

All right, well, it is six o'clock. So we're going to go ahead and get started and on this spring break Wednesday. So it's good to see all of you here. Glad you could make it and join us for this special time. And we're going to be looking, of course, at Nehemiah chapter nine tonight. David Wells in his classic work, *No Place for Truth*, or I think it's also whatever happened to evangelical theology, which is a brilliant commentary on the state of the church, the evangelical church, and really the decay of the evangelical church in terms of its doctrine. Of course, this book was written many years ago in the mid-90s, so it's not particularly new anymore. But the... the situation that he describes in that book is still very much present in the evangelical church. He describes in that book how evangelical pastors have abandoned their traditional role as ministers of the Word, as proclaimers of the truth, to serve rather as therapists self-help gurus, managers of small business enterprises that call themselves churches. And he describes how these pastors have led their congregations to abandon what he calls genuine Christianity and biblical truth in favor of a self-centered, inner-directed form of religion that is no different than various forms of spirituality that now pervade our Western culture. And among the factors that he lists to contribute to this decay is the loss, he says, of a true sense of the holiness of God and a true sense of the sinfulness of man. I'm going to read a quote. He says, This, the loss of the traditional vision of God as holy is now manifested everywhere in the evangelical world. It is the key to understanding why sin and grace have become empty terms. Divorced from the holiness of God, sin is merely self-defeating behavior or a breach in etiquette. Divorced from the holiness of God, grace is merely empty rhetoric, pious window dressing for the modern technique by which sinners work out their own salvation. Divorced from the holiness of God, our gospel becomes indistinguishable from any of a host of alternative self-help doctrines. Divorced from the holiness of God, our worship becomes mere entertainment. The holiness of God is the very cornerstone of Christian faith, for it is the foundation of reality. Sin is defiance of God's holiness. The cross is the outworking of victory and victory of God's holiness, and faith is the recognition of God's holiness. Knowing that God is holy is therefore the key to knowing life as it truly is, knowing Christ as he truly is, and knowing why he came, and knowing how life will end. It's a strong statement about the importance of understanding the true holiness and gratefulness or, yeah, the gratefulness of God or the greatness of God in that we can only do that when we get a true sense of our own sinfulness and the extravagance of God's grace demonstrated to us in Christ when we understand

the holiness of God. Without it, as Wells says, sin and grace are merely empty terms that have no meaning or impact on the reality in which we live our Christian lives. Now, why do I tell you all this? Because tonight we're going to look at a passage in Nehemiah where this is certainly not the case. In Nehemiah 9, we read of a community, a church, that is impacted by the reality of who God is and therefore who they are. and therefore understanding a true sense of the holiness of God and the sinfulness of their own sin. So let's read Nehemiah chapter 9, and we're going to read almost the whole chapter. We're going to stop in verse 37, but this is the word of the Lord. 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. 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, Bonnie, Cadmiel, Shebaniah, Buni, Sherebiah, Bonnie, and Chanani, and they cried with a loud voice to the Lord their God. Then the Levites, Jeshua, Cadmiel, Bonnie, Heshabaniah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah, and Pessahiah 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 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 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 against our fathers. And you made a name for yourself as it is to this day and you divided the sea before them. So 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 out of Egypt and had committed great blasphemies, you and 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 so 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 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. Enjoying your great goodness that you gave them in the large and rich land you have 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. Well, this is God's Word. Thanks be to God for His holy and inerrant Word. It's a... It's a lengthy passage, no doubt, but it's... An important one. Verse 1 begins by telling us it was the twenty-fourth day of this month, it says, and we need to know from the... the context. We know from the previous chapter, chapter 8, that this month, as it's referred to, was the seventh month which means it was the month in which they celebrated the Feast of Booths and other feasts that had been prescribed by God for His people. And we read here that the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth and with earth on their heads. Now, when we begin this, we... we might ask the question, well, what feast was it that they were now celebrating? They had just celebrated the Feast of Booths. There's other feasts going on in this month, so... so what is it that they are celebrating? The answer is there... there actually is no feast on the 24th day of this month since the Feast of Booths ended on the 22nd day. And so, really what this is, is this is an impromptu gathering of God's people that was happening in response to the truth of God's Word that was being proclaimed to the people. And when we read that Scripture, I mean, it must have been an amazing scene to witness, right? I mean, think about it. For the past three weeks, the people have been celebrating and worshipping God, you know, observing the feasts that God had given them to celebrate His faithfulness to them over the centuries. they had been instructed

in the Word of God. But now, having celebrated and... and hearing God's Word, it says that they are standing in sackcloth with dust on their heads, just like we do every Sunday after we hear a sermon, right? We... we stand with sackcloth and dust on our heads. Well, not really. Why were they doing that? It seems maybe a strange response. Well, likely, right, because in celebrating the feast and having God's Word opened to them, they discovered that something very important And that is that they and their fathers before them had neglected to live and worship according to God's design. And as a result, they were convicted of their sin. That is what the sackcloth and the dust on their heads expresses. And so now we read that they gathered, in verse three, to have the law of God read for them for how long? A quarter of a day, not a quarter of an hour. I mean, we just spent a long time reading the word here, but this is nothing. They did this for a quarter of a day, and it says they spent another quarter of the day confessing their sins. I mean, that's a worship service right there, isn't it? A quarter of a day hearing the word of God read, a quarter of the day confessing their sins, right? This is a good old-fashioned revival among God's people where we see the work of God taking root in God's people's hearts, right? In a very dramatic way. And this is how God's people respond when the truth of God's word is presented before them. Maybe not to the same degree, but certainly, right, when we hear the truth of God, there is a conviction that ought to be felt in our souls when we see truly who God is and who we are. But a word-centered conviction which drives God's people to recognize their sin, confess their sin, and ultimately to trust in God's provision for His people in Christ. And therefore, as a result, right, by God's grace to then live in obedience by the power of His Spirit. And essentially that's what we're seeing here in this passage. I just want to briefly highlight two things. First, that God revealed as holy and gracious, and secondly, how the revelation of God's holiness and grace leads to repentance and faith. So, here, to begin with, God revealed as holy and gracious. Now, verse 3, it seems, commentators point out, is perhaps a summary of all that is described in the verses 5 through 37. And probably But nevertheless, it's a good summary. In other words, verses 5 through 37 summarize what was actually read on this particular occasion. And the response of confession that we see is really a summary of the response that was offered by the people of God during the quarter day of confession that followed the reading. Okay, so it's sort of a summary of what happens on this day. But the first thing we notice is how God is addressed. Verses 5 and following, he says,

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 seeds and all that is in them, and you preserve them all. The host of heaven worships you. You are the Lord. Verse 17, also a God who is ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Verse 32, our God, the great, the mighty, the awesome God who keeps covenant in steadfast love. That is the God that we serve. This is the God that these people were confronted with, right? The great and awesome God, mighty in power, worthy of our worship. The one true and only God. The one who made heaven and earth. The one who not only made it, but preserves it. And when we understand who God is, right, that He is holy, righteous, true, He is infinite, eternal, unchangeable, that He is all-powerful, all-knowing, that He is just, and who will not allow the wicked to go unpunished, that when we understand, when His people understand who He is, We, like David Wells points out in his book, it is when we understand the holiness of God that we truly understand the grace of God. When we understand who God is in all the facets of His being, not just the ones that make us feel good, But when we understand that He is sovereign, the sovereign creator and judge, that we are not likely to think lightly of Him. We're not likely to think of Him simply as our good buddy or kindly grandfather or, you know, some kind of good luck charm. that it is only when we understand God for the fullness of who He is that we truly understand His love, His grace, His mercy in a real way. But also, when we understand who God is, we are not likely to think light of our sin or, right, to assume that He will just somehow, you know, take it, wink at it or laugh it off. Rather, when we begin to understand who God is, We begin to understand what R.C. Sproul was talking about when we will see our sin for what it is, as it's described by Dr. Sproul, cosmic treason against the sovereign God who rules and reigns over us. Cosmic treason against the sovereign God who rules and reigns over us. You see, when we truly understand the situation that we are in, when we understand God, when we understand our sin, we're not likely to question God's goodness because bad things happen in the world. Rather, we're driven to marvel at the love of God demonstrated to lowly creatures like us who have acted in rebellion against a good and holy God, against the one who created us and provides for us and cares for us. It seems apparent that it's only when we understand God for who he really is that we truly understand the grace of God. It is when we understand who God is that we truly understand the extravagance of His love, the depth of His mercy. Because it is only in the light of God's holiness that we truly understand the depth of our sin.

But it is from the depth of our sin that we can truly see the glory of our redemption in Christ. And we have the beautiful picture really painted in this passage of God's grace demonstrated to His people throughout redemptive history. I mean, He goes back, right, begins it with creation in verse 6, the covenant with Abraham in verses 7 and 8, and then goes on to the deliverance of the people from Egypt, the giving of the law, the preservation of the people in verses 9-21. Then the fulfillment of His promise in the days of Joshua in verses 22-25. His faithfulness to His people despite their rebellion in the days of the judges and the monarchy in verses 26-31. And it really just basically summarizes all of Old Testament history, or a good portion of it at least. And in each of those examples as they're being laid out, which is essentially just a summary of God's work throughout history, we see the enormity of God's grace, don't we? The enormity of God's love for his people despite their sin, their continual sin and rebellion against him. Even in the exile, in their current state of the restoration, which is described in verses 32 through 37, we see again the undeserved favor of God upon His people. But of course, all of these This beautiful picture is a foretaste, a foreshadowing of the great and grand redemptive act or event par excellence, the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ in which God demonstrated His love for us That while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. The eternal God, who is holy and righteous and true, who would be absolutely just, condemning all of humanity to hell forever because of our treasonous rebellion against Him, demonstrated His unfathomable love by sending His one and only Son to undergo all the miseries of this life, the cursed death of the cross, so that we might know Him and the power of His resurrection and new life in Him. That there's only one proper response to such love And that is repentance and faith that ultimately leads to worship of Almighty God. And of course, that brings us to the second part that I wanted to highlight, which is how the revelation of God's holiness and grace leads to repentance and faith. As we read in verse 3, a quarter of the day they read the book of the law, But then for another quarter of the day, they responded to God's word through repentance and faith. They made confession and worshiped God, right? That when they heard the truth of God's word and all that he had done for his people and were confronted with the reality of both who he is and the reality of who they were, they were driven to repentance. They were compelled to confess their sin before God. And it's important to see in this historical event that they... certainly they didn't make light of their sin. They also did not blame their plight upon their forefathers. They certainly recognized the error of their forefathers in acting disobediently in terms

of breaking the covenant with God, but also they saw themselves in light of that truth, they saw in themselves the same rebellious heart. the same culpability before God in acting rebellious against Him. They saw, truly, the justice of their own circumstances. And so, they responded in repentance and confession of sin. And of course, it is that pattern that God's people are called in every generation to show that when we see who God is, when we hear the truth of God's Word, we're reminded of who we are and our need for God's grace. That is why, at least one reason why it's important that we confess our sin together. Right? As John 1, 9, 1 John 1, 9 says, if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. But if we say we've not sinned, we make him a liar and his word is not in us. Confession is indeed good for the soul. But also notice when they were confronted with the reality of their sin, they did not wallow in their failure or view it as some immovable object that was somehow going to plague them and incapacitate them for the rest of their lives. They understood their sin, they understood their need for God's grace, and so they repented and called upon God, the one who would deliver them from it because of who he is, the great, mighty, and awesome God, and because of what he has done, because he is the one who keeps covenant and steadfast love. based on the faithfulness of God that has been expressed in every generation. They called upon God because of who he is to deliver them from their bondage. In this context, right, they ask him to give them the land that you gave to our forefathers. so that we might live in it and bear fruit in it according to the pattern that he had established in his word. Not presumptuously, but in faith and trusting in God who had been faithful to bring his people to that point. You see this, this is the life of faith. The life of faith is not one that diminishes the holiness and righteousness and justice of God so as to... as if we have to do that in order to emphasize the love and the grace of God. Nor is it one that begins by discounting the severity of sin so that we might not have our self-esteem crushed. No, the life of faith is one that begins with a true sense of who God is, the immensity of His greatness, and the true sense of the heinousness of our sin and rebellion against God. and who despite our cosmic treason against him has extended immeasurable grace to us through the sacrifice of his son so that we might respond in repentance from our sin and faith in Jesus Christ and his redemptive work so that we might know the unfathomable love of God that has no end. Indeed, that is the God that has revealed himself to us and who bids us to come and die so that we might live. in Him forevermore." Well, let's



stop there and go to a time of praising God together for who He is, the greatness of who He is. And let's just spend a few minutes doing that. We can do that from the tables where you are out loud so everyone can hear.