

Receiving the Word: the Prayer of Real Faith

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[0:00] Well, we're going to turn to our Bibles and to God's Word now as we read together in the book of Nehemiah, where we've been studying. Nehemiah chapter 9. If you have one of our visitor's Bibles, that's page 404.

Page 404. And we come to this long chapter. But a very, very remarkable chapter indeed. Last time, remember, we were studying chapter 8, this extraordinary chapter about the releasing of God's Word among his people.

It's the people all throughout the Feast of Tabernacles read and studied and heard and understood the law of God, the whole of the law of Moses.

And now in chapters 9 and 10, we come to the response to the receiving of that Word and what it results in. Among God's people. Now on the 24th day of this month, the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth and with earth on their heads.

[1:07] And the Israelites, the seed of Israel, separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. And they stood up in the 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 Yeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Buni, Sherabiah, Bani, and Shenani.

And they cried with a loud voice to the Lord their God. Then the Levites, Yeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabaniah, Sherabiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah, and Pethaliah 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 hosts.

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 Abraham and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans, and gave him the name Abraham.

[2:24] You find his heart faithful before you, and you made with him the covenant to give 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 your 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, presumptuously against our forefathers. And you made a name for yourself, as it is to this day.

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 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.

[3:31] 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 the mortar out of the rock for their thirst.

And you told them to go in to possess the land that you had sworn to give. But they and our fathers acted presumptuously, arrogantly, and stiffened their necks, and did not obey your commandments.

They refused to obey, and were not mindful of the wonders 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 and your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness.

[4:48] The pillar of cloud to lead them in the way did not depart from them by day, nor the pillar of cloud 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 Sion, king of Heshbon, 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 you 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, fruit trees in abundance.

[6:04] 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.

[7:25] And turned a stubborn shoulder and a stiffened 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, O God, the great, the mighty, 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. 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.

[8:48] Even in their own kingdom, enjoying 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.

But 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've 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. Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Lord, do you turn with me please to Nehemiah chapter 11.

Sorry, chapter 9. A chapter all about the real prayer that is a sign of true reception of God's word.

[9:54] Real reformation, real spiritual renewal in God's church, whether in any congregation, any other grouping, or indeed any individual. It always begins with the word of God when the living word is released among God's people with power.

Because spiritual renewal can't be manufactured. It's the response to the living reality of the empowering call of God himself.

Only a real revelation of the living God can lead to a real response of living faith. And when God's word is released, then the living God does reveal himself to people.

When God's word is spoken and taught, the voice of the living God himself is heard. And people encounter personally the living God. They cannot not respond.

They may reject his word. It is, as Paul says, for them, it is the stench of death. It is a fragrance of death unto death. Or they will receive the word as a fragrance of life to life.

[11:07] And so receive him and answer his personal call into a renewed and living relationship with him, the living God. And when that is so, when God's word is truly received, always the reality of that new and renewed real relationship is clear and it's obvious in tangible ways.

Real and living faith can be heard and it can be seen. It's heard in real prayer, which is the audible sign of real and living faith.

Remember Saul of Tarsus after he met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. God said to Ananias, you'll see him. Behold, he is praying. Because for the first time in his life, his prayer is real. He now knows God truly in Jesus Christ. Real faith is heard in real prayer and also it is seen in real obedience.

The obedience of faith, which, according to Jesus, is the only kind of real and living faith. Blessed are those who hear the word of God and do it. My mother and sister and brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.

[12:19] Real spiritual reformation and renewal comes when in response to the releasing of God's word, there is a receiving of God's word as evidenced by a renewal of the audible prayer of real faith and renewed and visible obedience of real faith.

And it is a wonderful example of exactly that that we see in Nehemiah chapters 8 to 10. Last time we saw in chapter 8 the releasing of God's word afresh among the returned people of Israel. Ezra and his colleagues taught them God's word day after day and as the whole congregation understood it. And what we now see in chapters 9 and 10 is the tangible evidence of a people receiving God's word in a renewed expression of real prayer as we see here in chapter 9 and a renewed commitment to real obedience as we'll see in chapter 10.

Now these events of course happened many centuries ago centuries before even the coming of Jesus. And no doubt it was a vital time in the life of God's people it was a vital phase in the unfolding story of the kingdom of God.

But of course these events were recorded and written down. Why was that? Well, obviously Ezra and Nehemiah and the others who preserved this account they felt it mattered much to teach the coming generations about what their pattern of spiritual life ought to be.

[13:47] But what about us? Surely as Christians we are way, way further on than all of these people. We live in a new era. We've moved into new covenant times. We live in the end of the ages, the time of fulfillment, the age of the Spirit.

Surely, surely there's nothing for us to learn from something so, so long ago. Well, not so says the Apostle Paul. Very frequently indeed he says that. Never, God has preserved all of these scriptures to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus and that we might be equipped for every good work in the church today.

Moreover, he says that all these things that happened to the Old Testament people of God took place as examples for us. And they were written down, he says, for our instruction, even though we do live in these last days after Christ's coming.

And we, says Paul, we are not to be presumptuous to think that we don't need both these encouragements and these same warnings. Do you and I no longer need to heed what it really means to be receiving the Word of God as a congregation of God's church today?

Do we not need that? Do we not need to learn still what real spiritual reformation and renewal looks like and sounds like? If we think that, Paul says to us, be careful lest any of you who think you stand have a great fall.

[15:14] Don't think that we are somehow living beyond the need to learn humbly and deeply from the lives of all of these saints who went before us and to learn what it means to be a people truly receiving the Word of God.

So we are going to heed Paul's admonition and we are going to turn to this chapter which has much to teach us about real prayer. The prayer that is always the sign of real renewal from a people who are truly receiving the Word of God.

It teaches us how real prayer is expressed, how it is elicited, how it encourages us. As it records, this people here in their renewed confession to God and in their renewed consciousness of God. And that's what gives them their renewed confidence in God. First look at verses 1 to 5 because we witness here a renewed confession to God. Real prayer is expressed in new and real confession to God.

In the response to the revelation of His living presence in His Word, we confess our real guilt in the face of His great mercy.

[16:25] verse 3 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 and for another quarter of it they made confession and worshipped the Lord their God.

And once again the revelation of God's Word and the response of God's people is being taken very, very seriously. A quarter of the day listening to God's Word proclaimed.

A quarter of the day responding in prayer. verse 1 tells us it was the 24th of the month that's just a day after the Feast of Tabernacles had finished.

It began on the 15th lasted for 8 days and here we are then beyond that. And remember the feast as we saw had been all focused on joy on feasting not fasting because of course they wanted the people to learn the great truth that indeed it is in rediscovering obedience to God's Word that is the way of joy and delight in the spiritual life.

That's the message isn't it? All the way through that great long Psalm 119 all the way through it has those two prayers Lord give me understanding of your Word and so give me life in all its fullness.

[17:41] Open my eyes and I may behold wondrous things out of your law. But of course when our eyes are open to God's law we also see the woeful reality of our own sinfulness don't we?

So the psalmist also tells us we must pray incline my heart to your testimonies and not to selfish gain. Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things and give me life in your ways.

I've got those words sitting in front of my face at my desk so I see them every single morning of my life because I need to pray them every day of my life and so do you. And so God's revelation will always bring us both a response of real rejoicing in Him and a response of real repentance from us towards Him.

And notice here what such real repentance and real confession looks like verse 2. It involves doesn't it a costly separation from sin as well as a corporate confession of sin.

The Israelites literally the seed of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners. This is not about xenophobia. This is not about being arrogant in any way. You remember back at the end of chapter 6 they were only too glad to be wrapped up in all kinds of lucrative business models and family relationships with the enemies and the peoples all around them the foreigners.

[19:03] That's the whole point. No, they're God's seed. They cannot be tangled up in their lives with the seed of the serpent with the world that is opposed to and hates the one true God.

Paul says exactly the same thing to the church in Corinth. You cannot drink the cup of our Lord and the cup of demons. There must be a separation. No, real repentance towards God always means a costly separation from sinful entanglements in this world.

Wrong relationships, however profitable they might be socially, financially, sexually. And notice the corporate nature of this confession.

Do you see? They confessed together their sin and the iniquities of their fathers. There was no hiding it away in a sort of silent personal prayer. Now this was all open.

It was honest. It was real. And it's only when God's people are open and honest about the reality of their sinfulness and their real struggles instead of keeping them under a veneer of pretense.

[20:09] It's only then that there's any real hope of change, isn't it? It's like the AA meeting. It's only when somebody has stood up and said, my name is John and I'm an alcoholic.

It's only then, isn't it, that they can begin to be any help. Well, it's just the same with any church, any fellowship of God's people.

It's only when we're real with one another, when we stop pretending away the reality about our fallenness, the battles with sinfulness that we all have. It's only then that the grace and mercy of God through his people in the church, by his Holy Spirit, working through his word in us, it's only then that we can begin to get real help, real forgiveness, real renewal, and new strength and new hope.

And that's why the Levites here lead this exercise in down-to-earth reckoning with reality among God's people. We're told in verse 4 they stood on the stairs, presumably that was the stairs of that great pulpit platform we read about in chapter 8.

It's an interesting detail, isn't it? Why are we told they stood on the stairs? I wonder whether in fact it somehow signifies their own solidarity with the people in their sin and in their confession.

[21:28] they stood on the platform with all the authority of God's word coming from above to the people but when it came to expressing the prayer of the people they went down on the stairs as if they were among them because they were among them.

And certainly that's true, isn't it? All who teach and preach God's word must feel and they do feel the same convicting power acutely in their own lives. So here, verse 4, they cried out with a loud voice their prayers of confession to God along with all the people.

But notice verse 5. Notice, even amid this great confession, it was not their sin but it was the glorious reality of God that dominated things.

the heart of all sin of course is personal. It's a personal offense against God our creator and our sovereign Lord. And yet here transcending even the cries of confession is something else.

Derek Kidner says the facts are not ignored as the ensuing prayer will show but they will be seen in the context of eternity and of God's unimaginable greatness.

[22:45] All their expression of sin has been elicited by what God's word has been teaching them and what they've been rediscovering about the true nature of their God.

This renewed and real confession is born out of a renewed and real consciousness of the God who is their God from everlasting to everlasting and of his great eternal purposes and of their extraordinary praise and privilege within those everlasting purposes of grace.

And so they pray and they confess their real guilt but it's in the face of God's greatness and God's glory. And it's a greatness and a glory do you notice which doesn't drive them away from God's presence in panic but draws them towards God in prayer.

The rediscovery of true prayer comes from a rediscovery of the true God. But what kind of God have they discovered who makes guilt conscious human beings full of realism about their own sin who makes them want to pray and come to God not that they can't come to God and can't pray?

That's a real question isn't it? A real question for you and me when we have to face the reality of the sin and the guilt and the shame in our own lives. Sometimes we feel so deeply ashamed don't we that as we sang when we want to come before God we feel it must surely turn his face away.

[24:19] Can I come near to God ever again? Will he ever possibly turn his face towards me now? Can he ever forgive me again? Well if we think that that's why verses 6 to 31 are here.

Look at them. Because we see laid out this people's renewed consciousness of God. And real prayer is elicited by a renewed and real consciousness of God.

In response to the self-revelation in his living presence in his word you see we become conscious of his mighty grace his mighty goodness. And that eclipses that overwhelms even the greatest of our sin and our guilt and our utter perversity before him.

This people bless the name of the Lord verse 5 Yahweh their God and they exalt his name above all blessing and praise because verse 6 he is who he is he is the Lord.

Well who is the Lord? That's what the whole prayer tells us. It echoes so much of the language of the Old Testament which they've rediscovered which tells us the kind of God that the God of the Bible really is and it's so so important we see this because we hear today don't we from so many people such terrible things about the God of the Bible especially the God of the Old Testament.

[25:48] He's a vicious ogre he's a tyrant he's a ghastly malevolent force bearing down on people in their sin. Well look at verses 6 to 15 every single sentence has as its subject the Lord God what he says what he does who he is and these people are in no doubt that they come in prayer to a giving God whose giving is above all blessing and praise all the focus here is on the extraordinary gifts of his creating and covenant grace.

You are the Lord verse 6 the God of creative power the giver of all heavenly life the giver of all earthly life you made everything and you preserve everything and all heaven praises you.

All the extraordinary beauty and diversity and wonder of life in this world all things bright and beautiful all creatures great and small all things wise and wonderful the Lord God made them all and the host of heaven we're told here sees it and marvels and worships God for all that he has done whereas for the most part the host of earth pays him no attention whatsoever.

It's one of the cardinal signs isn't it that somebody has come to true and living faith in God when the perception of heaven becomes evident in their perception now of this world and their attitude to prayer becomes full of thankfulness to God for all the abundant glory of his mercies and his creative beauty in this world.

The attitude of the natural person the worldly person is just to blame God isn't it? They look at the world and say look at all these terrible things if there is a God it's all his fault isn't that right?

[27:37] That's the voice of the unrepentant heart that's the voice of the self-justifying person but the penitent heart marvels for the extraordinary mystery of God's goodness and grace to a rebellious world to a sinful world that he blesses everything that he has made so richly in sheer undeserved grace.

But of course the believer also knows that the Lord is God not only of creative power but he's the God of covenant promise. Verse 7 you are the Lord who chose Abraham and made a covenant to give him and his offspring a place in your presence forever and you kept your promise for verse 8 you are righteous in other words you are always faithful and true to your promised word.

And when this God is your God verse 9 he will always be present with you as promised to see to help you in your darkness.

he's on your side against all evil verse 10 just like he was against the Egyptian oppressors. No destroying power can pluck you from his hand and he leads you verse 12 night and day his powerful presence is there to lead and to guide you.

He is the God who gives and gives and gives and gives again. not just the daily bread of earthly sustenance verse 15 which he gave them so miraculously in the desert but also and of course this was the whole point of the manna as Deuteronomy 8 verse 3 told them and they now obviously relearned that the heavenly word of God alone is what they needed day by day to sustain them in everlasting life.

[29:30] Verse 13 you came down and spoke from heaven. You gave the very words of life by Moses your servant. He is the giving God as Peter says he has given us everything we need for life and godliness through the knowledge of him who has granted us great and very precious promises.

When this God when the Lord God is your shepherd you lack nothing he is with us. he leads us. We need fear no evil because he is our constant comfort and strength.

Now is that the God that you think of when you're very conscious of your need to confess sin when you're perhaps fearful and you wonder if you could ever approach him and he would ever look at

you.

Well if not maybe you need to open your Bible more often at chapters like this one because the God of the Bible shows himself truly and if we receive him in his word we will see the wonder of who he really is and that will always lead us to a renewed humility in confession of our sins but that will never ever be separable from the wonderful renewed hope that it brings us in our consciousness of the grace and the glory of the Lord who is the God of creation and the God of covenant who never fails.

If it had not been the Lord who was on our side said the psalmist then the flood would have swept us away but our help is in the name of the Lord who is the maker of heaven and earth the giving God whose giving is above all blessing and praise.

[31:23] And as verses 16 to 31 underlined so powerfully he is the good God whose goodness is exalted above all blessing and praise. Surely the focus in these verses is on the extraordinary goodness of his covenant faithfulness that both provides for God's people and punishes his beloved people but always in order to preserve them in his mercy despite their presumption despite their rebellion despite their utter perversity.

Look at verses 16 and 17 aren't they astonishing? God gave and gave and gave promises provision protection his presence in abundance but they and our fathers acted presumptuously stiffened their necks did not obey refused God.

Derek Kidner says throughout this miraculous pilgrimage they lacked nothing as verse 21 says and they appreciated nothing. Verse 17 look they appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. The word used in verse 16 by the way of acting presumptuously is the same word used of the enemy Egyptians in verse 10 arrogantly. The same again in verse 29. They're just like the Egyptians.

As Ralph Davis puts it there's an Egyptian nature within Israel. Something deep within them wants to reverse God's redemption to go back to slavery although of course they saw it not as going back to slavery but as seeking liberation from this tyrannical God.

[33:04] Presumptuous stiff-necked disobedient it's very strong language isn't it? It's the language Stephen uses in Acts 7 as he rehearses the same history and says always you resist the Holy Spirit.

But that's the way of the world isn't it? Let us throw off the yoke of this burdensome God. Let us be rulers not God. Let us be God not Him. Let's find a leader to take us away from the restrictive life that He wants us.

Let's be led by a political ideology that promises us freedom and utopia. Let's be led by economic ideologies that promise us prosperity and wealth. Let's be led instead by sexual ideology that promises us intimacy and fulfillment and on and on it goes.

And friends the really chilling thing is how that Egyptian nature still bubbles up so often even in the redeemed people of God. Yes even in us.

A dark rebellious reality deep down within our nature which still causes you and me to be so perverse even though we are Christ's people even though we want to follow Him faithfully.

[34:22] For I do not do what I want but the very thing I hate cries the Apostle Paul himself. The evil I do not want that is what I keep on doing. Though I delight in the law of God in my inner being I see in my members another law waging war and making me a captive to the sin that dwells in my members.

What a wretched man I am. That perversity is within us isn't it? And it's evident so often within Christian churches too.

Just read the New Testament. You're biting and devouring one another says Paul to the Galatian church. I read a letter this very week from a church I know where people are biting and dividing one another and very likely if they go on to consume one another.

Sheer perversity reversing the joy of redemption wanting to go back into the way of this world. How can you go back says Paul to those weak and worthless things to be slaves once again?

Don't be submitting again to that yoke of slavery. Don't go back to Egypt. That's the letter to the Galatians in a nutshell. The letter of the Hebrews is the same.

[35:40] Don't go back. Don't be presumptuous. Don't be stiff-necked. Don't be disobedient to the gospel. Don't refuse God's commands for your

life.

But we do don't we you and I? We have this very week. We sin and we sin deliberately and arrogantly presumptuously and every time we do we spit in the face of God our Savior. We trample over the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ and we join the mockers who shout what a waste that's all for nothing and we shout with them we despise you for all that you've done. We can't read verses 16 and 17 here all these repeating words of sinfulness without also taking the words of verse 33 on our lips with this people and admitting that we also have acted wickedly and shamefully and unforgivably.

If that's true we say to ourselves don't we how can we come before our God ever again? Verse 17 But you are a God ready to forgive.

[37:10] Literally it says you are a God of forgivenesses plural. My goodness how we need that plural. Gracious merciful slow to anger abounding in steadfast love.

what did we sing in Psalm 130 let Israel hope in the Lord for with the Lord there is mercy with him there is plenteous redemption.

And verses 16 to 25 tell of his faithful patience that provides for his people even in the face of appalling ingratitude and perversity and rank idolatry. they verse 18 committed great blasphemies but you in your mercies did not forsake them.

Rather he went on look with infinite patience providing for their every need leading and guiding them wherever they went verse 19 verse 20 instructing them by his good spirit through his word to them sustaining them physically with food and water verse 22 bringing them great victories over kings to possess the land verse 25 look the richness of a land full of good things properties vineyards olive groves fruit trees in abundance not just provision absolute sheer prosperity he makes them fat with delight and notice the last line all through your great goodness not ever through their goodness or faithfulness or merit this is not the meritocracy that our prime minister wants us to have thank God no hope for us in that with God it's all of his goodness and grace it's a reminder isn't it by the way that all the material prosperity of the church in the west and indeed the western world in general is not a sign of our deserving it is not a sign of our righteousness and faithfulness only of

God's abundant goodness just as the beauty and blessings of this whole world are a sign of his common grace to all he sends the rain and the sun on the evil as well as the good for what a God of faithful patience to provide for such a rebellious people so ungrateful so presumptuous nevertheless verse 26 they still behaved shamefully with recalcitrant and murderous disobedience killing God's messengers the story has moved on here to the time of the judges and then the kings and despite all God's warnings to turn back they just continued to turn their backs on him more and more and more blasphemies and so verses 26 to 31 tell of God's faithful punishments also but also there to preserve his people they're all to turn his people back God's patience does not mean softness never make that mistake

[40:18] God's love is fierce and jealous for the health of his people and so like any father he'll chastise he'll punish so as not to let his offspring become feral and utterly lawless and utterly lost so as not to forsake them and so in his great mercy he preserves them even through great punishment when they refuse to heed his word he warned them repeatedly notice that verse 26 and verse 29 and verse 30 many times by his spirit he warned them in order to turn them back so they did not face calamity God's warnings in scripture are always merciful warnings wish we would understand that and recognize that God warns us in his word not because he hates us not because he wants to ruin our lives but because he wants to save us because he loves us God sent Jonah remember to the pagan city of Nineveh and said repent or the place will be destroyed and you with it and those pagans they received

God's word and they were saved but not God's people his own people verse 29 still presumptuous still arrogant still Egyptian at heart they did evil again verse 28 they did not obey God's commands verse 29 they sinned against God's rules which if a person does them he will live by them notice that this is nothing to do with works religion this is nothing to do with justification by merit not at all it's so clear here isn't it they chose to refuse God's spirit they chose to refuse God's word they

chose to persist in the disobedience of unbelief rather than to humble themselves in the obedience of true faith which is the only kind of saving faith according to the Lord Jesus they said we're Israelites we're God's people God must be happy with us and save us just as the Pharisees said to Jesus we're Pharisees we surely are justified in God's sight and just as Christians today sometimes say we're evangelical we're reformed no less so surely God must be happy with us no no no says the Bible no says Jesus and his apostles and every prophet and Moses don't say to me Lord Lord and not do what I command when people think that he must punish chastise in his mercy in order to preserve them verse 30 he gave them into the hands of the peoples of the lands the pagans the enemies the seed of the serpent but from whom they had become indistinguishable God gave them up it's a chilling reminder there isn't it of Romans chapter 1 when God says

Paul says God gave man up to the lusts of his own heart to allow human sin to bring judgment upon its own perpetrators because God's own people by nature by themselves are just like everyone else we are Egyptian nature we are by nature seed of the serpent not the seed of the living God if you don't really believe that you don't think that's true just take a long deep look into your own heart doesn't it frighten you what do you find there aren't you often so ashamed of the things that emerge from there into your thoughts into your lips into your actions left to ourselves every single one of us would just merge back in with the people of the lands but we're not left to ourselves because our God is the God of extraordinary goodness whose infinite patience provides even in our perversity and whose merciful punishments preserve us even from pride and presumption and self determination look at verse 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 with him is plenteous plenteous redemption and you see it was their renewed consciousness of this God who is their God the Lord God revealed afresh in that living encounter with him in this word and received in hearts of penitent faith it was this that elicited their prayer and enabled them to pray and enabled them to express their confession of sin to God and so be restored to him be renewed be back in fellowship with him that's why we see in the final verses 32 to 37 this renewed confidence in

[45:36] God because real prayer is encouraged by a new and real confidence in God in response to his revelation of himself in his word because that's where we see afresh his tenacious commitment to his purposes and his tender tender compassion to his people now therefore our God they pray the direct call to him to look on them in their own day with his mercy see all this that has come upon us verse 33 see it all and what they're saying is will you not still today be to us the God that we now know you to be boundless in mercy boundless in steadfast love not said explicitly but that's a clear implication of their prayer isn't that they have a renewed confidence encouraged by everything that they've grasped about this God before whom they are kneeling in prayer and they do two things you can see verse 33 first of all they confess their unavoidable weight of sin and their part in that dreadful perversity we have acted wickedly behold we are slaves verse 36 because verse 37 of our sins you see no covering up no special pleading no self justification no saying oh it's all

God's fault verse 33 see you have been righteous in everything that has come upon us this is not self pity this is the true self knowledge that is forced upon us by the truth of God when the spirit of God touches our hearts through his word but second notice even more so they confess aloud the unavoidable wonder of the grace and goodness of God verse 32 our God the great the mighty the awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them verse 31 and this is the God that they know is their God from everlasting to everlasting and so they know that because he is who he is then even though they now cannot avoid knowing what they are they know that there is still plenteous redemption they know that there is a way back to God from the dark past of sin that there is a door that is open that they may go in they know because they know him the true

God of heaven revealed in his glorious word to them friends how much more how much more do you and I know him know him who is revealed so fully and completely in our Lord Jesus Christ because we know don't we that it's Calvary's cross where you begin when you come as a sinner to Jesus let me draw to a close with these words this was an act of confession on the part of God's

people and yet the predominant consciousness is not so much of their sin as of the greatness of God they were overwhelmed by the sense of that greatness this is the ground of all hope in spiritual life to make this discovery because in biblical confession the deepest consciousness is not not of our sin but of

God's greatness and glory it's possible to be morbidly preoccupied with our sins and unworthiness but reading Paul's life and letters how little preoccupation he had with sin he said he was the chief of sinners but he did not bemoan and wail his sin endlessly before God no his eyes were upward on the greatness of God and on the unsearchable riches of Christ and it may be that we have yet to learn that viewing the unsearchable riches of Christ is a more health giving act of confession of sin than morbid preoccupation with it you see when we turn our eyes there to the ultimate self revelation of this God who is our God from everlasting to everlasting in his ultimate revelation in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ we do see there of course our sin our wickedness our perversity our blasphemy and it rightly puts us down in the dust but more than that far far greater than that overwhelmingly greater than that inscribed upon the cross we see in shining letters

God is love he bears our sins upon the tree he brings us mercy from above you see it's seeing that and it's only seeing that that can draw us again into health giving and life renewing confession of our sins and our God which is the mark of real prayer well let's pray oh Lord our God the great the mighty the awesome God who has shown yourself to us in all your radiant wonder in all your depths of mercy in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ in the person of your son and who has kept your covenant with us sealed with blood of your own and so redeemed us forever by your abundant and your triumphant grace grant us we pray

[52:22] Lord to so receive your word that even the darkness of our sins cannot ever extinguish the brightness of your glorious goodness and the surpassing riches of your love towards us in Jesus Christ and so that we may be strengthened with power through your spirit in our inner being that we might be people of real prayer people who have received this glorious gospel of grace and people who live to the praise of your glorious grace all the days of our lives and we ask it for Jesus sake
Amen Peace Amen