

Commitment to Rebuilding

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[0 : 00] In the 1997 movie, As Good As It Gets, it starred Jack Nicholson and Helen Hunt. And in the movie, Jack Nicholson, it's not Helen Hunt in the picture, in the movie, Jack Nicholson has obsessive compulsive disorder.

And he is a very difficult and off-putting person to be around in the film. He's difficult, people don't like him, but there's one waitress in a cafe who is kind to him.

And he really likes this person. And then she leaves, this is Helen Hunt's character, she leaves to take care of her son. And Jack Nicholson pursues her. And at the end of this movie, there is quite a famous scene, when Jack Nicholson says to Helen Hunt, I have a wonderful compliment for you.

Because I have obsessive compulsive disorder, because of you, I have taken my medicine for the first time. And Helen Hunt sits there and his face just says, So what?

And then he says, You make me want to be a better man. And every heart melts.

[1 : 18] And it's quite a famous scene. It's really heartfelt. And sitting behind it, I'm sorry if I've spoiled this 25-year-old movie for you. But sitting behind this is that Jack Nicholson has found someone who is motivating him to change.

His motivation is, I want to be a better man for you. Maybe you've had that in your life. Not that someone says, You must meet these conditions.

But maybe you've met someone, and you want to be a better friend for them. You've met someone, and you're like, Actually, I'm going to play the sport that you like, because I want to spend time with you.

My brother loves board games and card games. And I hate learning new board games and card games. But I will do that out of love for him.

But what motivates us in our relationship with God? Is it who he is? Is it his love and his compassion and his mercy to us throughout all our lives and across generations?

[2 : 24] Are we aware of what motivates us in our relationship with God? Or are we motivated by guilt?

What brought you to church this morning? Was it just a, Oh, this is what we do as a family on a Sunday morning. We just go to church. Are we motivated by a desire to please other people?

Or to make sure that we're good with God? Are we even aware of what motivates us? We are coming to the end of the book of Nehemiah.

Janet has read for us chapter 9. We're actually doing chapter 9 to 12. But we're going to spend most of our time this morning in chapter 9. And we see that a section of Israel has moved back from exile in Babylon.

They've come back to Israel. The walls have been built up. The people have been trusting in God. They've not been afraid of their enemies. And they've come to the point of remembering why the walls were broken down in the first place.

[3 : 30] Their sin. And God handing them over to their enemies. They've sinned for generations. God patience ran out. And so they were exiled.

But in God's great compassion, He's called them back to the promised land. And so now Israel remind themselves about who they are, how sinful they are, and how good God has been to them.

And they recommit to this God. They meditate on the character of God and it motivates them to recommit. And so the challenge for us today will be to consider what motivates us in our relationship with God.

duty, compulsion, family, fear of hell, fear of harm. Or will it be like Israel who are motivated by God's love and compassion to us to obey Him because of who He is?

There's three points this morning. Confession, character, and commitment. They're in the St. Paul's app. You can be writing those down, taking notes in your phone. But as we have a look at Nehemiah 9, let me pray for us.

[4 : 39] Heavenly Father, as we look at Your Word to us today, help us to see who You are and grow in love and trust and obedience of You.

Amen. First of all, confession. In chapter 8, we left Israel celebrating. They were celebrating and rejoicing, but now they turn to grief.

And they turn to grief because before you can appreciate who God is, we have to know who we are not. And so, in your Bibles, chapter 9, verse 1.

On the 24th day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads.

God's people are owning their own sin. They know who they are and who they are not. And so they put on a burlap sack. It is very itchy. I don't know if you've got children and you've ever tried to dress them in something that looks nice.

[5 : 48] One of my children, whenever we put something nice on them, they say, this is itchy. This is uncomfortable. These people, the Israelites, are wearing a burlap sack because they know that they should feel uncomfortable because of their sin.

They see themselves as dirty. It's a wonderful picture of humility. They put dirt on their heads because they say, I am a mess. I am dirty. And I am in need of help.

This is the place we should be in when we find ourselves comfortable in our sin. We have to acknowledge that we have sin in our lives and we are a mess.

And the only one that can help us and make us clean is God. In verse two, they also separate themselves from the foreigners, not to say that there's anything wrong with people of other nations, but it is as if they are owning their sin.

We are Israel. We are God's people. And we are going to own our sin with our God. And so they confess. They confess their sins, the sins of their ancestors.

[6 : 58] They're not blaming anyone else for being exiled, and they own their sin. And it's not just saying, oh God, we're sorry for all of the sins. They go through them in detail.

Verse three, they stood where they were and they read from the book of the law, of the Lord their God, for a quarter of the day. Imagine if I said, okay, everybody, we're going to read up, stand up.

I'm going to read the Bible for the next six hours. And as we do that, you're just going to be reminded of all of our sins and our failures. And so after they'd read the book of the law for six hours, verse three, they spent another quarter of the day in confession and in worshipping the Lord their God.

As they're reading the word, they would have been seeing all of the places that they fell short. and so they spend hours in confession. Now this might seem a lot to us, but imagine if we took, say, just the Ten Commandments.

Even that's too many. Let's just take the very first of the Ten Commandments. You shall have no other God but me. I'm sure we could spend a lot of time in confession.

[8 : 15] God, I'm sorry when I made myself God over you and I chose selfishness this morning. God, I'm sorry when I made money, my God, yesterday when I was at the shops and I worshipped at the altar of work or possessions or consumerism.

And Jesus says of adultery that lust is just as bad and murder, well, anger is just as bad. Imagine if we went into detail and just confessed the last two days of our lust and our anger and our theft and our envy and our jealousy, we too have hours to confess.

To appreciate who God is, we need to have humility and take a good, hard look at ourselves to understand who we are and who we are not.

One of the challenges of our time is that we are told that our views are valuable and right. Our emotions are right and the view of ourselves is right and we are losing the ability to say of ourselves and anyone else, this is right and this is wrong.

God sits outside time, he sits outside culture, he himself is good and he tells us what is good and right. And so Israel realise how far they have gone from God and they confess.

[9 : 44] They read the law, they have clarity of where they fell short but their own sinfulness is not what motivates them. They don't go, we are so sinful, we're going to work really hard, we're going to pull up our socks, we're going to follow God really hard, we're going to do all of the things God says in the law.

No, their desire to confess and their motivation to change is based on God's character. Second point today, God's character. In verse 5, it says that the Levites, the priests, they stand up and praise God with a summary of Israel's history and there's two key highlights.

How awful Israel has been and how good God is. I'm not sure if you picked that up as Janet was reading. It just says how good God is over and over.

Verse 6, you alone are the Lord. You made the heavens. You give life to everything. God is lifted high as the one who is in charge of all, responsible for all and has power over it all and he chose Abraham.

Verse 7, God chose to make a covenant with the people. God heard that Israel was stuck in Egypt and so he saved them. Then in verse 13, God gave them laws and regulations that are good and right so they could follow him.

[11 : 10] Verse 15, God provided for their physical needs and gave them land to live in. Up to this point, it all looks good and rosy. God has been good to them.

Israel is following God. It all looks pretty good. Everything changes in verse 16. Whenever you see the word but in the Bible, just underline it, circle it, put a tab there.

The buts are really helpful. God has been good. Israel has been following. But, but they, our ancestors, became arrogant and stiff-necked.

They did not obey your commands. God has done everything for them. They were not humble. They were unwilling to bend their necks to follow God.

And so God has humbled Israel, sent them into exile, forced their necks to be softened. Verse 17, Israel refused to listen, failed to remember the miracles, failure of memory.

[12 : 19] They forgot the God who made everything. The God who, who took them and made them a people, who, who saved them out of Egypt, who, who gave them good laws to follow, who gave them a good land. They forgot their God.

And this is where the beauty of God's character is revealed. If you've ever heard or even thought yourself, the God of the Old Testament, I don't know about the God of the Old Testament, I like the God of the New Testament.

He's all about love and hugs and kisses and I like Jesus, he's wonderful. But the God of Old Testament, he's angry, he's wrathful. If you've ever thought that, come to this point in Nehemiah 9, take a friend to Nehemiah 9.

Verse 17, but you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.

Therefore, you did not desert them. God had compassion on Israel when they rebelled and made another God out of the golden calf. Verse 19, God had compassion on them and didn't leave them in the wilderness to die.

[13 : 25] God gave them land and then they disobeyed again and yet, verse 27, God had compassion. And it's this cycle that happens over and over and over.

They follow God, they forget him, they take him for granted, they worship other gods, he sends enemies, they cry out, verse 28, and when they cried out to you again, you heard from heaven and in your compassion you delivered them time after time after time after time.

God is beyond gracious to us. Even after we commit the most heinous acts against him, against the people we love, against friends, he continues to be loving and compassionate.

And even when his people are not repenting, he doesn't destroy them, he loves them. Israel, at this point, are in a disastrous situation. They've been exiled, their country has been all but destroyed, their nation shattered, and yet, Israel are remembering how good God continues to be to them.

And verse 31 summarizes summarizes the goodness of God's character. In your great mercies, you did not put an end to them or abandon them for you are gracious and merciful.

[14 : 55] Because of God's character, his mercy and his graciousness. As I read through this, there's a word that jumped out to me about God's character.

I'm not sure if you've picked it up, but it's the word compassion. It's there four times in chapter 9. God is gracious and compassionate. He has great compassion.

Again, he's got great compassion. And in your compassion, you delivered them. God is gracious and merciful, but key to this is his compassion.

I love this word compassion because it's made up of two words, com and passion. compassion. The word com means with. So, company.

You're with people. And the word passion doesn't mean strong emotions like we tend to think these days. The original meaning of the word passion means suffering.

[15 : 55] So, if you remember the movie, you know, 10 years ago whenever it was made, the passion of the Christ means the suffering of Jesus on the cross, the passion of the Christ. So, compassion means with in suffering.

So, if you have a friend who you're grieving, they sit with you in your grief, they are with you in your suffering, they have compassion. God is described as someone who has compassion.

He is not absent. If you remember that poem about the footsteps on the sand, it is this picture of God walking with us every step of the way.

God is with Israel every step, when they're faithful and when they're not. He is ready to show mercy and to forgive them. He is present and with them.

And how much more wonderfully does he do this in Jesus? when he is present as a human being, he knows our suffering.

[17 : 04] He knows what it is like to be a human with temptations, to love people and to suffer on the cross. God became man.

He is compassion. He is with us in our suffering. He knows our joys and our pains. when Jesus suffered on the cross, he suffered in every way like we suffer.

Physical pain, he was betrayed closest by those closest to him. He was distant from God, all so that God could have mercy and grace to us.

God is with us and he's with Israel in their suffering. His compassion is what motivates Israel to change. our third point this morning, commitment.

Israel in verse 37, cry out to God, God we are in great distress. In verse 38, in view of all this, in view of history, in view of what we have been like, in view of what you have been like, mercy, gracious, compassion, in view of all this, we are making a binding agreement.

[18 : 22] We're putting it in writing. We're going to stamp it with our stamp. Our leaders, the priests, the Levites, they're all affixing their seals to it. Everybody is on board. We are recommitting to you.

The people know their history. They know who they are and they know who their God is and they're motivated by who he is, by his compassion.

And so they want to better represent God. They want to honor him. They want to remain God's people and not take it for granted. And so they rededicate themselves.

There's something really significant going on in these verses. They make a binding agreement. They put it in writing. This is what we continue to do. We are people who have mostly moved away from paper, but still if we're signing up for something, it gets put in writing.

The leaders, the Levites, the priests sign up for it. It's representative that it's not just some people who are committing to the Lord, it is the whole people recommitting to God.

[19 : 30] God in his grace has called them back to the land and they've seen that and they're saying, yes, we want to be a people following this God. We're going to commit.

And then the next three chapters, 10, 11 and 12, show the people commit. Starts with all the people in verse 10 and they remind themselves of God's laws that they're committing to.

It's as if what they're saying, we swear that we're going to follow this God and if we don't walk in this way, we'll let God curse us because we want to follow this God.

the first step towards recommitting to this God is to turn back to him in his scriptures. That's what they've done. They've spent hours reading the law, remembering the law.

They're going to honour the Sabbath. They're going to rest and trust that God will provide. They're not going to give their daughters in marriage to people of other nations because those other nations are going to bring in other religions, but they want to worship God.

[20 : 36] They want to continue to worship God for generations. They're going to honour God, God's temple, the place where sacrifices are made. They would tithe, they would give of their money. They're recommitting not just with their Sundays or their Saturdays, they're recommitting with all that they earn, their money, their first fruits, their crops, their animals.

God has committed to them and they are recommitting to God with their money, their success, their families, with their time and with their worship.

And finally, at the end of chapter 12, we return to the wall, which is what this whole book seems to have been about, building this wall.

But the wall was built and it's almost like an afterthought that we come back to it. But the wall that Nehemiah came to build, which was finished a couple of chapters ago, it had not been dedicated.

It had been finished, but they hadn't smashed the bottle of bubbly on it like you do with a ship as you commission it. God first needed to work on his people before they could celebrate what he is doing.

[21 : 45] They've read the law, they've confessed their sins, they've recommitted to the Lord, and now they are ready to celebrate what God is doing in their midst.

And so Nehemiah orders all the musicians, the choirs, the priests, he positions them all on different parts of the wall, they offer many sacrifices, and in chapter 12 verse 43, they were rejoicing because God had given them great joy.

The women and the children rejoiced, and the sound of rejoicing could be heard far away. I wonder what it would look like to have even the people walking past church hear us rejoicing this morning.

In a couple of minutes, we're going to sing our last song. What would it look like for us to be singing so loud that people, two streets away, could hear us rejoicing in our God?

Jerusalem is becoming the city of God again. Not just the place, but the people. Restoration and reconciliation with God and his people should always be celebrated.

[22 : 57] When a sinner comes to God, there is a feast in heaven. When someone commits their life to God, we get a big water tank, we do a baptism. It is a good thing to celebrate.

Brothers and sisters, Israel has gone on a wonderful journey. God has restored them to their land. They've read the Bible. They've confessed their sins. They've meditated on how good God has been to them, particularly his compassion for centuries.

And God's character, his compassion has motivated them to change, motivated them to recommit. And so they've signed up to follow him again today.

Maybe today is a good day for us to do the same thing. Actually, let's take out that word maybe. Today is a good day for us to do the same thing. To confess our sins.

To remember where we've walked far away from him. To remind ourselves of his great compassion for us in Jesus. That he has dealt with our sins so that we can know him.

[24 : 06] And then remind ourselves to commit to him tomorrow, the week to come. Because he is with us when we are suffering.

When we feel that we are far from him, he is with us. When we are busy and tired and stressed, he is with us. When we are celebrating and joyful, he is with us.

When we are grieving, he is with us. He is with us. He's not with us like a puppy dog who is just there to be warm and comfortable even though they're great.

But God is not just with us passively to make us feel better. He is with us like a parent to a child who says, I know this is hard, but I have good plans in store for you.

Who carries us in our grief. God in his compassion calls us to walk closely with him, trusting him, living in obedience to him.

[25 : 07] Jack Nicholson said to Helen Hunt, you make me want to be a better man. God's compassion in Jesus means we get to be his people, reminding ourselves of his goodness and calling us to obey him.

Let me pray for us right now. God, your compassion and love calls us to be your people.

Thank you, God, that you are with us each step. Help us to recommit to you today, to love your word, to confess our sin, to choose to follow and obey you, trusting in you each day.

Amen. community, to never help us. That's right.

Thank you.