

Pathway to Peace

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[0 : 00] God is faithful, isn't he?

Faithful to get us expelled from college so he can get our attention.! Faithful to do whatever it takes to help create some sort of spiritual awareness of where we are and where we need to be. Praise God for his faithfulness. Let's pray and then we'll get into our text for the morning. Father, we are grateful for your faithfulness. We are grateful for the fact that your mercies are new every morning.

There's a fresh supply. There is a wellspring of mercy and grace and steadfast love that we can tap into day after day after day and that well will never run dry because of your inexhaustible faithfulness to us.

Lord, I pray that as recipients of your grace that you would use us as conduits of mercy and grace to others as well. Lord, if there's anyone here or anyone watching this morning, as we look into this text and we learn about the pathway to peace, Father, I pray that you would lead many hearts to everlasting peace.

[1 : 37] Peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ, through faith in Jesus. Do that work even now. Begin the work and hearts to lead us all to deeper appreciations of mercy and greater expressions of faith and peace in the world around us.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, this morning I want to begin by looking at the passage. I want to read it for you and I want to ask this question.

As we're reading through it, I want you to make an observation for me. If you were to preach this passage or to teach this passage, what points would you use?

What approach would you take? So let me read this and see how you might approach this text and how we should begin to enter into this passage and what God is trying to teach us through his word today.

We're in Nehemiah chapter 5. We're going to begin in verse 9 and take it through to verse 13. Nehemiah chapter 5, verses 9 to 13. So I said, this is Nehemiah, The thing you are doing is not good.

[2 : 52] Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God, to prevent the taunts of the nations, our enemies? Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain.

Let us abandon this extracting of interest. Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.

Then they said, We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say. And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised.

I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep this promise.

So may he be shaken out and emptied. And all the assembly said amen and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised. So what do you see?

[3 : 59] What's your takeaway? How would you preach or teach this passage if you were standing in my place this morning? I could ask for hands and take feedback.

But let me just share some of the things that are possibilities. And this is just kind of a tip of the iceberg. You know, if you were to teach this from a Nehemiah's perspective, a leadership perspective, you might say, Hey, these are the three qualities of courageous leadership.

Or maybe if you were to take it from the people's perspective, you might say the four easy steps to conflict resolution. Or maybe if you were to take this from the perspective of the outsiders, the enemies, who are kind of looking in, maybe you would say, This is your guide to risk management.

How to keep a movement alive. And certainly all of those could be derived from this text. The problem is this.

The problem is it's just a surface wash. And it doesn't actually get to the actual heart of the power that is taking place in God moving the hearts of the people to get them to a place of peace.

[5 : 17] It doesn't even begin to touch on the real results that are taking place. It looks on the cosmetics. It looks on the outside, the exterior. But it doesn't see where the actual power is.

It has nothing to do with Nehemiah. Or I should say, very little to do with Nehemiah. God uses him as a catalyst for peace. It has very little to do with the people themselves. They are responding because the Spirit is leading them to respond to the truth of the Scripture.

And so this morning as we look at this passage, I want to draw our attention to the pathway of peace. The pathway of peace that comes through the power of God.

Because after all, God is interested in peace for his people. You know, we were just singing a song. Our first song that we sang this morning.

And just drawing from the first several phrases, it says this. Build your kingdom here. Let the darkness fear. Show your mighty hand. Heal our streets and land.

[6 : 25] Now, looking around at the news, those of you who are news watchers, media watchers, those of you who are tuned in to what's happening around our country, you might say, well, that's a nice, lofty idea.

Heal our streets and lands? Come on. That is not going to happen. Well, what's happening right now is nothing compared to what was happening in tension with the conflict of brothers against brothers there in Jerusalem.

There was an all-out internal conflict. You might even say a civil war was about ready to break out in Jerusalem. And the power of God needed to come and to bear itself on the hearts of both the oppressor and the oppressed in order to bring peace to these people, in order to draw attention to the work of God in carrying out this mission of building the walls.

I was encouraged and reminded about this truth just from the Proverbs. As I was reading through the Proverbs, I've been walking through them personally in my devotions.

In Proverbs 29, 13, this should be an encouragement to you and has certainly been to me. As you think about these two things, being either oppressed or being oppressor.

[7 : 53] It says this, The poor man and the oppressor meet together. The Lord gives light to both. Isn't that awesome? The poor man and the oppressor meet together.

The Lord gives light to both. He is your hope for peace. He is the answer for all the conflict and all the disarray of life that is taking place right now.

The answer is Jesus. And I know that's the Sunday school answer, but there is no better one. Nehemiah is used as a catalyst for peace.

He is, in so many ways, he's kind of like the Christ figure in this story. But Nehemiah can only be a catalyst for peace. He can only help to broker peace.

He can't make peace happen. He can only invite the people to participate in peace. But it's got to be a work of God to create peace in their life. Jesus came to offer peace.

[9 : 04] We find in Romans chapter 5, 1, the only peace that really matters, Jesus came to bring. Romans 5, 1 and 2, it says this, Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have, what church?

Peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through Him, we have also obtained access by faith into this grace, which we stand.

And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Remember this, okay? The pathway to peace has the end point of worship and joy and rejoicing.

The pathway to peace leads to joy in God. It leads to worship of God. Always. True peace leads to worship.

Because true peace recognizes that the power that leads us to peace is a power of God working in both oppressed and oppressor.

[10 : 05] In offended and offender. It's a work of God to bring the two together. Peace with God that comes through the Lord Jesus Christ and peace that we can enjoy together because of the work of peace in our hearts.

Ephesians chapter 4, 1 to 3 says this, I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called. Okay, if you're a believer today, if

you put your trust in Jesus today, there is an expectation of a life change.

It's going to lead to a worthy walk. And what does that worthy walk look like? Well, here we go. All humility and gentleness with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

The Holy Spirit working in a life creates peace with God and peace with others. So Nehemiah has come as a catalyst, as a conduit for peace, a channel of peace to point to the pathway of peace, a peace that comes through God.

And he is the one who is inviting them to the table to enjoy the peace that God would have to give. And we've got three points this morning, okay?

[11 : 37] I tried to make them really simple so we can remember them. The pathway to peace involves these three things. First, repentance, then reconciliation, and then rejoicing.

Repentance, reconciliation, rejoicing. Can you say that with me? Repentance, reconciliation, and rejoicing.

I know reconciliation is kind of a long word. We're going to get there in just a moment. Basically, it's just God bringing things together, okay? Relationships restored. Friendships that are brought together, okay?

All of these are a work of God in our life. All of this leads to a pathway of peace. Let's start with repentance. We see repentance in verse 11 and 12, okay?

Where Nehemiah, in confronting this group of individuals, has some pretty sharp words to say. And he starts with, return to them all of these things that you've taken away.

[12 : 43] Whatever they might be, return to them these things. And then we see the fruit of repentance in verse 12. Then they said, we will restore these.

Fields, vineyards, olive orchards, houses, interest, grain, wine, oil. And require nothing from them. We will do as you say. That is the fruit of repentance.

It's the word return, which is the Hebrew word shuv, which is also the Hebrew word repentance. It's all kind of woven together. Because the concept of repentance is a recognition that this path is leading me in a direction away from God.

It is a recognition of that and a humility to turn and to walk towards him. That's true repentance.

Repentance. Not just a confession of sin, however important that is.

Not just a bad feelings about what you've done, feeling guilty, feeling burdened, feeling sorrowful. It is an active turning from and a turning to. It's a reorientation of entire perspective of life.

[13 : 52] It's setting your sights and you're savoring him instead of looking for and enjoying and being satisfied by these other things. Repentance is a turning away and a turning to God.

But I want you to know, and I just continue to highlight the things you already know. How does repentance come? It comes through the conduit of two things.

First, it comes through the authority of the scripture. It comes through the authority of the scripture. Now this is really, really good news.

Because if you have any broken relationships in your life, then I want you to understand that, and if you have access to the scripture, you have a pathway to peace with this individual, whoever that person is.

The authority of the scripture, okay? Now, where do I get that? Nehemiah says in verse 9, he says this. He says, The thing that you are doing is not good.

[14 : 55] The thing you're doing is not good. Now, how is Nehemiah able to say that? Well, he's able to say that because he is not speaking on his own authority. Nehemiah is pointing to the interest that has been exacted on the people.

He is discussing with them the enslaving pattern of their behavior. They have oppressed the people rather than tried to bless the people.

You see, it wasn't wrong for them to be wealthy. It wasn't wrong for these people to have lots of income, but they forgot the reason for the blessing.

Why God blessed them was so they could be benevolent to others, not so they could be a burden to others. God blesses all of us with a degree of wealth so we can illustrate God through the terms of sharing and through benevolence with the people around us.

It is a way for us to point to God because God is a benevolent God. God is a giving God. God is a gracious God. And so when we dispense or disperse the wealth that God has given to us, we show God.

[16:07] So having wealth was not the problem. The problem was is they compounded the distress on the people by taking their position and extorting those underneath them, taking advantage of the people underneath them.

We saw last week that Nehemiah pointed to two different passages, at least two different passages. One in Deuteronomy chapter 23, verses 19 and 20, where it says, you shall not charge interest on loans to your brother, interest on money, food, or anything that is lent for interest.

He understood the law. He understood what the law said. And then in Leviticus 25, he understands the law says, if your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave.

Nehemiah was shaped by the scripture and so he applies the word to the situation. He can do that boldly and courageously because he knows that for them to resist his words is not to resist Nehemiah and his leadership.

It's to resist God. We have the privilege as God's people to be a mouthpiece for God to those around us.

[17:25] And when they reject the word, they're not rejecting you, they're rejecting the scripture. And by the way, it is the scripture that has power to invade a life and to change a heart.

That's what Paul says. I am not ashamed of what, church? The gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes.

So when we use the word of God, we're applying the power at the greatest level because we're accessing the power of God on that specific situation.

Nehemiah understood. He understood the significance of applying the scripture, the power of the scripture, the authority of the scripture into this specific situation. And we could talk about the specifics of the process that he used.

But I want to look at the product, okay? We could talk about the process, but I want to focus on the product. We could talk about how in verse seven, we find that he takes counsel with himself.

[18:30] He gets angry, rightly angry, because he sees the injustice that is happening. But he pulls back, he takes some time, he collects himself, he evaluates the scripture, and then he applies it specifically, and notice one-on-one, first of all, with these nobles.

He kind of follows the Matthew 18 process, 450 years before Matthew 18. It says in verse seven, I took counsel with myself, and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials.

I said to them, you are exacting interest, each from his brother. Notice, no response. There's just a period and white space after his confrontation.

And then he moves to the next level. And I held a great assembly against them. Now he ratchets up the accusation, and now he makes a very public sin public, so that he can help to address the seriousness of the problem, and help to draw out the hearts of these nobles, so that God can begin to work in their life, not so that he can shame them.

It has as an intention, restoration, and the image of the glory of God among the nations. He's not trying to strong arm this situation.

[19:57] He really desires, Nehemiah desires, the glory of God to be evident. It takes us to verse eight. The great assembly comes, and it says, at the end of verse eight, the second half, they were silent, and could not find a word to say.

Now, we begin to see the force of the scripture having its way. I think this silence is the silence of conviction. I think this silence is a silence where they are coming to terms with their own sin, and they're not offering a defense.

They're not trying to justify themselves or to vindicate their behavior. They're not trying to say, oh, Nehemiah, if you only knew da-da-da-da-da. They're coming to terms with the gravity of the scripture is landing on their heart, and conviction is beginning to settle in.

God is beginning to have his way. And now we see the fruits of repentance starting to show up in verse 11. Where Nehemiah calls them to return this day all of those things that they have taken according to the law.

And by the way, this isn't to return all the money back because they had legitimately offered loans. Those loans still needed repayment. And notice there's not a returning back of the sons or daughters either because there's still an obligation for those sons and daughters to work off this debt.

[21 : 29] But as it comes to the things in the law, vineyards and orchards and interest in those things, there's a turn of heart.

There's an alignment with the scripture, a compliance with the standard, and God is having his way. Not only is the authority of the scripture brought to bear, but we understand that repentance only comes through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The power and authority of the scripture, but also the power and authority of the Spirit, the Holy Spirit. It has always been the Spirit's work to convict.

It has always been the Holy Spirit's job to help us come to terms with the sin in our life. The psalmist says in Psalm 51, verses 10 and 11, creating me a clean heart, O God, renew a right spirit within me.

Cast me not away from your presence and take not your Holy Spirit from me. There's a work of the Spirit in a heart that leads an individual to understanding the seriousness of their sin.

[22 : 42] And that's what David describes in Psalm 51. And he recognizes the potential implications, at least for an Old Testament believer, that the Holy Spirit didn't indwell permanently like he does in the New Testament.

He just came on temporarily. And there was a chance, for David at least, having disrupted and refused to listen to the Holy Spirit's speaking in his life, that the Holy Spirit's saying, well, okay, fine, gone, peace out.

But for us as New Testament believers, the Holy Spirit indwells permanently until the time that Jesus comes. And the Holy Spirit's job, as Jesus said to the disciples, was to convict the world of sin.

That is his ministry. So if you can think of some people in your life that need to repent, you have the Holy Spirit's enabling help in their life to make that happen.

Trust God to do that work. He is able to do that job. Nehemiah entrusted himself and the ministry of confrontation to the work of the Scripture and the work of the Spirit to do the work, to do that job.

[23 : 59] But now we turn from repentance to reconciliation. And just as repentance was a work of God and a heart, reconciliation is also a work of God and a heart.

Come back to Proverbs 29, 13. The poor man and the oppressor meet together. The Lord gives light to both. God has to do a work in the life of those who are hurting, those who have been offended, those who have experienced the burden and oppression of the individual who's taken advantage of them.

They need God to work in their life to lead them to forgive, just like Christ forgave us. The work of reconciliation is where we turn next.

And we see the significance. I want to just draw attention to the significance of forgiveness and why reconciliation is so important. First, I want you to know that forgiveness points to God's mercy.

Forgiveness points to God's mercy. We see at the end of verse 13, all the assembly said amen, meaning all the assembly were in agreement with the terms that Nehemiah put out because they were the terms spelled out in the law.

[25 : 22] They were terms that were right. And all the assembly came together to understand these are good terms. We're all good. Let's go with this. But there was some damage done.

There was some damage done that was probably unrecoverable. Daughters who had become wives, and they weren't getting those daughters back.

Those lives weren't going to be restored. Profit that had been lost. Feelings of betrayal. Meals that had been missed.

Perhaps loss of life because of some starvation in the larger families that were described. There was loss, and there was hurt. There was oppression that was unrecoverable.

Have you experienced hurt in relationship? The older you get, the more you'll experience. And the more opportunity you'll have to put this to work in your life.

[26 : 28] The need for forgiveness. The need for entrusting forgiveness to God. Because although it's easy to hold a grudge and to hang on to bitterness, it's really important to understand that the sin that is against you is preeminently a sin that's against God.

Not against you. So just try to knock yourself down a little bit and understand where you stand in all of this. He is creator.

He is holy. All of creation exists for his glory, not for yours. And so sin that is against you is preeminently against him.

So don't put yourself in that equation and make more of yourself than you should. Okay? And so when we choose to forgive, here are at least four things that are true.

Maybe three things. When we choose to forgive, first we agree with him that forgiveness is good. We agree with him that forgiveness is divine.

[27 : 38] That forgiveness is his plan. And so forgiveness is good. And when we choose to forgive, we agree with him that his sacrifice covers sin.

That his sacrifice was sufficient. In the Old Testament, the sacrifice of the lamb, which pointed to the future, fuller sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

And so when we forgive, we say, yeah, Jesus was enough to cover this. And when we agree, when we choose to forgive, we agree with him that we too are in need of mercy.

We come to grips with the fact that we stand in need of forgiveness too. And thus, when we choose not to forgive, we reject God's place as judge.

We say, God, you're not good enough for this job. Step over, let me do your work for you. Wow. That's serious.

[28 : 43] And when we choose not to forgive, we suggest that his sacrifice was insufficient. We say, Jesus was good. He was good enough for my stuff, but he doesn't even begin to cover that guy's stuff.

And when we choose not to forgive, we imply that we're not in need of mercy ourselves. At least not as much as that other person. Forgiveness is so significant.

It is a way for us to point to the forgiving God that we have. It's a way for us to showcase the gospel. The gospel that is built on forgiveness.

Jesus who said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. And they hadn't even asked for forgiveness yet. That is the kind of forgiveness that we, or posture of forgiveness that we need to have.

The kind of posture that says, whether or not they are willing to approach me and come to terms with their own wickedness, only then will I forgive.

[29 : 46] Well, that's just not how Jesus went about things. He had a posture of forgiveness that went to God and was open to invite and accept forgiveness from others when there was repentance.

Forgiveness is important because forgiveness points to God's mercy. Forgiveness is also important because it depends on God's justice. Forgiveness depends on God's justice.

Now, think about this a little bit. When somebody offends you and you find in your own heart, like I do so often, at times it's hard to forgive.

Why? Why is it hard to forgive? Well, because, doggone it, they should be disciplined somehow. There should be some, hmm, something bad's got to happen to them.

I mean, that's why we have eye for eye, tooth for tooth, right? I mean, let's get even. I want to see something happen. I can't just let this go without some kind of, some kind of remuneration, right?

[31 : 03] That's our, in our heart. But as we remember God's justice, and as we depend on the fact that there is a judge who will judge every person, they will stand before the judgment seat of Christ one day.

Every knee will bow. Every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. That will happen. Do you depend on God's justice?

Are you secure in knowing that God will handle it? He's either handled it already in Jesus, meaning the wrath of God has already come on Christ to pay for that sin.

Judgment has already been exacted on Christ for that sin against you because it's really a sin against Him. Or one day, that sin will be punished forever in hell.

God's judgment is so much more severe and so much more fair than your judgment ever could be. And it is a sin against Him preeminently.

[32 : 18] Do we depend on God's ability to act justly as He promises to do? Jesus did this. He was the forerunner of this.

We find in 1 Peter 2, 22-23, Jesus is experiencing injustice, but He says, He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in His mouth.

When He reviled, He did not revile in return. When He suffered, He did not threaten, but continued entrusting Himself to Him who judges, what church?

Justly. That's how He could say, Father, forgive them. Because He knew that justice would be served. either through His own reception of the penalty, the wrath of God being absorbed on Jesus, or the wrath of God coming on them in hell.

But, the road, the pathway to peace begins with repentance, moves to reconciliation, and always leads to rejoicing.

[33 : 30] And, briefly, I just want to encourage us this in this way. There are, there's an internal component of rejoicing, and there's an external component of rejoicing.

First, there is the celebrating the work of God in our midst among us. We celebrate the work of God in helping to heal the brokenness and the fracture among us.

Because, every one of us are in a relationship where we are both the oppressor and the oppressed. We are both the offender and the offended. It may not be the same relationship, but you have been that person, especially if you're married and have kids, you have been that person.

Okay? You are in need of God's mercy. And so, when God does the work of helping to heal that heartache in your life, it is cause for rejoicing.

And that's what happens here. All the people, it says in verse 13, and all the assembly said amen and praised the Lord. The word Lord, by the way, do you notice how the Lord is in all caps there?

[34 : 44] Maybe you don't know this, but when it's in all caps, it means Yahweh. Okay? As opposed to Adonai, which is just Savior. But Lord is Yahweh, and Yahweh is Jesus.

It points to Christ. And that's what the people are rejoicing in. They're praising Yahweh, this future Christ who's coming to heal all the wounds.

And so there's a celebration of worship that happens because the people recognize that God has been among them. The hand of the Lord has been present with them. It's helped to heal them.

Not only does it help to celebrate the work of God among us, but it also helps to call attention to the gospel.

The work of God in creating unity among God's people helped to call attention to the power of God to do what only God can do. He is the God of peace.

[35 : 51] Only God can accomplish the work in a heart to lead to peace, the pathway of peace. Paul, I'll just close with this passage.

In 1 Timothy 1, verses 15 to 17, you'll see all these components here. Paul is recounting his testimony and the mercy of God in his life when he says this. He says, this, the saying is trustworthy in deserving of full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the foremost.

But I received mercy for this reason. That in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

to the king of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Paul is saying is, as people look at my life and they know what kind of a scoundrel I am and they know the kind of grace that was needed to apply to get me to the point where I am today, they might say, if God can do that for Paul, he can do that for me.

And if you have a broken relationship, if there's conflict somewhere in your life, God is able through his word and through his Holy Spirit to accomplish reconciliation in your life.

[37 : 28] He has actually called you to that ministry. The ministry of reconciliation. As recipients, those who have experience being reconciled to God, made a friend with God, you now have the ministry of reconciliation, also helping to lead others into that same pathway of peace to say, hey, come, join me.

Look what God did in my life. You can have it too. You can enjoy peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Come along. Enjoy that peace as well. Do you know that peace?

Do you have peace with God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? If you don't, I'd love to talk with you about how to enjoy that kind of peace. Because when you experience that peace, it will lead you to abounding joy and rejoicing and worship at the work of God in your life.

Just like with Paul, this doxology, now to the king, eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. Hallelujah.

Thanks for coming this morning. Let me pray and I'll let you be dismissed. Oh God, we praise you for the work of peace that came through your son Jesus Christ.

[38 : 43] Thank you that you have commissioned us as agents of peace for the people around us. May we be faithful.

Faithful to showcase the power of the gospel working within so we can lead others to experience that same fellowship with God, that same peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We praise you for this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.