

## Series: Transforming the World in which God has Placed Us

VBC

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Nehemiah 9

### “Steps to Getting Right with God”

John Ortberg talks about confession in language most of us can relate to.

*Some years ago, we traded in my old Volkswagen Super Beetle for our first piece of new furniture: a mauve sofa. It was roughly the shade of Pepto-Bismol, but because it represented to us a substantial investment, we thought “mauve” sounded better.*

*The man at the furniture store warned us not to get it when he found out we had small children. “You don’t want a mauve sofa,” had advised. “Get something the color of dirt.” But we had the naïve optimism of you parenthood. “We know how to handle our children,” we said. “Give us the mauve sofa.”*

*From that moment on, we all knew clearly the number one rule in the house. Don’t sit on the mauve sofa. Don’t touch the mauve sofa. Don’t play around the mauve sofa. Don’t eat on, breathe on, look at, or think about the mauve sofa. Remember the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden? “On every other chair in the house you may freely sit, but upon this sofa, the mauve sofa, you may not sit, for in the day you sit thereupon, you shall surely die.”*

*Then came The Fall.*

*One day there appeared on the mauve sofa a stain. A red stain. A red jelly stain.*

*So my wife, who had chosen the mauve sofa and adored it, lined up our three children in front of it: Laura, age four, and Malory, two and a half, and Johnny, six months.*

*“Do you see that children?” she asked. “That’s a stain. A red stain. A red jelly stain. The man at the sofa store says it is not coming out. Not forever. Do you know how long forever is children? That’s how long we’re going to stand here until one of you tells me who put the stain on the mauve sofa.”*

All of us can relate, because we have all left stains

- Some of the stains are barely noticeable, some bleed all the way through
- Some have been acknowledged, some remain hidden

In this ninth chapter of Nehemiah, the people had gone through a long season of hiding

- And maybe it’s fair to say God had been hiding as well
- They had turned away, and God had turned away as well

There had been a famine on the land because of Israel’s unfaithfulness

- A famine of Word
- But that had changed, God began to speak again
- Ezra gathered the people and read the word (Nehemiah 8)
- And two weeks later the people gathered again (9:1a)

- Their hunger for God's word intensifying, as if banging their forks for more

And the more they read, **IRONICALLY** the more they grieved

- And sought for more
- By chapter 9, they dressed as those in deep mourning
- And for good reason
  - They were mourning the death of themselves, the putting to death of their self-centeredness
- The word of God was exposing, letting in light, in regions of the heart that had long been dark **AND A DEEP CLEANSING WAS TAKING PLACE**
  - 1) Their exposure to God's Word revealed God
    - And the seriousness He gives to sin
    - At the same time
  - 2) Their exposure to God's Word unmasked themselves
    - Gave them a grammar to explain themselves
      - The condition they were in
      - The desperate need they faced
    - So they came to confess
      - And confession always begins with God
      - And so they recounted:
        - His uniqueness, His majesty (verse 6)
        - His grace and faithfulness (verses 7-8)
        - His compassion (verse 9)
        - His power, fame, might (verses 10-11)
        - His leading (verse 12)
        - His teaching (verse 13)
        - His feeding (verse 15)
      - But they also came to confess their stains (verses 16ff)
        - Their arrogance, they were stiff necked (verse 16)
        - Their obstinance, they refused to listen (verse 17)
        - Their idolatrous nature, to deny, replace God with themselves (verse 18)
        - Their history of ungratefulness
- What they read was a story of man's sin abounding
  - God's grace super-abounding
- God giving them everything (verse 25)
  - And they appreciating nothing
- They recognized an endless cycle, described in verses 26-31
  - Goodness, sin, judgment, confession
- History can be distilled into one statement: ***History is the story of God's tenacious loyalty and man's persistent sin.***
  - Despite our appalling sinfulness, God's grace is even more stubborn, excessive, outrageous, scandalous
- And so they came in sackcloth

- For they realized they were at the bottom end of this cycle
  - The effects of sin has diminished, dehumanized, and dulled them
  - Their hope was that God would still be gracious (verse 32)
  - That he would respond to their confession of sin
  
  - If we are honest with ourselves, we see that their story is also our story
    - A deep cleansing is necessary in us
    - For all of us, in certain degrees, experience this same cycle
      - We experience the incredible goodness of God in different seasons, and our own passion to seek after Him
      - But somewhere, somehow, at times, we relax our grip on Him, His ways
      - We begin to assume that accomplishments are the result of our efforts
      - God remains present to us, but we are no longer present to Him
        - We have become dull, lost our vital sense of God
        - Gradually, we find ourselves out of the habit of time in the word
        - Prayer diminishes to hit and miss
        - Being with the community of saints in worship becomes sporadic
        - Coldness and indifferences, even the subtle signs of hardness creep in
        - Adoration of God recedes
        - Obsession with self moves in
        - Life is given over to more and more temptations
        - We are less inclined to guard our purity, our words, our compulsions
        - And suddenly life begins to take on certain addictions
          - We can't seem to stop succumbing to internet pornography
          - We are in the clutches of materialistic drives
          - Self-centeredness dominates our lives
          - Relationships turn sideways, we end up using people
          - Boyfriend/girlfriend are simply used to gratify our desires
        - And we wake up to find our world rocked by behaviors that now are killing our relationships
          - Or pushing us deeper into debt
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- We find ourselves using the same description as these people (verse 37)
  - We are in a vise, we are in a self made bondage
  - We are slaves in our own world, our abundance goes to others
  - And in all of this, there is a sure conviction the blessing of God has been lost

- What's true individually can become true corporately
- Churches tend to live out the same narrative
  - God's hand is on us, we seek hard after Him
  - And see everyone who enters as vital to our community
  - We meet to pray hard over what God is going to do
  - We think hard about what it means to move towards Christlikeness
  - We gather to share the gifts of the Spirit
  - We aspire after justice
  - We are determined to be a radical influence on culture
  - A foretaste of God's reign
  - And God blesses-and we grow
  - And then we start relaxing
  - We turn inward, we have our friends, no longer is there the need to reach out to others
  - We have our building, our budget, our staff, our programs
  - And we start relying more on them and less on God
  - We no longer come to pour ourselves out, but come merely to be fed
  - We no longer are so counter-cultural, we look more and more like our culture
  - We have some successes, and begin to assume they came because of us
  
- And we wake up one day and discover we're one of the 85% that have plateaued, and no longer really count

How do we get out of this?

- How did those of Nehemiah's day get out of this?

#### 1) IT BEGINS WITH CONFESSION

- That comes out of our exposure to God's Word
  - Examining the heart just as the people of Nehemiah's day
    - "Why am I doing this?"
    - "Where is this taking me?"
  - Seeing sin as God sees sin
  - Laying down the burden of hiding, pretending
  - Owning up to sin
- Reckoning with I John 1:9 "if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins"

Illustration - Our first house, a stagnant pond

- It took some back breaking work to cut and remove some logs that had inhibited the flow of water

- Once there was no longer a log jam, the water flowed, the putrid smell of stagnant water was gone
- Same is true when we confess sin, the waters of grace again flow
- A resurgence of power and joy take hold
- But something more must take place
- It's here in the story

## 2) CONFESSION THAT MOVES TO REPENTANCE

- For confession without repentance does not ultimately change much
- Feeling sorrow does not go very far, without taking the bold step of change
- For repentance has little to do with blubbering and self-loathing and self-hatred
  - That's despair
- True repentance has everything to do with decisive action, restructuring
  - Declaring "Here is what has to change if I am to live a life reflecting the stature of Christ."
- We see this in verse 38
  - They were determined to change
  - So serious that the people asked their spiritual leaders to affix their seals to it
  - Hold them accountable
- Confession is the necessary first step
- Until we get to the bottom of ourselves, we are not ready for repentance
- But once we are there, repentance is what moves us into the future and out of our past
  - Into real change
  - Covenants save our laudable desires from hovering in a pious void
- So what are the stains that need God's removal?
  - What must you confess?
  - What must we as a church confess?
  - Are we willing to move to repentance?
  - One that is demonstrated by signing a covenant?