

SACKCLOTH AND DUST

MAIN POINT.

Confessing our sin frees us; worshiping God changes us.



CHRIST CONNECTION

God's people remembered all He had done and promised to be faithful. God is gracious and compassionate. All along, God has been faithful to people who are unfaithful. We experience God's grace and compassion in Jesus, who gave His life so we can receive mercy and life forever.



GIFT OF WORSHIP

This week, we're covering the passages and main points below. But we encourage you to read all of the content on the timeline as you prepare to teach.

Nehemiah 9–11

CONFESSION PROMPTS WORSHIP

NEHEMIAH 9:1-3,26-29,33-38

1 On the twenty-fourth day of this month the Israelites assembled; they were fasting, wearing sackcloth, and had put dust on their heads. 2 Those of Israelite descent separated themselves from all foreigners, and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their ancestors. 3 While they stood in their places, they read from the book of the law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day and spent another fourth of the day in confession and worship of the LORD their God. . . . 26 But they were disobedient and rebelled against you. They flung your law behind their backs and killed your prophets who warned them in order to turn them back to you. They committed terrible blasphemies. 27 So you handed them over to their enemies, who oppressed them. In their time of distress, they cried out to you, and you heard from heaven. In your abundant compassion you gave them deliverers, who rescued them from the power of their enemies. 28 But as soon as they had relief, they again did what was evil in your sight. So you abandoned them to the power of their enemies, who dominated them. When they cried out to you again, you heard from heaven and rescued them many times in your compassion. 29 You warned them to turn back to your law, but they acted arrogantly and would not obey your commands. They sinned against your ordinances, which a person will live by if he does them. They stubbornly resisted, stiffened their necks, and would not obey. . . . 33 You are righteous concerning all that has happened to us, because you have acted faithfully, while we have acted wickedly. 34 Our kings, leaders, priests, and ancestors did not obey your law or listen to your commands and warnings you gave them. 35 When they were in their kingdom, with your abundant goodness that you gave them, and in the spacious and fertile land you set before them, they would not serve you or turn from their wicked ways. 36 Here we are today, slaves in the land you gave our ancestors so that they could enjoy its fruit and its goodness. Here we are—slaves in it! 37 Its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have set over us, because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and our livestock as they please. We are in great distress. 38 In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement in writing on a sealed document containing the names of our leaders, Levites, and priests.

WORSHIP PROMPTS COMMITMENT

NEHEMIAH 10:28-29

28 The rest of the people—the priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, and temple servants, along with their wives, sons, and daughters, everyone who is able to understand and who has separated themselves from the surrounding peoples to obey the law of God—29 join with their noble brothers and commit themselves with a sworn oath to follow the law of God given through God's servant Moses and to obey carefully all the commands, ordinances, and statutes of the LORD our Lord.

BEFORE YOU TEACH

MAIN POINT.

Confessing our sin frees us; worshiping God changes us.

Leaders: Don't shy away from conviction; instead, model how it is a gift that brings freedom.

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

CONFESSION PROMPTS WORSHIP

NEHEMIAH 9:1-3

"The goal of understanding God's word is to apply it to one's life; thus, the people needed to confess where they had failed to follow God. Then they would be in a right relationship with God and could demonstrate their humble submission by bowing in worship before him."¹⁰

NEHEMIAH 9:26-29,33-36

"The primary theme of the prayer is God's gracious self-revelation of himself in history and Israel's miserable response to his revelation. . . . The author of this passage is restating the oft-repeated confession that God's benevolent initiative has been characteristically met by man's defiance and self-will."¹¹

WORSHIP PROMPTS COMMITMENT

NEHEMIAH 10:28-29

"They have separated themselves from something to something. They have separated from certain things: the abominations of the idolaters. And they have separated to the Torah of God. This word 'Torah' refers to all that Moses taught in the first five books of the Old Testament. . . . Some might be inclined to ask whether this might be a little bit legalistic. The answer is that this is not legalistic at all. These people have been mercifully redeemed and brought back from exile. It must be kept in mind that they were already redeemed before the commitment to obey was made at the exodus and before they made a covenant to keep the covenant here at the return to the land. . . . God does not teach His people legalism. This commitment is not a legalistic covenant. They are entering into this covenant having been mercifully redeemed and as a sign of their commitment to respond to the mercy that has been shown to them."¹²

"Separation from the neighboring peoples was important to maintain the distinctive beliefs and ethical principles of the community. God still wants his people to be separate by repudiating values and beliefs that are contrary to his will. We must take seriously the scriptural emphasis on separation without falling into an isolationist situation. The other danger is to accommodate the world so much that we fall into a syncretism that loses our Christian way of thinking and acting. In the situation of Ezra and Nehemiah, separation was imperative to secure the continuity of the redeemed community."¹³



CONTEXT

Previously, Ezra's reading from God's Word led the people to repent. Then, they spent the next several weeks observing Hebrew festivals: the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Festival of Tabernacles. Once the celebrations came to a close, the people assembled again to hear God's Word and to spend time in confession and in worship. In chapter 9, we read their prayer, which summarized the entire storyline of the Old Testament—the story of God's work in His creation and in His people's victories and failures. Hearing the history of God's faithfulness contrasted with Israel's history of rebellion prompted the people to renew their covenant with the Lord. Israel took part in a covenant renewal at several points in the nation's history. Like Israel, we rebel and must practice renewal. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can experience daily renewal by cultivating spiritual disciplines like prayer, reading God's Word, resting, and worshiping (2 Cor. 4:16).

THEOLOGY CONNECTION

Worship

While many reduce worship to an event or the singing of worship songs, worship is first and foremost something of the heart and extends to all areas of life. The aim and focus of worship is God, giving Him the praise and adoration He deserves. Worship should be carried out not only at a personal level within a Christian's life but also in joining with other Christians in the corporate act of worship and stewarding our gifts for the glory of God. Corporate worship serves to uplift and strengthen other Christians, but it also serves as a witness to nonbelievers of the greatness of God.

LEADERS' PRAYER

GOD, CONVICTION IS A GIFT THAT DRAWS US CLOSER TO YOU AND MAKES US MORE LIKE YOUR SON. HELP US TO RESPOND IN REPENTANCE. WORSHIP IS A GIFT THAT REMINDS US OF YOUR GREATNESS AND YOUR FAITHFULNESS. MAY OUR WORSHIP LEAD US TO GREATER OBEDIENCE AND A DESIRE TO KEEP THE COMMITMENTS WE'VE MADE TO YOU.



KICK STARTER

RATE IT!

How likely are you to keep your word, even when you don't want to (1=Sorry, I'm out; 10=I'm locked in)?



These optional activities are designed to help your students interact. You'll find a Discussion Activity and a Cultural Connection, which touches on a relevant topic in today's teen culture. Each group is different, so adapt these activities to fit your group's needs. The goal is for students to connect more to the lesson as they connect to the topic and to one another.

1

WHAT YOU KNOW NOW

SUPPLIES LIST: NONE

Ask the following questions, allowing time for students to share responses:

- **IF YOU COULD GO BACK AND RELIVE SOMETHING FROM YOUR CHILDHOOD, WHAT WOULD IT BE?**
- **IF YOU COULD TALK TO YOUR YOUNGER SELF, WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE?**
- **WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED ABOUT GOD THAT WOULD'VE HELPED YOU IN THE PAST?**

Looking back, many of us probably wish we could relive certain parts of our childhoods. Then again, we probably have parts of our past we'd never want to revisit. We know more now than we did then. And if we're walking with Jesus, we know Him more deeply. Often, in looking back, we can see God's faithfulness more clearly, as we'll see in the lesson today.

2

CULTURAL CONNECTION

Who helps you to be a better version of yourself? Who brings out your best qualities by motivating you and inspiring you? Whose commitment to Jesus influences you to desire a closer walk with Him? These are the people who call us up to a higher standard than what we'd settle for on our own. They call us out too, helping us see where we've allowed sin to creep into our lives. Here's the deal: Worship makes us better. That may sound odd because worship isn't a person, but worship places us in God's holy presence. We can't come away unchanged. Now, God is with us at all times, but when we worship God in spirit and in truth (John 4:24), we intentionally lift up God's name, draw closer to His heart, and position ourselves to hear His voice more clearly. Worship is an invitation for the Holy Spirit to expose our rough edges, and through the power of conviction, to smooth them. And we're better because we're made more like Jesus in the process.

DISCUSSION

MAIN POINT.

Confessing our sin frees us; worshiping God changes us.

CONFESSION PROMPTS WORSHIP

READ NEHEMIAH 9:1-3,26-29,33-38

HOW DO YOU REACT WHEN SOMEONE CALLS YOU OUT? INSTEAD OF BECOMING DEFENSIVE, HOW CAN WE THINK DIFFERENTLY ABOUT CONVICTION?

Repenting is admitting that God is right about our sin and giving up the fight to prove we had a reason to sin—that our situation was different. **The Holy Spirit convicting us, or showing us our sin, is an invitation to agree with God and repair our relationship with Him.** The closer we walk with God, the more easily we recognize our sin, but we react less defensively. Why? **Because conviction isn't a cruel attack on us but on our sin; we welcome confession and repentance because they are gifts that draw us closer to God.**



WHY DID REMEMBERING THEIR HISTORY PROMPT THE PEOPLE TO CONFESS THEIR SIN? WHY DID IT RESULT IN WORSHIP?

The people saw two truths when they looked back: God was faithful and they weren't. In revisiting their history, the people saw that the nation's response to God's constant goodness was a cycle of rebellion. The people confessed sins of the past and the present and were moved to worship—to praise God's name and give Him glory. This is the right response for us too. When we look back, we'll see that God's goodness marks our lives, prompting us to confess our sin. **Because God is faithful to forgive us (1 John 1:9), our only move is to worship Him, giving Him glory for saving us through the blood of His Son, Jesus.**



WHAT DOES IT SHOW ABOUT GOD THAT HE KEPT *RESCUING* HIS PEOPLE WHEN THEY KEPT *TURNING* FROM HIM? HOW DO WE GET CAUGHT UP IN THE SAME CYCLE?

If we look at their behavior, Israel was a lot like people who continue to hurt us, betray us, or gossip about us after they've apologized and promised to stop. God loved them, freed them from slavery, gave them a good land and His law, provided for them; in return, they "flung [His] law behind their backs" (v. 26). They treated God's words as meaningless and bowed before false gods and idols, which had only betrayed them with false promises. God's people chased worldly power and pleasure and came up empty. But God was faithful to call them back. While we would've probably turned around and walked away from people who behaved like Israel, God didn't. Why? **Because God is absolute goodness. He made a covenant to bless all people through Israel—to bring a Savior. God was going to be faithful to this promise, even when His people were unfaithful to Him.** We get caught up in a cycle a lot like Israel. God loves us, frees us, leads us, and provides for us, and in return, we ignore His Word and His voice and chase after the world. We come up empty every time. **We'd probably walk away from ourselves, but God has never left us and never will leave us.** Instead, He calls us to return to Him through repentance.

WORSHIP PROMPTS COMMITMENT

READ NEHEMIAH 10:28-29

DO YOU MORE EASILY OBEY PEOPLE YOU TRUST? HOW MIGHT THIS APPLY TO OBEYING GOD?

Looking back at their history only proved to the people that they had every reason to trust God. He had been faithful to His words; they could trust He would be faithful moving forward. Though we are supposed to obey people in authority, we don't always obey easily. But when we trust someone—we know they love us and care for us—we usually find it easier to obey them. Why? Because we know with certainty that they'd never ask us to do something that could harm us. **Trust motivates obedience. If we trust God—and we have no reason not to—then we have every reason to obey Him. We can commit to follow Him because He leads us with love and care.**

WHY DO WE EASILY MAKE PROMISES TO GOD AT CAMPS OR OTHER EVENTS YET STRUGGLE TO FOLLOW THROUGH? WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

Many of us make commitments at camps and retreats. In the moment, we truly mean what we promise. We're surrounded by worship and God's Word in a godly community. Then, we come home and re-enter "normal life." We return to the same people and places—the same temptations and habits—and the emotional high wears off. **We must decide to follow through even when we don't feel like it anymore; our commitment has to be rooted in something deeper than our feelings.** Here's the deal: You don't have to get caught up in the cycle of emotional vows. Sure, camps and retreats are great places to strengthen our faith! But expect your emotions to die down. And then, keep going! **The truth God revealed to you there is the same truth everywhere else. You won't do it perfectly, but you can live out the commitments you've made to God when you stay connected to Him through prayer, the Word, and godly community!** God has given you everything you need to be faithful (2 Pet. 1:3)!

HOW COULD WRITING DOWN THEIR OATH MAKE THE PEOPLE ACCOUNTABLE? HOW CAN WE CREATE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR OURSELVES TODAY (9:38)?

The people couldn't deny their vow. Writing it down held them accountable to God, to one another, and to future generations. **We can share our commitments with godly friends, write them in a prayer journal, or set reminders on our phones.** Creating accountability helps us remember and keep our vows.

WRAP-UP

 DO YOU FEEL LIKE GOD GETS TIRED OF FORGIVING YOU FOR THE SAME SINS? HOW DOES THIS PASSAGE REASSURE YOU?

Maybe you've made promises to God many times. You had the best intentions of keeping them, but over time, you fell back into the same sin. The more times this happens, you may struggle with feeling like God is just over it—over *you*. **The story of God's people shows us that God never tires of forgiving us when we truly repent.** In fact, His kindness is what leads us to repentance (Rom. 2:4). **If you've struggled with falling back into the same sin over and over, then it's time to break that pattern for good.** You likely need accountability—people to walk with you and help you stay connected to God's Word. Who can you share your struggle with? Who can you ask to ask *you* the tough questions? You may also fall into the same sinful habits because you never removed idols or temptations from your life. Maybe you need to turn your phone over to your parents at night. Maybe you need to break off a dating relationship instead of trying to change the person. **One thing is certain: God has given you a way out if you're willing to take it (1 Cor. 10:13).**