

Rejoice, Renewal, Relapse

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- [0 : 0 0] Years ago when our boys were little kids, we took them to the beach and I was excited to show them how to build a sand castle. So we got all our tools together and we started working.
- And I showed them how to build the turrets and then the walls and then the front gate. And then we started building the buildings inside the walls. And it was wonderful and we were putting all kinds of details in there and using shelves for windows and things.
- And as soon as we got done, I turned and I said, boys, isn't this great? This is a sand castle. But before I could even get those words out, they leapt on the sand castle and began to demolish it.
- And they smashed every piece of it down to the ground to where you could no longer tell there had ever been a sand castle. They turn and they look at me and they are delighted with themselves.
- And they are covered head to toe in sand. And it occurred to me we may not be on the same page when it comes to the point of this exercise. They had a different agenda in mind. And I think about that as I read these final chapters of Nehemiah.
- [1 : 0 6] It may be something of how Nehemiah felt. He had spent 12 years of his life, 12 good years, leading God's people in the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem.
- They built the walls. They built the gates. They were rebuilding the houses. And he had put all kinds of reforms in place to not only rebuild the people, but to rebuild, to not only rebuild the city, but to rebuild the people.
- And then he leaves. And no sooner does Nehemiah leave than the people immediately begin to smash everything to bits. Not so much the physical walls of the city, but all of the reforms that he put in place.
- So we are going to look at these final chapters of Nehemiah, chapters 11 through 13. And we are going to ask what they have to teach us as God's people in 2024. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word.
- And we ask now that you'd bless us as we open your word. We pray that you would help us to understand it, to understand how it speaks to us today. We pray that your Holy Spirit would do what we can't do, which is to use your word to bring life in us.
- [2 : 1 2] Lord, to challenge those of us that need to be stirred up, to comfort those of us who need to be encouraged. Lord, we pray that you would do your work through your word. In Jesus' name, amen.
- So let me summarize what's happening here. This is a lot of ground to cover, so we're going to summarize it fairly quickly. There's a lot of material here. But essentially, after 12 years of working to rebuild city and to rebuild the society, Nehemiah is called to return to give a full report to the Persian king.
- And he has instituted a number of reforms to ensure that God's people continue being faithfully devoted to him and him alone.

And so when the time comes for him to leave, he looks around, and he probably feels fairly satisfied that the mission has been a great success. Everything is as it should be.

God's people have broken their idolatrous marriages. See, one of the big issues is that they would marry into other pagan people groups and that they would begin to worship the idols of those people groups.

[3 : 15] And so the concern was idolatry. And so they had broken out of these idolatrous unions and had rededicated themselves to God. They're keeping the Sabbath faithfully.

The Sabbath reforms had worked. They're giving to and they're maintaining the temple, and they're serving and worshiping in the temple. They're gathering publicly to read God's word and to pray.

They're marching around singing. And there had even been a great celebration to mark the restoration of the city and the people. And for that celebration, they called every musician they could find.

Anybody who could play an instrument, come into the city and be a part of this celebration. And so they have hundreds of musicians and hundreds of voices all singing together. And here's how it summarizes that at the end of chapter 12, verse 43.

It says, And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy. The women and children also rejoiced, and the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away.

[4 : 17] And Nehemiah and the people lived happily ever after the end. Wouldn't it be nice if the story ended there? But it does not end that way. There's one final chapter, lucky number 13.

A few years later, after Nehemiah has returned to the Persian king, he gets leave to come back to Jerusalem. And what does he find? Well, the people immediately started to smash everything to bits.

They had rejoined into their idolatrous unions with the pagan people. They had broken the Sabbath. They had profaned the temple. There were the same kinds of issues we see today of favoritism and idolatry and materialism.

All of that was happening. Nehemiah had worked so hard to bring reform, but after just a few years, it had already started to crumble. So Nehemiah is absolutely furious.

So what does he do? He starts cursing at the people. And then he beats them. He starts punching people in the face. And then he starts yanking their beard hair. This is a really insulting thing to do, really, to anybody.

[5 : 25] But particularly in this culture, if you really wanted to insult somebody, you would yank their beard hair. It's just not a nice thing. And this shows us, really, that Nehemiah has been pushed past his limits.

He sort of loses self-control. And then he begins to furiously reinstitute the reforms and to try to set everything right. And then the book ends. And now we have to ask, what can we possibly learn from this ending to what has been really an amazing book and an amazing journey?

It's an amazing story. And then it ends in such an odd, anticlimactic, sort of disappointing, disillusioning way. As much as we might enjoy a happily ever after ending, the Bible is really not interested in fairy tales.

The Bible is interested in reality. The Bible is interested in helping us to see things the way they truly are, not the way we would prefer to see them. And in these final chapters of Nehemiah, we see something vital about individuals and about society as a whole.

There will always be the need for reform. That's the point. There will always be a need for reform when it comes to our lives, when it comes to our marriages and our families, when it comes to the church, when it comes to the society we live in as a whole.

[6 : 51] The work of reform is never done. Coming out of the Protestant Reformation, there was a phrase that became almost a slogan. *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*.

The church reformed, always reforming. Now that's been used in all kinds of ways. It's been abused in some ways as well. But originally, it was coined by a Dutch pastor named Jodocus von Lodenstein.

And he meant something like this. Even if we get all the externals right, even if we get the correct doctrines and the correct forms of worship and the best form of church governance, even if we get all the externals right, there will always be one thing that needs reform.

And that is the human heart. The human heart always needs to be reformed. And that sits at the very heart of anything.

And this is something that if you're here, by the way, and you're not a Christian, pay attention to this. In a secular world, in our secular society, people love to believe in the essential goodness of human beings, that we are born good, that we're born more or less blank slates, that we are wired for goodness, but that we are corrupted by society.

[8 : 17] We're corrupted by outside forces. And those ideas come from a man named Jean-Jacques Rousseau. So people love to believe that. We're originally good and innocent, but society corrupts us.

People love to believe in the myth of progress, that even though there are some bad people over here, that most of us are good people working together to make the world a better place. And that history is the story of the world becoming better and better and better.

And eventually we're going to succeed. We're going to arrive. Now, these are nice ideas. They are appealing and they're attractive, but they are fairy tales. They're for people who like happy ever after endings.

They're popular because that's the way we pretend the world is. It makes us feel better to think we have that much control over the way things are and the way things are going.

But it doesn't map onto reality. Throughout history, there have been hundreds of attempts to start utopian societies. And there is a 100% failure rate.

[9 : 21] Now, why is that the case? Right? If we're simply corrupted from the outside, why not take a bunch of young, innocent people, move out into the country where no one can corrupt them and start a society where no one gets corrupted and we can build things the way we know they should be?

Well, it turns out a whole bunch of people have tried that. And it never works. Now, while it's true that since the Enlightenment, there have been many improvements to the quality of life and to lifespans.

They've gotten longer. We can't deny that. No matter how many advances we make culturally, technologically, no matter how much education or wealth we may amass, the world remains as broken today as it ever was.

No one can look at the atrocities of the 20th century and make a compelling case that we have made progress as human beings.

And we find ourselves on the brink of another world war. Right? Roughly a century later. Many people say we are making the very same mistakes that we made a century ago.

[10 : 30] Now, why is this the case? Well, essentially, Rousseau was wrong. Evil is not the result of outside corrupting influences coming at us from society.

Evil comes from within. Here's how Jesus teaches us. For from within, he says, out of the heart of man come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.

All these evil things come from within. That's Jesus' explanation. Human beings were created for goodness and beauty and truth. We long for those things still.

But ever since our first parents rebelled against God, our hearts have been corrupted by sin. So even if we get all the externals right, the best education, the best government, the best people in office, enough wealth to go around so that everybody has a shot at a flourishing life, the human heart will always need to be reformed.

Simper reformanda. Now, the good news is this. This is exactly why Jesus came. At the end of Nehemiah, Nehemiah has reinstituted his reforms.

[11 : 48] And in the last line of the book, he says, almost with a tone of exasperation, remember me, oh my God, for good. He's essentially saying, let my good deeds cover all of their wicked deeds.

Let my righteousness count for something. Focus on me. Don't pay attention to what they're doing. But, of course, Nehemiah himself is full of sin.

We catch a glimpse of that when he beats the tar out of people for disappointing him. Right? People hold him up as an example of a great leader. There are some things to learn there, but by no means should we follow every example he says.

What we need to understand is in the larger story of Scripture, Jesus is actually the truer and better Nehemiah. That Jesus is the one who became like us in every way and yet without sin.

Right? And Jesus is the one who's able to give his life for us to atone for sin. And so the gospel says that Jesus is actually the one who stands before the Father and says, like Nehemiah, remember me, oh my God, for good.

[13 : 00] Remember the perfect life I lived. Remember the death on the cross that I was willing to die. Allow me to pay the price for their sin.

Allow my righteousness to become their righteousness. And unlike Nehemiah, Jesus is able to pray that successfully. Remember my righteousness in place of their wickedness.

And that's the hope that Christianity offers the world. And that's why when Jesus began his public ministry, he didn't start by issuing a bunch of reforms. He didn't give us a moral to-do list.

And here's how you need to shape up. And here's what you need to start doing. And you need to stop doing all of these things. Jesus began by calling people to repentance, which is not the same thing as reforms.

Because when we repent, we turn away from sin, and we come to Jesus, and we confess that sin, and we ask for forgiveness. And then Jesus responds, not by saying, shape up, but by forgiving us and pouring grace into our lives.

[14 : 09] And then he fills us with the Holy Spirit to help us overcome sin in our lives. And then he promises that from that day forward, we'll never again be alone in our battle against sin, that he will be with us in it, strengthening us, encouraging us.

And that we will no longer have to pay the penalty for that sin. It's already been dealt with. So this gives us a way to deal with sin once and for all, an objective, true, and lasting forgiveness.

And it gives us a way to reform our hearts. So this is not something that we do once. This is something that is ongoing. It's a way of life.

It's a way of responding to the brokenness in the world until Jesus comes again to make all things new. So understanding this, I mean, what's the so what of this?

How does this apply to us? Understanding this is absolutely essential. If you want to make sense of the church and the kind of culture we're trying to build here at a place like Church of the Advent.

[15 : 19] If you come into the church with utopian expectations, none of this is going to make sense. And you're probably going to set yourself up for a whole lot of disappointment.

Because you're never going to find a utopian church. You're never going to find a perfect church. Our goal is, frankly, not to build a utopian culture. It's to build a repentance culture.

It's to build a culture where repentance is our normative way of life. Repentance, my friends, is the Christian superpower.

It is the thing that gives us the capacity for self-correction. It is the thing that gives us a way to deal with sin objectively and permanently. To rebuild relationships with God and other people that would otherwise be impossible to repair.

So the church is a place for people who are very serious about heart reform through ongoing repentance. Semper reformanda. And I would say that a culture of repentance requires that at least two things be true.

[16 : 30] There need to be two things in place for a culture of repentance to exist. Number one, there has to be a high commitment to personal responsibility. Meaning that there is a readiness to admit sin.

There is a readiness to take responsibility for the wrong that we have committed in our lives. High personal responsibility. A readiness to admit sin. And right alongside that, you have to have a high commitment to grace.

Which is about Jesus' readiness to forgive. Right? So if there is a readiness to confess sin and a readiness in Jesus to forgive that sin, there you have a culture of repentance.

And in any community where there is a high personal responsibility and high emphasis on grace, you have that kind of culture. And that is the kind of church that changes lives. That is the kind of culture where people change and grow.

So when it comes to this church, when it comes to your marriage, when it comes to your family, when it comes to your friend group, what kind of culture do you want to live in?

[17 : 38] I think this is maybe helpful if this is the kind of thing that if we see it, it helps us make sense of not only the kind of culture we want, but maybe the kind of culture that we have lived in. So can we put that up on the screen if you guys have that back there?

This is a way to sort of help us make sense of what happens when you have a high commitment to personal responsibility and grace or when you don't. So in the top right, we see what we're talking about right now.

A repentance culture. Where there is a high commitment to personal responsibility. People are quick to admit wrong. They're quick to forgive. They're quick to take responsibility.

In this kind of culture, when something goes wrong in your relationship, your first impulse is to ask, is there anything in this I need to own? You know, if you have a huge fight with your spouse, your first question is not, let me tell you all the things you did wrong.

It's, what do I need to own in this? You know, people are eager to repent because they understand how powerful repentance can be. People embrace grace and forgiveness as a means of growth and healing and change and reconciliation.

[18 : 51] And this kind of culture reinforces a core message in all of us. We all see ourselves in a culture like this. Everybody fundamentally believes about themselves.

I'm forgiven. And therefore, I am loved and I am accepted. Right? So the more evil we commit, the more things we see in our lives, the more we repent, and the more that deepens that belief in us that I'm forgiven, I am loved, I'm accepted, I belong.

That's a repentance culture. Now, what happens when both of these things are not in place? Well, let's look at the top left. If you have a high emphasis on grace and the gospel, but you have people who are not ready to admit their own sin or to take responsibility for their own wrongs, well, then you have a denial culture.

This is also known as a culture of cheap grace, to borrow the phrase from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This is essentially a culture where there is forgiveness but without real repentance.

In this kind of culture, people tend to minimize their sin. They tend to justify their sin. If you confront them, they'll say, well, this is a misunderstanding. If you knew what my real intentions were, that's how they make excuses.

[20 : 06] They claim to be misunderstood or unfairly judged. They demand and expect that people forgive them and overlook their offenses, but they're never really willing to admit or take responsibility for them.

And there is a core belief that is reinforced in a culture like this, and that is that actually at the end of the day, you know, I believe in the gospel and everything, but I'm actually faultless. The gospel is for the bad people.

It's for the other people. But I'm actually doing okay. So that's a culture of denial. Now, on the bottom left, we see what happens when you have neither grace nor personal responsibility, and this is what we would think of as a blame culture.

This is what happens when people don't take responsibility for their sin, and they don't really practice grace and forgiveness toward others. So in this kind of culture, people externalize and blame other people for all the evils and all the ills of the world.

They tend to see themselves as the good guys. They tend to get offended very easily, and they're very quick to call other people out. You often see this in the world of secular activism.

[21 : 16] And it makes sense. How can you possibly enter into and to try to tackle issues like racial injustice or generational poverty if you're not willing to own your part in it, nor do you believe in a God of forgiveness and reconciliation?

You end up having a whole lot of people claiming the moral high ground and blaming other people for all the evil in the world. And there is a core belief that is reinforced in this kind of culture, and that is ultimately, hey, at the end of the day, I'm kind of the victim here.

And if people confront you or say, hey, this is the way that you've done wrong, or your spouse comes to you and says, this is the way that you did wrong or hurt my feelings, your response is to kind of say, well, if you really understood this correctly, I'm actually the real victim here, and you're the one who should be apologizing to me.

That's a blame culture. No personal responsibility and very low emphasis on grace and forgiveness. And then finally, bottom right, we have a shame culture.

This is when there is a high readiness to admit sin, personal sin, and to take responsibility maybe too much, but a very low emphasis on grace.

[22 : 29] In a culture like this, people lack the ability to find healing and forgiveness, and that leads to despair and self-condemnation. People tend to feel overwhelmed by guilt and by shame.

This is the kind of culture where, if it's a religious culture, people tend to believe that God is disappointed with them or frustrated with them or angry with them. So this is the kind of culture where people learn how to hide their sin.

They learn how to conceal. They learn how to separate out. They play the part of a religiously faithful person on the outside, but they hide the brokenness of their lives so that no one else can see it.

Because they believe, if anyone really knew the truth about me, that they would reject me. Nobody would want to be near me. And you often see this in fundamentalist religious societies, not just in the Christian church, but in other religions.

Fundamentalist legalistic societies that tend to focus on works as a means to salvation. There are the externals of religious faithfulness, but there's really no heart change.

[23 : 35] People just learn how to say what they need to say. And there's a core belief that is reinforced in these kinds of cultures that ultimately I'm unworthy. I'm unworthy of love.

I'm unworthy of God's love. I'm unworthy of friendship. I don't deserve to have good things. I don't deserve joy. I don't deserve to have good experiences. And so there's a deep sense of unworthiness in cultures like this.

Now, taking all of this into account, I put it up there simply to provide a kind of diagnostic tool. Because we need to actually apply this. We should ask ourselves, where do I find myself here?

What are my tendencies? Think about your family growing up. What kind of family did you grow up in? Where would you place that on the chart? What about your current friend group?

The people who have the most influence on you and how you make sense of the hard things in your life. What is being reinforced there? What about your marriage?

[24 : 34] How do you operate in times of conflict? Do you tend to play the victim? Are you willing to take responsibility and get wrong? Do you carry around deep shame and failure? What about your family?

How are we parenting our kids? What kind of culture are we reinforcing for them? If we are not quick to forgive, to repent and quick to forgive.

If we don't have a high readiness to admit sin. And if we don't have a knee jerk reaction to go to Jesus and to actually believe that he forgives us. We need to figure out.

Do I have a low view of grace? Do I have a low view of personal responsibility? Right? If you find yourself being overly defensive or minimizing or blame shifting or hiding your sin.

Are those things in place? So just a couple of final takeaways. Number one, hopefully it's clear by now that gospel ministry, gospel ministry looks different depending on the situation.

[25 : 35] For some of us, gospel ministry means an emphasis on the grace and forgiveness available through Jesus. And that's what we need to hear. If you're in that bottom right corner, that's what you need to hear.

But for some of us, gospel ministry may begin painfully to truly have the gospel work itself out in our lives.

We may need to do the hard work of actually confronting and admitting our own sin. And that's something that our culture very much does not emphasize. But for gospel ministry, we may need to do some hard, deep soul searching to break through the denial, break through the justification, break through the victim narrative, to own what we need to own so that we can give it away to Jesus.

So that's the first takeaway. The second and final takeaway is this. Hopefully it's clear by now that the gospel is not just something that we believe intellectually. The gospel is something that we have to work out in our daily lives through ongoing repentance.

Semper Reformanda. Let's pray. Our Lord in heaven, we thank you that these are not just truths or ideas to give us a different way of thinking, that this is the blood and the life of your son worked out in our lives.

[26 : 57] Lord, this is the so what of thousands upon thousands of years of salvation history working out across cultures, across continents.

Lord, this is the so what of plans that you put in place that will one day lead us to the new creation. Lord, now we are seeking to be reformed and renewed through your Holy Spirit.

But we know that the promise is that there will be a day when the good work that you have begun in us will be brought to completion, where we will see you face to face.

And we will recognize you because we will be like you. Lord, we pray in the hope of that day and we ask for your Holy Spirit to help us to be faithful as we live the death and resurrection every day.

That you would put to death those things in us that are not of you and that you would bring new life that isn't. That one day we would be with you for eternity. We pray this in your son's holy name.

[27 : 57] Amen. Amen.