

Worship (17) Corporate – Confession & Repentance

Worship is often compared to a fragrance coming up to God. In **Psalm 51**, David tells us of a scent ascending to heaven, which God is very pleased with. The savour of this is more pleasing to God than the bulls and rams and goats placed on the altar. This act of worship delights the heart of God.

Worship that pleases God is *the broken heart*:

Ps 51:16, 17 *For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering.¹⁷ The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.*

A broken heart. This does not refer to the broken heart of a disappointed romance, not the broken heart of a grieving person after having lost a loved one. This is the broken heart of repentance. Repentance is an act of worship.

Why is repentance worship?

It means the person is encountering a holy God as He is.

Examples: Job, Isaiah, Peter. When a person falls down in repentant sorrow, they are not worshipping a god in their own image – a nice, controllable, comfortable god. They have come to understand something of the holiness of God and it has slain them. Real worship is taking place, because a person is truly engaging with God.

It justifies God.

Repentance honours God. This is illustrated by what Joshua said to Achan –

Josh 7:19 *And Joshua said unto Achan, My son, give, I pray thee, glory to the LORD God of Israel, and make confession unto him; and tell me now what thou hast done; hide it not from me.*

Sin, by nature, dishonours God. Repentance is man stopping in his tracks, turning back to God – and saying, ‘You were right all along, I was wrong all along.’

Psalm 51:4 *Against You, You only, have I sinned, And done this evil in Your sight; That You may be found just when You speak, And blameless when You judge.*

It is the starting point for God to use that person and reveal Himself.

Consider the Old Testament worship at the tabernacle. What did it centre round? It centred round sacrifice; sacrifice which was the atonement for the people who were there, confessing and repenting of their sins. God wanted His people to know that the foundation is always repentance, confession, atonement; so that there can be cleansing and growth. Even the order of offerings reinforced this - first a sin offering, then a burnt offering, then a peace offering. The word ‘sanctify’ means ‘to set apart.’ Being sanctified is when God first separates you from what defiles; and then uses you for His purposes. A vessel first needs to be clean before God will use it.

But what does repentance and confession have to do with corporate worship?

Repentance and Confession on a corporate level.

God views our responsibility for sin simultaneously, as individuals and as a group. You see this concept again and again.

For example:

- [Achan's sin hurt the whole nation. Achan was punished, with his family.
- [King David's kingdom was plagued with a famine due to Saul's killing of the Gibeonites.
- [David's census caused the deaths of many, many people.
- [Josiah became king of Judah when God had already decided to destroy Jerusalem and take Judah into exile.
- [Israel's idolatry, and subsequent exile into Babylon, was also experienced by righteous people like Jeremiah, Daniel, and Ezekiel. Yet these righteous men were preserved by God.
- [The prayers of confession of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel are prayers of corporate culpability, even though they as individuals were amongst the most blameless.
- [God promises to reward the iniquity of one generation until the third and fourth generation. At the same time, in **Ezekiel 18**, He says the son will not be guilty of the father's sin, and the father will not be guilty of the son's sin.

New Testament examples:

- [God tells the church at Corinth that the sin of one man in their midst is like leaven that will leaven the whole lump.
- [When a relatively small number of men arrested, tried and executed Jesus – they said, 'His blood be upon us and our children' – and God punished the whole nation.
- [When Jesus speaks to the churches at Ephesus and Pergamum and Laodicea – He treats them as if they are all guilty of the same sin. And yet it is reasonable to imagine that there were exceptions in those churches.

While individuals alone are guilty for their sin, there is a corporate culpability for sin.

Every revival – outpouring of God's presence - has been preceded by, or has triggered, a great confession and repentance amongst God's people.

Examples:

- [Israel under Samuel.
- [The whole city of Nineveh.
- [Israel under Asa.
- [Israel under Jehoshaphat.
- [Israel under Hezekiah.
- [Israel under Josiah.
- [The Day of Pentecost.
- [The revivals of the Great Awakenings in the 18th century,
- [The prayer revival of the 19th century.
- [The Welsh revival of 1904.
- [And many, many small-scale local church revivals have begun with corporate repentance and confession to God and one another.

At the start of a great renewal of joy in God, of commitment, of gratitude – was a great period of brokenness, of repentance of confession.

Therefore, one of the acts of corporate worship is corporate confession and repentance. Certainly repentance and confession takes place individually – and many times privately. But often it will happen amongst God’s people, and even better with God’s people.

It honours God when individuals come to repentance in the context of corporate worship. It also honours God when entire groups repent and confess sin to God and one another.

Looking at Nehemiah again, as we did in the previous lesson, we can track the different stages of having this broken heart:

1. Conviction

Neh. 8:8-9 *So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.⁹ And Nehemiah, which is the Tirshatha, and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said unto all the people, This day is holy unto the LORD your God; mourn not, nor weep. For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law.*

Once the Word of God was declared and they were receptive, conviction was bound to take place. The Bible tells us that this is its work (**2 Tim 3:16, Heb 4:12**).

Here the people who heard the Law began to weep. They wept because they saw how far short they fell; because they sensed their utter failure in pleasing God; because they sensed how much damage they had done to themselves. They wept. There were no more excuses like, “Well, I’m not as bad as so and so” or “He or she provoked me” or “It just happened” or “Everyone’s doing it” or “I had to do it” or “I did it for the right reason”. No more excuses. As the Bible says – “The mouth is stopped”.

Conviction simply means a man becomes clearly guilty in his own eyes. A person is confronted with God, with His ways, with His nature; and the comparison between that and him or herself is sharp and blinding, even painful.

Conviction is the ‘Thou art the man’ feeling. This horrible portrait of sin is painted, you are repelled, and then you suddenly start to recognise it is a portrait of you.

We recognise we commit sins of commission and sins of omission. We recognise we commit sins as individuals. And on a corporate level, it means as families we recognise our sins toward God and one another. As churches we recognise our sins of omission and commission toward God and one another.

2. Confession

Neh. 9:2 *And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers, and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers.*

These people confessed their sins. That is, they agreed with God that they had sinned. They humbly and totally blamed themselves (**Ps 32:5, I John 1:9, Ps 51:3-4**).

Confession is agreeing with the conviction.

Confession is claiming ownership for sins brought to your attention by the Holy Spirit - The Holy Spirit comes and asks “Is this yours?”

Confession is specific. It does not deal in vague generalities when it knows the specifics. Confession is not 'If I sinned today.... please forgive me.' Confession states things in a way that God would agree with.

Now the amazing thing is – conviction can be present, and some still do not confess. They have been caught red-handed, but they refuse to regard what they have done as wrong-doing.

Corporate confession can come in the form of a corporate prayer of confession prayed by one of the leaders, wholeheartedly prayed by those who listen and agree. It can be after a service, gathering to confess failure and repent of it before God.

To dismiss the idea of prayer after a sermon, when you have been convicted, is to dismiss the idea of repentance.

Sometimes, that confession of sin, once done before God, will need to be done to one another – confession of gossip, of bitterness, of unkindness, of not praying, not serving.

James 5:16 *Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.*

3. Contrition

There can be confession without repentance, e.g. Pharaoh, Saul, Judas, and Balaam.

These people in Nehemiah did more than casually confess. They were deeply sorrowful for their sin, as we see in Nehemiah 8; but also in **Nehemiah 9:1** – they were fasting, and covering themselves with sackcloth, and dust. They adopted outward, visible signs of discomfort, they purposely afflicted themselves to underline – 'We hate what we have done. We don't want to do it again. We wish to break away from this sin. We don't just want the consequences removed – in fact, we are willing to accept some of the consequences, but we don't want the guilt of this sin, we don't want its defilement. We want to get away from this sin – permanently.'

What is it that drives this sense of deep sorrow and revulsion for sin? **Romans 2:4** *Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?* It is the goodness of God.

Knowing you have broken the rules of a tyrant, might make you afraid, but not sorrowful. Having offended the purest, gentlest, most righteous Person of all – this brings great sorrow.

For example, you do not feel much regret when you spill your coffee on the grass outside. But when you spill it on an almost perfectly white new Persian rug belonging to your best friend – you feel terrible. It is the badness of our sin that convicts us and brings out a confession of guilt – but it is the goodness of God that breaks our hearts and says – 'I hate this sin, because I love God. I have grieved my dearest Friend. This sin is my enemy.'

There is a desire to be forgiven, to find mercy, to be rid of the sin. There is a Godly sorrow. There is a turning – mentally, emotionally and volitionally – turning away from sin and towards Christ (**Ps. 51:1-2, Ps. 38:18, Prov. 28:13**).

And how would this look corporately? As a group it would be seeking God in silence and repentance. Again, spending time in prayer, repenting of vertical and horizontal sins; yielding to the Word as it works in us.

Now God has promised that if we confess with true contrition He will cleanse (**1 John 1:9, Prov. 28:13**).

This is based on the ever sufficient death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

That brings us to the final stage

4. Confidence and Consecration

After the confession, the people of God praised.

Nehemiah 9:4-5 *Then stood up upon the stairs, of the Levites, Jeshua, and Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, and Chenani, and cried with a loud voice unto the LORD their God.⁵ Then the Levites, Jeshua, and Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabniah, Sherebiah, Hodijah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah, said, Stand up and bless the LORD your God for ever and ever: and blessed be thy glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise.*

And they rededicated themselves.

Nehemiah 9:38 *And because of all this we make a sure covenant, and write it; and our princes, Levites, and priests, seal unto it.*

David makes it clear – when cleansing takes place – confidence returns. A great joy in God returns.

Psa. 32:1-2 *Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, And in whose spirit there is no deceit.*
(**Ps 51:8, 12, 14-15**).

That great joy results in *consecration*.

Bible examples of this would be Isaiah – after his cleansing; and Zacchaeus after his cleansing.

Confident people serve God, and obey Him all the more (**Ps 51:13, 18-19**).

As a group this is manifest in shared prayers of rededication. It is the corporate joy we feel when sins are forgiven before God and between one another.

This is why God loves repentance – because of what it will produce in us – renewed confidence in His presence.

This is the sacrifice God loves.