

Sing before the service: Psalm 138:1

Our help is in the Name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.

Beloved, grace and peace be to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ through the mighty working of God the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Psalm of praise: 118:1, 7

Prayer

Psalm 9:1, 7

Scripture reading Nehemiah 9

Scripture text: Nehemiah 9:5

And the Levites— Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah and Pethahiah— said: Stand up and praise the LORD your God, who is from everlasting to everlasting. Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. (Nehemiah 9:5 NIV-UK)

Stand up and praise the LORD your God from everlasting to everlasting!

In the history of the church, people have always turned to the Lord when they suffered severe trials.

- Through humbling themselves they settled up with the Lord and then the Lord again showed mercy to them.
- Tonight our service also speaks of humbling oneself because tonight a few of our young people are going to confess their faith before the Lord.
- To be able to confess our faith means that we must know that we actually deserve temporal and eternal punishment because of our sins, because this is exactly what makes us realise that we can never enter God's kingdom without the salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.
- This in fact applies to every one of us who are here tonight in the Lord's holy presence.

In this sermon we focus on the following matters:

- 1. The principles around humbling oneself**
- 2. The result of humbling ourselves and confessing our sins**
- 3. Forward in the Lord Jesus Christ**

1. The principles around humbling oneself

Let's have a look at the principles the Lord laid down for the Israelites for their day of fast during times of suffering while Nehemiah was their governor.

We learn from the passage we have read that the people, at that time, had already been together for a month to be instructed in the Book of the Law.

- Following the first phase, which included the Festival of Shelters, a second national assembly was held.
- Again they assembled in groups at the square just inside the Water Gate.
- Every group was instructed by Levites.

The main purpose of this assembly was to confess their sins to the Lord. How did they do it?

- They had interesting ways in which they wanted to show the Lord that they were in the wrong and that they wanted to correct it.
- They fasted. It means that they did not eat anything on that they. The Lord had given this custom to them long ago.

Their clothes – clothes of mourning – also reflected their fasting and repentance.

- Clothes of mourning consisted of a tunic of sackcloth – coarsely woven goat or camel hair.
- It was usually worn without underclothing.
- The dust or ash they sprinkled on their heads also showed that they were mourning. (See Job 16:15: *Here I sit in sackcloth. I have surrendered, and I sit in the dust.*)

The idea was that a person who was mourning tried to bear, as well as he could, a resemblance to the dead. Compare Ezra 9:3 and 10:6:

When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled. (Ezra 9:3 NIV-UK)

Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the room of Jehohanan son of Eliashib. While he was there, he ate no food and drank no water, because he continued to mourn over the unfaithfulness of the exiles.

(Ezra 10:6 NIV-UK)

In so doing they tried to show that they were dead because of their many sins and sinful nature. Paul also refers to this in Ephesians 2:1:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, *but made alive in Christ*
(Ephesians 2:1 NIV-UK)

Quite remarkable is the fact that on this day of repentance and confession the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners.

- This had nothing to do with politics.
- It was just to make sure that only those who knew the Lord would join in worshipping the Lord. Also see Ezra 10:11:

Confess your sin to the Lord, the God of your ancestors, and do what He demands. Separate yourselves from the people of the land and from these pagan women. (Ezra 10:11 New Living Translation)

By separating themselves from the foreigners the Israelites, at the same time, had to reach a stage where they could confess their own sins and those of their ancestors.

- In their worship they had to reach a stage of such honesty that they could not blame other people to be guilty and be punished for their own sins.

The national assembly (public worship?) lasted half a day – from early morning until noon.

- Translated into our time it's about six hours (see 8:3).
- Half the time was spent on reading the Book of the Law and explaining what has been read.
- The other half was used to confess.

On such an occasion they did not only confess their personal sins.

- They also confessed the sins their people had committed in the past.
- They studied their history and admitted their mistakes and also that the Lord's punishment had been good and just.

- They also bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground (Nehemiah 8:6 NLT).

The same principle still applies for us too. If we really want the Lord to show mercy to us, we have to confess our sins in all honesty before the Lord.

2. The result of humbling ourselves and confessing our sins

The Lord immediately answers if our sorrow and repentance that goes with it are truly sincere.

- Hence we should not continue to be depressed after we have confessed our guilt.
- Our repentance and humbling ourselves should immediately result in joy and positive worship.

Confession of guilt may not end up in depression.

- Hence the Levites instructed the people to immediately get up from the ground.
- Their tears and lamentation had to stop after they had confessed their sins.
- Instead they had to sing a great song of praise to honour the Lord.

Here the Scriptures lay down a very important rule of life. We must praise the Lord.

- Praising the Lord means that you can immediately take hold of the content of the Lord's blessing.
- When you have confessed your sins, you need not wait till tomorrow to feel better –the Lord's counsel takes effect immediately.
- God's grace does not need time to mature. When He hears our supplication He shows mercy to us immediately.
- Hence it had to be reflected right away by the attitude and worship of the people: Stand up and praise the LORD!

Of course one cannot just stand up after having mourned and then act irresponsibly when one is joyful.

Our praise and gratitude to the Lord should be of a specific nature.

- Hence the Levites warn them that they should praise and thank the Lord from everlasting to everlasting.
- Your gratitude to the Lord must be so deep that it will last forever.
- You must continue to show the gratitude to the Lord – the gratitude you inherited from your ancestors – and it should be passed on to generations to come.

For us it means that the congregation should respond to their confession of sins by testifying joyfully of the Lord's readiness to show mercy to us.

- It must be clear that the Lord is far above any praise – He is so great that the very best and greatest songs of praise can never reach the full extent of the Lord's greatness and mercy.
- The Lord is far greater than our very best songs of praise.

The people then sang a song of praise.

- The **song of praise** started by praising the greatness of the LORD.
- The creative power of the Lord is glorified.
- Hence it is also a **song of thanks**, because we owe our existence to the creation of the Lord and our continued existence to his fatherly care.

- The Lord is Creator of more than just the earth and us. He also created the highest heavens: Psalm 148:4. Also see: Deuteronomy 10:14; 1 Kings 8:27; 2 Chronicles 2:6).
- In addition, there are also more creatures than us – the angels of heaven.
- They were also created to praise and glorify the Lord.

The song the people then sang, briefly tells that Israel had forgotten that they owe their continued existence to the immeasurable goodness of the Lord.

- They confessed that they had turned away from faith and that they had refused to do what they should have done.
- Maybe we should not read this passage in too much of a hurry, because it lays down the principle that puts into effect the Lord's punishment for us.
 - They rebelled against the Lord – they were disobedient.
 - They regarded the Lord's instructions as being worthless and turned away from his law.
- The prophets who had come to warn them were all killed.

Maybe we have not killed any prophets; however, in our country are many people who have no time for the Lord.

True respect and honour to God have greatly disappeared, because at present the general view is that the Christian faith ranks with false religions such as Hinduism and what Moslems believe, the worship of forefathers and their faith healers, and all those kinds of religions.

How can we expect the Lord to show us mercy while this religious chaos is the order of the day?

3. Forward in the Lord Jesus Christ

Fact is that the believers must reach a stage where these matters are left behind and then they must move forward.

- They must turn away from their sins and then testify with a song of praise that they worship the Lord.
- In this passage they sing praises to the Lord to express their gratitude.

In this song of praise to the Lord the believers confess that they have often sinned greatly and that they have turned away from the Lord, and that the Lord then let them suffer many hardships.

How did the Lord do it?

- In various ways. In the time of the judges – for example – the Lord handed them over to their enemies, and by doing that He punished them time and again when they had turned away from Him.

They confess to the Lord that every time they knew they could pray and cry to the Lord to help them.

- In his wonderful mercy He rescued them repeatedly; every time He sent them deliverers (the judges).
- This is what they are thankful for. The Lord showed mercy to them again and again!

We experience the same. Whenever we are in distress the Lord's grace is always far greater than our sufferings.

- We must just take care not to do what the Israelites did repeatedly.

- Every time the Lord had shown mercy to them, they did not appreciate the peaceful times, because time and again they turned to sin again and turned their backs on the Lord.
- This is a grave mistake. We must confess that we are adults in faith and that we know the Lord whole-heartedly. We must reach a stage where we confess before God that we personally accept full responsibility for serving Him whole-heartedly.
- We must also undertake, now that we are adults in faith, that we will always praise and glorify the Lord for his blessings.

Look at this passage again: *The dominant message of this song of praise is not the Lord's punishment.*

- The Lord's mercy and forgiveness are more prominent than his judgement.
- Let us all – together with these young brothers and sisters – confess in our heart our faith before God tonight. And let us then live a life filled with songs and prayers to the glory of God.

We should not turn back to sin like the Israelites did time and again.

- The Lord changes us through the death of his Son and the descent of the Holy Spirit so that we are more capable of turning away from sin than they were.
- God let his Son die as punishment for all our sins.
- Also for such bad things done by nations that the Lord punished them with wars and droughts – droughts, for example, in Elijah's day, and wars like in the time of the judges, of which we also read in this passage.

Confessing your faith before God is almost like becoming dead to sin and then living a new eternal life with God!

On the other hand, confession of faith is also prophetic of eternal death in hell if we do not live according to what we confess about and before God.

- If we truly are servants of the Lord Jesus Christ, we will be honest by confessing that we sometimes sin in weakness but that we will not continue to do it!
- Through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ we were renewed, and also by the working of the Holy Spirit, so that we all know the right road to follow.

Let us who believe and who serve the Lord, although we are few, stand up and turn away from what is not good and right, and live a life of sincere praise and gratitude to God.

- We confess his daily protection that He promised us in his covenant.
- Let us confess the grace of the Lord and, for the very reason that we experience his abundant grace, pray for forgiveness of our sins and for his blessing in times to come.
- Then we do not pray with any doubts in our minds. We pray because we know the facts: God always shows mercy when people turn away from their sins and then live a truly faithful life.

Stand up and praise the LORD your God from everlasting to everlasting!

Amen.

Closing prayer

Closing hymn: Psalm 91:7

Confession of faith

Psalm 134

The Lord will bless you and keep you.

The Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you.

The Lord lift His countenance to you and give you peace.

Amen.

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Date: 19 October 2008