind. It is the holiness of God, which identifies and exposes sin as sin. When confronted by Holy God, we can’t help but see sin for what it is, an offensive and rebellious act against God.

5) He is compassionate.

Nehemiah rejoices that his holy God is also compassionate. He identifies his needs in the presence

of a God of infinite grace who has made a covenant of love with His people (vs. 5).

- 6) He is consistent.
God is not fickle. His love and acceptance aren't fickle and changeable. Instead, they are constant, consistent, and reliable. He keeps His covenant of love.
- 7) He is vocal.
God keeps His covenant of love with those who love Him and keep His commandments. God has given us commandments to live by. He is not a silent deity like the gods of the surrounding nations. He has spoken eloquently, patiently, and persistently through His servants. The God who has spoken throughout history will not leave Nehemiah without a direct word concerning his future work.
- 8) He is attentive.
Nehemiah prayed that God's eyes and ears would be attentive to his needs (vs. 6). It should be comforting to us to know that not only does God speak and is vocal in our lives, but He also listens. He is not like the deaf idols of other nations who have ears but cannot hear. Nehemiah was confident that not only was God able to help in his time of need but God could also hear him in his time of need.
- 9) He is merciful.
Nehemiah offered his prayer knowing that he was addressing a merciful God (v. 8).

Nehemiah quietly reflected on God's character for four months during those days of weeping, praying, and fasting. The reflection intensified his awareness of unforgiven sin in his life, his family, and the nation. It led him to respond in repentance.

5 Characteristics of Repentance

- 1) Contrition

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

– Psalm 51:17

Nehemiah was overwhelmed by the rebelliousness of human sin. He hated the sin that he and his brethren had committed against God. He understood that it separated him from God and disrupted God's desire to bless His creation.

Contrition is the state of feeling remorseful and penitent. In response to the reality of sin, Nehemiah wept, mourned, fasted, and prayed (vs. 4). He was not flippant toward the sin. It broke his heart because it broke the heart of God.

2) Humility

Nehemiah humbled himself before God. He referred to himself as a servant (vs. 6). He wasn't brash or argumentative about his and their sin.

3) Confession

Nehemiah was honest about their sin. He made no attempt to excuse anyone, including himself. He called the sin what it was, and he honestly confessed it. He confessed the sins of commission (vs. 6b) and those of omission (vs. 7). Confession is agreeing with God about your sin.

4) Faith

Nehemiah confessed the sin, but he also exercised faith in what God had said and done (vs. 8-9). He believed God's Word in Deuteronomy 4. He believed that if they confessed their sin and returned to God, then they would experience the Lord's forgiveness.

5) Action

Nehemiah didn't wallow in a prolonged introspective examination of his failures and those of his fellow Jews.

He owned his sin, confessed it, and trusted God for forgiveness. Then he began to move in the direction of God. He turned from sin and self to God. He prayed for success as he sought an opportunity to help God's people in their shame (vs. 11).

With a biblical understanding of God's character and repentance, how should one respond in repentance?

1. Move toward God. (vs. 4)

Man's natural response to the presence of sin is to run and hide. Man always tries to fix his situation on his own. This was what Adam and Eve did in the Garden following their disobedience. They immediately felt the shame of their decision, but instead of moving toward God for help, they attempted to fix themselves and hid in the bushes.

Nehemiah models for us a better approach to sin. When he learned of the shameful state of Judah, Nehemiah moved toward God. He sat down before God and wept and prayed. He knocked repeatedly at God's door because there was no one else to whom he could turn for help. He couldn't fix the problem. Religion couldn't fix the problem. The government couldn't fix the problem. Only God could fix the problem and remove the shame, so Nehemiah moved toward God.

2. Be honest about any and all sin.

Read verse 7.

Nehemiah was honest with God about the reality of their sin. He confessed every sin; he left nothing in the closet. He hated the sin and the damage it created.

“No man ever enters heaven until he is first convinced that he deserves hell.” – John Everett

You must come to terms with the reality that your sin condemns you to hell. It separates you from God for all eternity. Therefore, to be free from it, you first have to be honest about it.

3. Trust God for forgiveness.

As Nehemiah calls upon God to remember and honor His Word in Deuteronomy 4, he is placing his trust in God for forgiveness. This is what the Bible is about. The meta-narrative of Scripture is redemption. It is a story of God’s forgiveness. Over and over we see the Lord reach out and redeem His people when they call upon Him.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
– 1 John 1:9

A repentant response agrees with God about sin, and it also agrees with God that He stands ready to forgive and cleanse you from all sin.

Conclusion: When the people in Jerusalem who heard the gospel message that Peter proclaimed, they repented. They moved toward God. They were honest about their sin. And they trusted in Jesus for forgiveness. This is the same pattern that we see in the life of Nehemiah, and it is the same pattern for us today. Like Nehemiah, when convicted of our sin by the Holy Spirit we need to move toward God, be honest about any and all sin, and then trust God for forgiveness.

Today, you may find yourself walking at a guilty distance. You’re in relationship with Jesus, but it’s not a close one because your sin stands in the way. Perhaps, you find yourself completely cut off from God today because you have never

repented of your sin and trusted Christ for forgiveness. You are cut off from God. If you are in one of these positions, today move toward God, confess any and all sin, and trust God for forgiveness of that sin. Turn from a life of sin toward Christ.

As we continue to worship, respond appropriately to the Lord. God responds to repentance.