

Corporate Confession
Nehemiah 8:18-9:38
February 23, 2014

Introduction – Generational Sin

Have you ever done a search on your ancestors? Have you ever thought about why people do that? It seems to be a universal quest. Some folks are more motivated and actually follow through on the detailed search. Others are like me, saying, “Yeah...I ought to do that.” Even though we live in a culture that seems to only value the present and the future, we’re still fascinated by the past...especially our past.

That’s because our past shapes who we are today. A few years ago NBC produced and aired a program that tapped into our fascination with ancestors called “Who Do You Think You Are?” I think I only watched it once, but its premise was compelling. The show featured well-known celebrities who would go on an ancestral search – often times to the actual geographical place of their forebears. The show had plenty of emotional moments when the celebrity came to realize some significant person or event in their past. There is a very strong sense of connection with those who’ve gone before us.

This connection with our forebears also has a downside. It’s called generational sin. In my family tree – I won’t tell you who and how far back – there are extra-marital affairs, a “back-alley abortion” and, if you look far enough back, even accusations of witchcraft. We’re all the same. Rustle the leaves in your family tree and I’m certain you’ll also find things you’d rather not know.

The nation of Israel in Nehemiah’s time was a big family with a long and sometimes dark history. Our text today, Nehemiah 9, is a retelling of their national story. As we read last week, the nation was in the midst of a revival. God was bringing them back into alignment with his purpose. They celebrated the Feasts of Trumpets and Booths with great joy in Chapter 8. In the narrative today, the people convene in a solemn assembly to remember the greatness of God’s faithfulness and to confess their national sins.

Text – Nehemiah 8:18-9:38

And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God. They kept the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the rule.

Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads. And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the Lord their God for a quarter of the

day; for another quarter of it they made confession and worshiped the Lord their God. On the stairs of the Levites stood Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, and Chenani; and they cried with a loud voice to the Lord their God. Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah, said, "Stand up and bless the Lord your God from everlasting to everlasting. Blessed be your glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise.

"You are the Lord, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you. You are the Lord, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham. You found his heart faithful before you, and made with him the covenant to give to his offspring the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite. And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous.

"And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea, and performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants and all the people of his land, for you knew that they acted arrogantly against our fathers. And you made a name for yourself, as it is to this day. And you divided the sea before them, so that they went through the midst of the sea on dry land, and you cast their pursuers into the depths, as a stone into mighty waters. By a pillar of cloud you led them in the day, and by a pillar of fire in the night to light for them the way in which they should go. You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments, and you made known to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses your servant. You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger and brought water for them out of the rock for their thirst, and you told them to go in to possess the land that you had sworn to give them.

"But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments. They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them, but they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them. Even when they had made for themselves a golden calf and said, 'This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt,' and had committed great blasphemies, you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness. The pillar of cloud to lead them in the way did not depart from them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night to light for them the way by which they should go. You gave your good Spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst. Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness, and they lacked nothing. Their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell.

“And you gave them kingdoms and peoples and allotted to them every corner. So they took possession of the land of Sihon king of Heshbon and the land of Og king of Bashan. You multiplied their children as the stars of heaven, and you brought them into the land that you had told their fathers to enter and possess. So the descendants went in and possessed the land, and you subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gave them into their hand, with their kings and the peoples of the land, that they might do with them as they would. And they captured fortified cities and a rich land, and took possession of houses full of all good things, cisterns already hewn, vineyards, olive orchards and fruit trees in abundance. So they ate and were filled and became fat and delighted themselves in your great goodness.

“Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies. Therefore you gave them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer. And in the time of their suffering they cried out to you and you heard them from heaven, and according to your great mercies you gave them saviors who saved them from the hand of their enemies. But after they had rest they did evil again before you, and you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them. Yet when they turned and cried to you, you heard from heaven, and many times you delivered them according to your mercies. And you warned them in order to turn them back to your law. Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your rules, which if a person does them, he shall live by them, and they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey. Many years you bore with them and warned them by your Spirit through your prophets. Yet they would not give ear. Therefore you gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.

“Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love, let not all the hardship seem little to you that has come upon us, upon our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and all your people, since the time of the kings of Assyria until this day. Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly. Our kings, our princes, our priests, and our fathers have not kept your law or paid attention to your commandments and your warnings that you gave them. Even in their own kingdom, and amid your great goodness that you gave them, and in the large and rich land that you set before them, they did not serve you or turn from their wicked works. Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves. And its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress.

“Because of all this we make a firm covenant in writing; on the sealed document are the names of our princes, our Levites, and our priests.

Prayer

Corporate Confession

Nehemiah 9 is called a corporate confession. Often, when we think of confession we think of admitting our sins. That’s only part of it. We also have what is called our “confession of faith.” A confession is a statement of what we know to be true. The Jews of Nehemiah 9 confessed not only their shortcomings, but they gladly proclaimed the everlasting faithfulness of God. Throughout the long passage, they tell of the goodness and longsuffering of God who patiently extended his grace even after his people rejected him. Time and again, God would lavish his love on his people. They would forget him and rebel against him. And then God would graciously restore them.

After leading them out of Egypt with a powerful hand, the people rebelled. (vs. 16-17)

After they were established in the Promised Land, they rebelled again. (vs. 26)

They repeated the cycle over and over again. (vs. 28)

Finally, they were given over to captivity. (vs. 30)

But God did abandon them. (vs. 31)

Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.

Through it all there is a common theme: *stubbornness*. God’s love is stubborn. He never abandoned them. A great virtue. Conversely, God’s people repeatedly “stiffened their necks” and acted stubbornly against his commands. A great vice. Are we so different?

Our Common Problem

Stubbornness is a common problem among God’s people. We are so very prone to rebellion and refusal to obey God’s commands. Psalm 95 is a wonderful psalm. It includes an oft-quoted call to worship and a wonderful picture of God’s care for us, his people.

Oh come, let us sing to the Lord;
 let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
 Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
 let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
 For the Lord is a great God,
 and a great King above all gods.

In his hand are the depths of the earth;
 the heights of the mountains are his also.
 The sea is his, for he made it,
 and his hands formed the dry land.
 Oh come, let us worship and bow down;
 let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!
 For he is our God,
 and we are the people of his pasture,
 and the sheep of his hand.

If we are attuned to the Lord, our hearts resonate with the words of this psalm. He is the Creator God and his power is immeasurable. He is our God and we are his people. He cares deeply for us as a shepherd would care for his flock. They are words and concepts that we drink in deeply and in which we find comfort and consolation.

But God knows us too well. The majesty and intimacy of the psalm closes with a serious and dire warning:

Today, if you hear his voice,
 do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
 as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
 when your fathers put me to the test
 and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.
 For forty years I loathed that generation
 and said, "They are a people who go astray in their heart,
 and they have not known my ways."
 Therefore I swore in my wrath,
 "They shall not enter my rest."

If we had the gall to critique this psalm, we might ask the writer, "Now why did you have to go and ruin such beautiful words with that dark ending. Just ruined it." I think that's the point. It grabs our attention and forces us to look in the mirror at our propensity to wander. Isaiah said it well, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way." (Isa. 53:6) The hymn-writer put it this way:

O to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be!
 Let Thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to Thee:
 Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love...

The Roots of Stubbornness

What are the root causes of stubbornness? As I've worked on this message through the week I've reflected on that question. There may be more, but I think there are three primary reasons why we get "stiff-necked" and stubborn.

Selfish Pleasure

The first is easy to see. We don't want to change because we enjoy what we are doing. There are some people whom God calls out of very comfortable situations into self-giving ministry. They usually don't go without some kind of struggle because they enjoy the life they are living. But most often, the refusal to give up selfish pleasure is because it is a blatant sin: an illicit affair, substance abuse, behavioral addictions, or - if I may meddle and accuse myself a bit - gluttony. Some spend all of their money on their own pleasures rather than being generous to help those who are in need. If we get our back up and refuse to surrender those selfish pleasures, God often lets them run their destructive course. We ruin our lives, our relationships, or our health and find ourselves in a crisis. How much better to obey God than be stubborn and eventually lose it all!

Fear

Another reason why we get stubborn is because we are afraid. It's kind of like the kid standing at the edge of the pool refusing to jump into their daddy's arms because they are afraid. God will often urge us to do something outside of our comfort zone. And because we are afraid of the unknown, we balk and refuse to step out. This was certainly the case as Israel came to the brink of going into the Promised Land. God promised to be with them and to give them success over their enemies. But some of the men who spied out the territory came back and were intimidated by the walled cities and giants in the land. They were afraid so they stubbornly refused to follow God into the promise that had been given to them. The result? They wandered in the wilderness for another 40 years until all the adults but the two - who had urged obedience - died without ever realizing what God had planned for them.

Fear also motivates stubbornness in our relationships with others. What if I gave in? I'd lose my position and leverage of power in the relationship. Let that sit for a while. Pretty ugly, isn't it? We need to call it what it is. Such stubbornness sabotages intimacy in marriage, stymies productivity in the workplace, and grieves the Holy Spirit in the church. Christ calls us to be servants, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." (Mark 9:35)

Unbelief

Fear eventually leads to unbelief, the root of all sin and rebellion against God. Unbelief was the undoing of Israel. They did not recognize God as God. They did not truly believe his promises, though he demonstrated his power and faithfulness over and over. Because they did not believe, they "stiffened their necks" and refused to obey.

It's very tempting to live our lives the way we want - never accepting God's challenge to step out in faith and obedience and live his way. We ignore his voice and promptings and just go on doing what we want, propped up by our own self-righteous assessment of our choices. God often speaks into our lives through people who seemingly oppose us. You know, the people that

get under our skin and bring tension into our lives either by what they say or simply by who they are. But some folks just always assume that they're right. They never question themselves. And by being so stubborn, they lose the opportunity to hear God's voice through others. Always assuming that you are right is the mark of a weak and immature person. It takes courage, humility, and faith to consider that you may be wrong.

Overcoming Stubbornness

So how do we overcome this destructive stubbornness in our lives? What is it in my heart that keeps me clinging to my own way? How can I overcome the selfishness, fear, and lack of faith that keeps me from following God?

The Bible tells the story of two different kings in the early history of the nation of Israel. One was stubborn, the other submissive to God. Both of them, at a significant point in their rule, disobeyed God. How they reacted tells us how we can overcome the sickness of spiritual stubbornness.

God told King Saul to destroy the entire nation of the Amalekites, but he failed to do so. He kept some of the best things of the Amalekites and took their king into captivity. When Samuel the prophet confronted him, he deflected responsibility, and said the people did it. Saul was proud and would not humble himself when he was wrong.

Most of you know the awful story of King David's adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband to cover it up. A heinous crime. And yet when he was confronted by the prophet, Nathan, he said simply, "I have sinned against the Lord." God calls us to have soft hearts that are ready to respond to him and others. David learned it the hard way. His heart was broken. He was humble and he took responsibility. In the depths of sorrow over his sin, he wrote the moving words of Psalm 51: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." (Psalm 51:17)

Friends, simply put, we are stubborn because we are proud. There is a law – a principle – that runs throughout the story of Scripture. God resists the proud, but gives grace to broken people.

Proud people focus on the failures of others.

Broken people are overwhelmed with a sense of their own spiritual need.

Proud people have a critical, fault-finding spirit; they look at everyone else's faults with a microscope but their own with a telescope.

Broken people are compassionate; they can forgive much because they know how much they have been forgiven.

Proud people are self-righteous; they look down on others.

Broken people esteem all others better than themselves.

Proud people have an independent, self-sufficient spirit.

Broken people have a dependent spirit; they recognize their need for others.

Proud people have to prove that they are right.

Broken people are willing to yield the right to be right.

Proud people claim rights; they have a demanding spirit.

Broken people yield their rights; they have a meek spirit.

Proud people are self-protective of their time, their rights, and their reputation.

Broken people are self-denying.

Proud people desire to be served.

Broken people are motivated to serve others.

Proud people are wounded when others are promoted and they are overlooked.

Broken people are eager for others to get the credit; they rejoice when others are lifted up.

Proud people feel confident in how much they know.

Broken people are humbled by how very much they have to learn.

Proud people are quick to blame others.

Broken people accept personal responsibility and can see where they are wrong in a situation.

Proud people are unapproachable or defensive when criticized.

Broken people receive criticism with a humble, open spirit.

Proud people find it difficult to share their spiritual need with others.

Broken people are willing to be open and transparent with others as God directs.

Proud people want to be sure that no one finds out when they have sinned; their instinct is to cover up.

Broken people, once broken, don't care who knows or who finds out; they are willing to be exposed because they have nothing to lose.

Proud people have a hard time saying, "I was wrong; will you please forgive me?"

Broken people are quick to admit failure and to seek forgiveness when necessary.

Proud people wait for the other to come and ask forgiveness when there is a misunderstanding or conflict in a relationship.

Broken people take the initiative to be reconciled when there is misunderstanding or conflict in relationships; they race to the cross; they see if they can get there first, no matter how wrong the other may have been.

Proud people compare themselves with others and feel worthy of honor.

Broken people compare themselves to the holiness of God and feel a desperate need for His mercy.

Proud people don't think they have anything to repent of.

Broken people realize they have need of a continual heart attitude of repentance.

Proud people don't think they need revival, but they are sure that everyone else does.

Broken people continually sense their need for a fresh encounter with God and for a fresh filling of His Holy Spirit.

Nearly twenty years ago, a woman by the name of Nancy Leigh DeMoss spoke those words to a gathering of Campus Crusade for Christ staff members. These were people who had given their lives to serve Christ. You wouldn't think they would be stiff-necked, proud, and stubborn! Don't kid yourself. We're all prone to pride and stubbornness. But on that day, when she shared those convicting words, the Spirit of God swept through Campus Crusade and brought a powerful revival.

Friends, I'm not looking for drama. But I want us to take this word seriously. We all tend toward stubbornness. God will resist us. Where is it that you are resisting God? Is it some area of sin that you won't give up? Be like David. Own it and then repudiate it. Is there someone that you need to be reconciled with? Someone in your family? Someone in the church? Don't just turn away and ignore God's voice. Don't do it. Don't be stubborn. Follow his prompting and be reconciled. Is there something – some ministry – that God is calling you to do? Step out in faith. Put away your fears. You will not be sorry.

What is God saying to you today?

*Today, if you hear his voice,
Do not harden your heart...*

Let this be the day you say "yes" to God.