This is the eight message of eleventh in this series of “Amazing Things Can Happen.” So far, we have learned how Amazing Things Can Happen when we pray, when we plan, when we work together, when we overcome antagonism, when we stop strife, when we stay steadfast, and when we welcome joy. Today’s message is about God’s inexplicable patience with us and his grace for us, so it is titled “Amazing Things Can Happen When We Confess.”

Last week, as we studied Nehemiah chapter 8, we learned that God’s people were told to stop grieving their shame and guilt and start rejoicing in God’s love and mercy. Now we come to chapter 9, and this episode is mainly a beautiful prayer by Ezra highlighting that despite everything we do wrong and even in our rejection of God, God does not change his loving commitment to us.

I know that we often may think that God is tired of us and we can’t ask him to help us, give us a second chance for the millionth time, or ask him to forgive us for something we have prayed many times before already. Sometimes we are so overwhelmed by what is going wrong with us, that we forget God’s goodness and that he is still no matter what.

Can you relate to any of this? Well, you are not alone. And I don’t mean that there are others like you (which is true), but that God is still with you because there is nowhere you can go where God would not be there with you, and there is nothing you can do to keep God away from you.

Can you believe that? After everything you have done and said, God is still insisting on being with you. Yes. Crazy, but you better believe it because it is true.

Let’s see what is happening in Nehemiah chapter 9 that speaks about this. This is Nehemiah 9: 1-5,

Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads. Then those of Israelite descent separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their ancestors. They stood up in their place and read from the book of the law of the Lord their God for a fourth part of the day, and for another fourth they made confession and worshiped the Lord their God. Then Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, and Chenani stood on the stairs of the Levites and cried out with a loud voice to the Lord their God. Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah, 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.”

After the wall was completed and the people had heard God’s Word, they were moved by it, becoming aware of their sins and brokenness. Now they were now experiencing a rebuilding of themselves as people of God, and that led to this dramatic scene of humble repentance and confession.

Nehemiah describes the picture by saying they were fasting, in sackcloth, and with dirt on their heads. They did this as a sign of deep contrition of their sins. They considered themselves so morally and spiritually bankrupt before God that food, comforts, and conveniences of life seemed unimportant at this point as if saying, “we are deeply troubled by our sin.”

This was a critical part of their healing and reconciliation process with God and each other. Confessing they were sinners and that they came from sinful ancestors was necessary to understand why they were the way they were and behaved the way they did.

As a side note, let me say that this has nothing to do with a “generational curse” that had to be broken. God does not punish the children for their parent’s sin—that is an evil thing to say (Ezekiel 18). This was about recognizing they were sinful not only because of their free will but also because they repeated their ancestors’ behaviors. If they wanted to stop the repeating cycle of brokenness and not pass it onto their children anymore, they had to heal from the inside out and change. And that is what is going on here. So, they stood and confessed it all away.

Now, it is important to notice when and why this is happening. After such a great accomplishment of rebuilding the wall and being reminded of God’s mercy, they finally began to get a glimpse of God’s goodness and grace. After rejecting God’s ways and forgetting God’s past goodness for too long, God was still good to them and patient with them, and that was an overwhelming thought. They soon understood that they did not have to convince God to want them because as they were drawing closer to God, God was now drawing them even closer to him.

This process is reflected in Ezra’s prayers. In it, he confesses both their sin and God’s goodness. This prayer was not only a confession about what they did wrong but also about how God did not abandon them. Ezra begins by reminding people how God keeps his promises,

“You are the Lord, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham; and you found his heart faithful before you, and made with him a covenant to give to his descendants [this land]; and you have fulfilled your promise, for you are righteous.” (6-8)

Then Ezra’s prayer moves to speak about God’s goodness by rehearsing the history of Israel, speaking of their repeated failure to appreciate God’s blessings and keep God’s commandments. He does this by giving them a history lesson on how God brought them out of Egypt and slavery, how they rebelled shortly after making a golden calf, saying, “this is our God that brought us out of Egypt.” Then, despite all that, Ezra points out that God still did not abandon them but continued to guide them through the desert, sustaining them in miraculous ways as he explained,

“But our ancestors acted presumptuously and stiffened their necks 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 necks and determined 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 you did not forsake them.” (16-17)

I wonder why Ezra did this. Perhaps as the saying goes, “Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it.” If they wanted to have a fresh start, they needed not forget why things went wrong in the first place—including the stiffened necks and all that stuff—so they would not repeat it anymore.

This was a pivotal moment because, finally, they were getting it. As their faith grew, their conviction of sin increased too, and their hearts were finally ready to receive God’s grace. So, they confessed,

“You have been just in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly; [our leaders] and ancestors have not kept your law or heeded the commandments and the warnings that you gave them. Even in their own kingdom, and in the great goodness you bestowed on them, and in the large and rich land that you set before them, they did not serve you and did not turn from their wicked works. Here we are, slaves to this day—slaves in the land that you gave to our ancestors to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts. Its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins; they have power also over our bodies and over our livestock at their pleasure, and we are in great distress.” (33-37)

The sentence that sums this up is “[Y]ou have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly.” This was a confession about their deeds and how that led them to a sad place. God had brought them out of slavery in Egypt to make them a great and blessed nation, yet they were once again enslaved. But this time, it was worse, for they were slaves in their own land, subjected to a foreign empire.

However, as bad as this was, they needed to come to this place of being truthful and honest about who they were and what they did and then humble themselves to welcome God’s grace.

What does all this mean to us? As a result of their spiritual awakening, they were able to see and recognize that, generation after generation, the same ill behaviors and brokenness kept repeating. Before they could have a new beginning in their lives, they needed this process to heal the pain, trauma, and drama that had defined them for too long.

I know we can relate to this. We know how it feels and what it means to be “in great distress,” too. We have our own history of good intentions that fell apart, and destructive behaviors that have taken too much away from us. We have dealt with the brokenness passed onto us by our family. And we have suffered the metastasis in our lives of our ancestors’ traumas and misbehaviors.

Considering all this, it is understandable that sometimes we may feel as if God has gotten tired of us; that we can’t ask him to forgive us for something he has forgiven us for so many times already.

But here is the good news: God never gets tired of us and never turns away a sinner. As king David said after committing a grave sin himself, “[A] broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” (Psalm 51:17)

Isn’t this a beautiful thing? We may have to convince the world to like us, but we don’t need to convince God to have us. God is not sitting back passively waiting for us to finally “get it.” Instead, God continuously pursues us with love and grace because he wants our wellness and to put us back together.

In conclusion, this story in the book of Nehemiah, and all that happened that led up to that moment, is a testament to God’s mercy and grace but also to our ability to change. We don’t have to keep traumas and dramas of the past, not even those that come from family. We don’t have to settle with our sin, resigning any hope. Even in the middle of the rubble of a past life, God can bring new life when we bring ourselves entirely to him.

So, whatever has been going on in your life all these years, whether it was passed onto you or you brought it upon yourself, know that you don’t have to keep it and stay in it.

This is what we need to do: We need to draw closer to God by confessing our sin and giving up our brokenness. But also, we need to draw closer to God by confessing God’s goodness and trusting his grace.

My friends, when we confess God’s love in our minds and with our lips, it becomes part of us and changes us as God’s children. As it is written,

“For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Romans 10:10-13

Amazing things can happen when we confess.