

Building the Builder Part 2

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Work in Progress / Confession / Nehemiah 1:1–11

In Nehemiah 1, persistent prayer doesn't begin with requests for change, but with honest confession. As Nehemiah intercedes for Jerusalem, he identifies fully with the sins of his people, acknowledging personal and communal failure before a holy God. This message explores why confession is not a detour in prayer, but a necessary doorway that aligns our hearts with God's character and prepares us for faithful action.

Introduction

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian in the early twentieth century, living through the rise of Adolf Hitler and the collapse of moral courage in much of the German church.
 - He was a brilliant pastor and theologian.
 - He had opportunities for a comfortable, influential career.
 - Instead, he chose a harder path.
 - As the church increasingly aligned itself with Nazi ideology, Bonhoeffer spoke openly against it, insisting that faithfulness to Christ required truth, repentance, and obedience, even when those things were costly.
 - In 1945, just weeks before the end of World War II, **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** was executed for his role in opposing the regime.
- In 1935, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was running an illegal seminary in a small German village called Finkenwalde.
 - It wasn't impressive.
 - There were no grand buildings, no official recognition, no guarantees of safety.
 - The seminary existed because Bonhoeffer believed something had gone terribly wrong in the German church.

- Pastors were being trained to preach sermons and manage institutions, but not to live honest lives before God.
- Bonhoeffer believed that kind of ministry was dangerous.
- So at Finkenwalde, he did something unusual. He structured the life of the seminary around prayer, Scripture, silence, shared meals, and confession.
 - Not public confession.
 - Not forced confession.
 - But voluntary, deliberate truth-telling among brothers who lived under the Word of God together.
 - This wasn't common practice. And it wasn't comfortable.
- Bonhoeffer had watched the church slowly learn how to hide.
 - Hide fear.
 - Hide compromise.
 - Hide sin behind good theology and polite worship.
 - He believed secrecy was hollowing the church out from the inside.
 - That conviction led him to write something that still unsettles people nearly a century later:
- “He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone.”
 - Bonhoeffer didn't mean isolated in a crowd.
 - He meant spiritually severed.
 - Disconnected from grace.
 - Living a divided life where one version of yourself shows up to worship and another version lives in the dark.
- According to Bonhoeffer, unconfessed sin creates a false self.
 - A self that knows how to pray out loud but not how to tell the truth.

- A self that can preach repentance without practicing it.
- And over time, that false self becomes exhausting to maintain.
- He argued that sin spoken aloud loses its power.
 - Not because confession earns forgiveness, but because secrecy feeds sin while truth starves it.
 - Confession drags sin out of the darkness where it thrives and places it into the light where Christ already reigns.
- This wasn't theory.
 - Bonhoeffer required nothing of his students that he wasn't willing to practice himself.
 - He lived openly.
 - He submitted himself to spiritual discipline.
 - He refused to cultivate a private life that contradicted his public faith.
 - And that refusal would eventually cost him everything.
- As Nazi pressure increased, Finkenwalde was shut down.
 - Bonhoeffer was banned from teaching.
 - His books were censored.
 - His movements were restricted.
 - He could have fled.
 - He had opportunities to stay safely in America.
 - But he returned to Germany, convinced that faithfulness required presence and honesty, not distance and safety.
- In prison, Bonhoeffer lived what he had taught.
 - Those imprisoned with him later testified that he was calm, clear-eyed, and unafraid.

- Not because he believed he would survive, but because there was no hidden life left to protect.
- Confession had already done its work.
- Bonhoeffer understood that confession doesn't make sin heavier.
- It makes it honest.
- And honesty, before God, is the beginning of freedom.

› RETURN TO TITLE

- Hidden sin fractures a person.
 - Confession puts together that which sin has taken apart.
 - Bonhoeffer believed the church becomes strong not when it appears pure, but when it becomes truthful.
 - When sin is named, not minimized.
 - When grace is trusted enough to be told the truth.
- That's what makes confession so costly.
 - It strips away illusion.
 - It dismantles self-protection.
 - It forces us to stand before God without props.
- As we continue to work through Nehemiah's prayer in the first chapter of this book, we see Nehemiah taking confession very seriously.
- When Nehemiah prays in this chapter, he does not confess at arm's length.
 - He does not say, "They have sinned."
 - He says, "We have sinned. I have sinned."
 - He refuses to live divided.
 - He brings the full truth of his people, and himself, into the presence of God.

- Bonhoeffer would recognize that prayer immediately.
 - Because confession, done rightly, is not about shame.
 - It's about refusing to be alone with your sin any longer.
- This morning, I want to follow up on last week's sermon, digging more deeply into the content of Nehemiah's prayer.
 - We'll cover the first 10 verses.

> Scripture Reading

Nehemiah 1:1–11 ESV

¹ The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel,

² that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem.

³ And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire."

⁴ As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

⁵ And I said, "O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments,

⁶ let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned.

⁷ We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant

Moses.

⁸ Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples,

⁹ but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.’

¹⁰ They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.

¹¹ O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.” Now I was cupbearer to the king.

› Prayer (Return to Title Slide)

- As a brief reminder of where we are at in this journey.
 - The opening chapter of Nehemiah immediately drops us into the action of the story.
 - Nehemiah is serving in the court of King Artaxerxes I as a high-ranking official.
 - We learn in v. 11 that he is the cupbearer to the king.
 - This means that he has to be one of the King’s most trusted officials because he literally held the life of the king in his hands.
 - This wasn’t a position of military strength, or even political power.
 - But it was a position of absolute trust.
 - This is an interesting time for Persia - there’s this little bubble of relative peace.

- Artaxerxes father, Xerxes I, was the Persian King that you're most familiar with.
- He was the king at the famous Battle of Thermopylae...where 300 Spartans helped to ward off the Persian Army which may have had as many as 250,000 men.
- There were several significant battles between the Greeks and the Persians, but those conflicts settled and relative peace was put into place by Artaxerxes 1 - a few years before Nehemiah takes the scene.
- This would lead to a time of relative peace for Jerusalem until Alexander the Great conquered the region in the early 300s.
- We learn at the beginning of the chapter that Nehemiah hosted his brother and an official delegation from Jerusalem.
 - As a faithful man, he wanted to learn about the condition of their nation and he learns that things are not great.
 - Everything is in disarray.
 - The Temple is built, but the walls still bear the scars of Nebuchadnezzar's devastation from a century and a half earlier.
- This is crushing news to Nehemiah which sends him into a lengthy season of prayer.
 - Chapter 1 records a summary of Nehemiah's prayer posture, but it is important to notice how long this season lasts.
 - We're told in v. 1 that Nehemiah first learns of Jerusalem's status in the month of Chislev (which is roughly November).
 - We're then told in chapter 2 that he brings the news to Artaxerxes in Nisan (which is roughly March).
 - So Nehemiah takes 4 or 5 months to pray through this situation before taking action.

- So we've only got 11 verses, but these 11 verses are summarizing an intense season of seeking.
- Last week, we took a look at the role of persistence and consistency in Nehemiah's prayer life.
 - This week, we'll take a look at the role confession takes during this time of prayer.
 - This is a topic that, honestly, doesn't get a lot of attention in preaching and teaching.
 - I'm not sure if it is just because we have an allergy to things that sound Catholic, or something else.
 - But one thing is clear - the bible makes it very clear that confession of sin is critical for us to maintain a healthy, vibrant relationship with God.

- **David said in [Psalm 32:3-5](#)**

Psalm 32:3-5 *ESV*

³ For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.

⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. *Selah*

⁵ I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. *Selah*

- As you know, David had a deeply personal, intimate relationship with God.
 - But he recognized the toll that unconfessed sin was taking on that relationship.
 - Not only did it have spiritual consequences, it also had emotional - perhaps even physical - consequences.

- I think Nehemiah's prayer helps us recognize the importance of confession - and gives us some principles that we can put to work in our walk with Christ.
- The first thing Nehemiah's prayer shows us is this...

Confession is both corporate and personal (v. 6)

- Nehemiah is as far removed from the city of Jerusalem as he could be, but we see that he clearly identifies with his people.
 - Distance doesn't diminish the spiritual effect of sin.
 - I think we can all acknowledge how easy it would be to point fingers at the exiles in Jerusalem for dragging their feet.
 - They are the ones who are disobedient, they are the ones who are defying the Lord's instructions.
 - It would be all too easy to be a self-righteous Nehemiah.
 - I'm just here in the palace serving the King.
 - I'm "blooming where I'm planted."
 - I'm doing exactly what the prophet Jeremiah told us to do.
 - But you don't see that self-righteousness coming out in this prayer.
- Instead, you see some important pronoun usage.
 - He prays, "confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which WE have sinned against you.
 - "We have acted very corruptly against you."
 - And just to be clear, he says, "I and my father's house have sinned."
 - He identifies with his people - not just by race, not just by creed, but by sin and guilt.
- It is very early to blame others for what is wrong.
 - But Nehemiah understood something of the human heart.

- The same tendencies to apathy and fear and defiance that were in the hearts of the people in Jerusalem - those same tendencies were found in his heart too.
- If God was judging his people, Nehemiah understood all too well that he was part of the people of God.
- Too many times our tendency regarding confession is like the Pharisee in [Luke 18](#).
 - The man stood up to pray and instead of confessing sin, he prayed, [Luke 18:11](#) “11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.’”
 - When we look at what’s wrong with the church today (and there’s plenty wrong), it’s easy to come to the Lord with a sense of pride that “at least we’re not doing that...”
 - At least I don’t preach like those prosperity gospel preachers.
 - At least my church doesn’t do this or do that.
 - But if I can be really transparent with you...
 - The same tendencies are alive and well in my heart.
 - My heart is just as capable of producing the same sins that I’m so quick to judge others for.
- That’s why Nehemiah’s corporate and personal confession is so convicting.
 - Honesty says I’m just as much part of the problem as anybody else is.
 - Anglican bishop, Wallace Benn said it well, “Which one of us has been as zealous for the things of God as we should be or as faithful to his Word as he wants us to be? Repentance is the mark of a healthy Christian.”
 - And it is in confession that repentance is made manifest.
- Secondly, we see this...

Confession is specific (v. 7)

- Now, here in v. 7, Nehemiah's confession, at first glance, is kind of generic.
 - Note, "We have acted corruptly against you, and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses."
 - But keep in mind, this is the summary of months of prayer and fasting - this is not a memorized prayer that he repeated over and over again.
 - This is a formula for saying "We have broken all of your laws."
 - Obedience to the Law was a critical distinction for the people of God.
 - We see, for example, in [Leviticus 26:15](#), the Lord warns that rejecting God's statutes and hating his rules, and ignoring his commandments is how you break covenant with him.
- So, while the summary we see here in Nehemiah doesn't mention specific sins, we know exactly what this summary is intended to communicate.
- With that being said, Christians today need to embrace the discipline of specific confession.
 - Instead of confessing that you struggle with lust, confess that you struggle with lust toward a coworker or lust toward a movie star, or even lust toward an idea of desire.
 - Instead of confessing that you struggle with jealousy or envy, confess that you are jealous over a coworker's promotion, envious over a friend's successes.
- You say, "Pastor, it'll take me a while to confess specific sin."
 - That's okay - it took Nehemiah months to get to the place where we meet him.
 - If you spend four months in prayer and fasting, you'll be amazed at what you can confess to the Lord.

- However, that's where the wisdom of regular, ongoing, persistent prayer comes in.
 - Confession of sin doesn't have to be a ritual where you go to the altar, or to the priest.
 - Sin doesn't have to ferment in our hearts before we confess it.
 - Confession can be as simple as a moment of prayer after a stray thought.
 - I once heard a preacher say it this way, "We need to keep our sin list really short."
 - That means searching our heart for offensive ideas is just part of our regular time with the Lord.
 - And the Holy Spirit is eager to help reveal those places in our souls.
- Thirdly, we need to remember that we shouldn't just confess our sin...

We should confess the consequences of our sin (vv. 8-9)

- Nehemiah remembers what would happen to his people if they break covenant with the Lord.
 - They're living it.
 - He's a servant to a Persian king because of this very problem.
 - Sin has consequences.
 - Maturity in the Christian life means not just looking at the actions, but looking at what are happening as a result of the actions.
 - Sin is far too layered for us to ignore this.
- You're envious of a coworker who got a promotion that you think you deserved.
 - That sin doesn't just stop at your heart.
 - It affects your relationship with that coworker.

- It affects your attitude toward your boss who gave the promotion.
- It affects your work ethic because you feel under-appreciated.
- You're a husband who is looking at porn or a wife who is getting emotionally lost in spicy romance novels.
 - Those issues aren't just living isolated in your own heart.
 - If those things go unresolved, there's no way those sins are not impacting your marriage.
 - And if it's impacting your marriage, then it's also impacting your parental responsibilities.
- God warned Cain in [Genesis 4:7](#) as he wrestled with the hatred toward his brother, "Sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it."
 - Sin wants to master you.
 - And when we give it a foothold in our hearts.
 - When we decide we would rather manage it rather than confess it, then we're giving it exactly what it wants - we're giving it mastery over our lives.
 - The most surefire way to ensure that you will be ineffective as a follower of Christ is to let sin take hold in your hearts.

Conclusion - Toward a Christian Understanding of Confession

- So how should Christians respond to this.
- **First of all, you need to know that if you are truly a Christian, then this is not a salvation issue.**
 - We don't confess sin to satisfy God's wrath because his wrath was satisfied at the cross.
 - We don't confess sin because our salvation is lacking anything.
 - God supplied all we need at the cross for salvation.

- That does not mean that we should continue in sin that grace may abound in our lives.
- Paul spoke to that very issue in [Romans 6](#).
- And I would caution you as a Christian that if you continue in sin with no remorse or sorrow that there might be more at work in your heart than unconfessed sin and you should evaluate the validity of your conversion.
- **At the same time, we also need to recognize that just because God's wrath was satisfied, he did not remove the consequences of sin for his children.**
 - The stove is still hot if you touch it.
 - As much as I would love for my child to never touch the hot stove, and as much as it hurts for me to see him hurt, the consequences are still there.
 - Christians must still deal with the consequences of sin...some of those consequences are visible and immediate, some are more of a slow-burn.
 - The old Puritan commentator, Matthew Henry, said in his commentary on Jonah, "Sin brings storms and tempests into the soul, into the family, into churches and nations; it is a disquieting disturbing thing."
 - However, the pain and consequences of sin are potent reminders of God's love.
 - [Hebrews 12:6](#) says it plainly, "For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."
 - When we suffer under the weight of sin, it is an ever-present reminder that we are God's children.
- Confession is good for the soul.
 - [1 John 1:9](#) "9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

- When we taste forgiveness, we are reminded of God’s faithfulness and justice.
- He does what he says he will do and it is for our good - even if we still must bear the weight of consequences.

› **RETURN TO TITLE SLIDE**

- What we see happening in Nehemiah is a powerful reminder for us.
 - In the discipline of prayer, we see God working in Nehemiah.
 - He is going to go do a great work for God - building the walls of this great city.
 - But before Nehemiah can build a city, we see God building a man.
 - Because confession forces us to confront our sin, to recognize our own shortcomings and failures, to call us to depend on God’s grace and his mercy, we see how God uses it to build us.
 - The language of the New Testament is to “conform us to the image of his Son.”
- Confession is not God’s way of shaming us.
 - It is God’s way of healing us.
 - Nehemiah didn’t confess because God was unaware of Israel’s sin.
 - He confessed because he was unwilling to remain divided before a holy God.
- Hidden sin always promises protection, but it only produces isolation.
 - Confession feels costly, but it restores wholeness.
 - Some of us have been praying for God to act, while quietly resisting the one thing that would realign our hearts with Him.
 - Not because we don’t love God, but because we underestimate the freedom that comes with telling the truth.
- God is not waiting for polished prayers.

- He is waiting for honest ones.
- And when confession is brought into His presence, it does what nothing else can do.
- It clears the fog. It restores fellowship. It prepares us for faithful obedience.
- Before God builds anything through us, He insists on building truth within us.
 - So don't leave today carrying what God has invited
 - Bring it into the light.
 - Name it.
 - Confess it.
 - And trust that grace is already waiting on the other side.