

“Confession Is Good For the Soul”

Nehemiah 9

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • November 26, 2017

Almost universally as humans, perhaps the two most moving types of stories are stories of love and stories of redemption. Which probably explains why the 1989 movie *Field of Dreams*, starring Kevin Costner, is still such a popular and moving movie. *Field of Dreams* is about a young Iowa corn farmer, Ray Kinsella, who hears a voice in his field that tells him to build a baseball diamond in the middle of his farm. The Voice whispers, “If you build it he will come.” If you’ve seen the movie you know that the field becomes a place where long-deceased baseball players can return and play once again. But the movie is about so much more than baseball. It’s about second chances. It’s about broken relationships being restored. And it’s about faith.

Throughout much of the movie, only Kinsella can hear the voice. But his young daughter believes him even when almost nobody else does. She’s the first one to see one of the players on the field. Not everyone can see the players, only those who believe. It seems to me that *Field of Dreams* is a pretty good allegory for what it’s like to know Christ. As we read the Bible and hear it preached, at some point God the Holy Spirit gives us a clearer understanding. The words make sense. We hear God speak. Some people – many people, in fact – hear the words of the Bible and think it’s nonsense. They dismiss it as ancient superstition. But sometimes God works in the lives those same people. All of a sudden they read and hear the words and they come alive.

We find that very thing happening in Jerusalem after the wall is completed. As we heard last week, the people gathered to hear Ezra read from the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Personally, I think he was reading Deuteronomy, which is basically Moses’ farewell sermon. But it’s in Deuteronomy that God tells His people that if they obey the law they will be blessed and if they disobey they will be cursed. As the people hear this revival breaks out and

they become convicted of their own personal sin and their collective, national sin. They begin to weep. Nehemiah and Ezra send them away to celebrate instead. But the next day they come back to study more of the Scriptures. The more they study the more they discover that they are not keeping God’s laws or God’s festivals. They learned about the Feast of Booths, which would be similar to our modern Thanksgiving. And they went and did what God commanded.

When the festival was over they were still bothered by their sin. This is a sign of genuine revival. True spiritual revival always begins with the Word of God read and preached. It always includes the Holy Spirit giving understanding of our true sinful standing before a Holy God. And genuine revival always involves a response and life change by the people. All three are present in Nehemiah 9.

This passage tells us that the people assembled again with the traditional symbols of repentance – fasting, sackcloth, and ashes or dirt on their heads. These were visible reminders of their standing before God. So when they were together, the Levites once again read from the Book of the Law for three hours and then everyone confessed and worshiped for another three hours! Nehemiah 9:6-37 records their prayer of confession. This is, by the way, the longest formal prayer in the Old Testament, and it’s similar to several of the Psalms.

The prayer has three main sections and basically follows the outline of the Torah. One of the best ways *we* can pray is to use Scripture. This prayer begins with the work of God in creation. “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.” Of course that’s basically how Genesis begins.

The next section is a review of Israel’s history, beginning with God calling Abraham and moving on the Exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Law. One of the things that makes this prayer so powerful is that recounting the

ways God has acted also reveals God's attributes. We learn what God is like by reading this prayer – righteous, merciful, all-powerful, generous, and trustworthy. The other thing that makes this prayer so meaningful is that it alternates between the nature and work of God and the sins of God's people. Verse 14 says, "you made known to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses your servant." And then verse 16 says, "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."

The final section of the prayer is confession and an appeal for God's mercy in their current situation, ruled by foreign kings. In other words, they recognize from the Scriptures that when the people repent and return to God, He returns to them, just as He said. So now they are repenting and asking God to work.

It seems to me that there is much for us to learn and grow in our faith from this prayer. First of all, as Hebrews 4:12 says, "The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." These are not just words. They are the Word of God. It's where we hear Him whisper. We need to have a high regard for the Scriptures as much more than just human words on paper.

Second, when the Jews heard the Scriptures read they looked for the ways they applied to their own lives. There are people today who believe the Bible is just a history book or worse just a book of mythology about how people in the ancient past perceived God working. But we are convinced that the Bible is the revealed Word of God and is accompanied by God's power. Every time you read the Bible you should be trying to find out how it applies to your life today.

Finally, as the Jews drew closer to God through His Word, they became more and more aware of their own sinfulness and rebellion. The same thing will happen to you. The more time you spend in God's Word, the more you will be aware of your own sin and the more you will realize that God cannot stand sin in His presence. That's when you realize you need a savior. Ultimately, the whole Bible is pointing you to Christ. This is the paradox of faith. You would think that becoming aware of sin would make you move away from God. But as you draw closer to God you are more aware of your sin, which brings you to the cross where you discover forgiveness.

1 John 1 summarizes this beautifully: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." In other words, you have to admit you're bad. That's why the first question we ask new members is this: "Do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner in the sight of God, justly deserving his displeasure, and without hope except in His sovereign mercy?" When we understand our own sin we can begin to understand God's amazing grace that restores our fellowship with God and brings his blessings and leads us to want to get rid of sin. If you've never experienced that kind of brokenness and forgiveness, I want to invite you to start on that journey today.

Amen.