

A life of grace fueled renewal

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[0 : 00] Friends, keep your Bibles open at Nehemiah 8. We're looking at Nehemiah 8, 9 and 10 this morning. Let's pray. Gracious Lord, in the words of your psalmist, we ask that you would open our eyes that we might see wonderful things in your law.

Father, we pray that we would delight in your word and that we would delight in obeying your word and we ask it by your grace. Amen. Let me tell you about two court cases.

Both have to do with driving offences. Case number one, a man is pulled over by the police for driving at 191 kilometres an hour.

His breath test revealed his blood alcohol reading was four times the legal limit. He was charged and then eventually he was released on bail.

Four hours after being released on bail, he was pulled over again. His breath test result was exactly the same. Four times the legal limit.

[1 : 14] Case number two, 23-year-old man is in court charged with manslaughter and culpable driving. Trying to overtake, he ran into an oncoming car that killed two people.

The judge said one thing was in his favour and interestingly enough, so did the family of those who he killed. He said that they were struck by his genuine remorse.

We know there's a big difference between those two attitudes. A difference between true repentance and empty words.

So what might that look like for the people of God as they return from exile, settle back into their home after a long, long history of ignoring God?

Have they learnt from their past mistakes? Will their lies reveal genuine remorse? The story so far is that the wars are built, the city is populated, leadership is in place, the community life is ordered, people are setting back into normal life again, but the work of Nehemiah that he had come to do had only just begun.

[2 : 32] Chapter 8 verse 1 says it's the first day of the seventh month. It's the day of the Feast of the Trumpets, something similar to our New Year's Day.

A good day for the people of God to have a new start as they look forward to the future. Very significantly we read in chapter 8 verse 1 that the people gather as one people and they ask Ezra the priest to read to them the law of Moses, the same law that they had neglected for so long.

And notice that there are men and there are women, all who could listen and understand. They gather for the reading. There was potentially a creche, but there certainly wasn't a Sunday school and there wasn't a movie put on for the teenagers down by the dung gate.

The whole community gathers for the reading of the word. Verse 3 says, the reading went for five hours. And verse 5 says that they stood for it the whole time.

And verse 3 says, all the people listened attentively to the book of the law. There is a respect here for God's word.

[3 : 50] Notice too the response to the word of God in verse 6. Ezra praised the Lord, the great God, and all the people lifted their hands and responded, Amen! Amen!

Amen! Then they bowed down and they worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Bowing down is a posture that signifies their submission, corporate submission to the word of God, the authority of the word of God.

The people of God are here relearning the law that they had rejected for so long. They are making the scriptures the guiding principle of their lives. Is that not what we confess here?

The Bible for us, to be the guiding principle of our lives, it's written on our walls. One of our core values is Christ-centered Bible saturation. It says the Bible alone is God-inspired, infallible, and unerring means of speaking to humanity.

The Bible is essential for knowing God and transformation of life. The Bible is our standard for faith and conduct and leads us to treasure Jesus Christ. We believe that right thinking fosters right living, and we value teachable hearts that are earnest and intense and passionate about the things of God.

[5 : 10] Like them, our response to the word of God is not meant to be a mere intellectualism. They praise God. They want God to change them and to change us.

God's word here is informing the minds and reaching the hearts of these exiles. These exiles start to grieve in verse 9. It says, all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the law.

Everyone who gathered was guilty. Their offense was tragically universal, deeply serious, and inescapably personal. Amazingly though, the gathering was urged to dry their tears.

Verse 9 says that Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levite said to them, whoa, whoa, whoa. This day is a sacred day to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep.

They tell them to stop mourning and instead go off and have a party with some great food and the best drink because the end of verse 10, the joy of the Lord is your strength.

[6 : 25] Why do they tell them to stop weeping and start rejoicing? How can they find joy when all the conviction of their centuries of rebellion came flooding in as the word of God is read?

How? Well, the same word of God also reveals the remedy to their sin because every year, 10 days after celebrating the Feast of the Trumpets, the people of God gathered together to celebrate the Day of Atonement.

This day is the annual public declaration of God's mercy. The atoning sacrifice was offered. The people would metaphorically pin their sins on a scapegoat.

The scapegoat was cast out into the wilderness. It was a visible sign that they were clean from all of their sins. All their sins would be fully, immediately and irrevocably pardoned by God on the Day of Atonement.

Of course, each year the Day of Atonement anticipated a greater scapegoat who would truly, fully, completely carry the sins of all people and that day came on the first Good Friday when God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, carried our sins on the cross in his sinless body.

[7 : 55] And that's why for these returned exiles, the weeping and sadness of verse 9 is balanced by the joy and the gladness of verse 12. The people of God are again starting to live under the control of the Word of God.

Verse 14, I think, expresses it with a beautiful simplicity. They found written in the law which the Lord had commanded through Moses that the Israelites were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month.

They discovered something from the Word of God that they didn't know was there, that they neglected. And what they discovered, most likely, they'd been looking at Leviticus 23, was that the following the Day of Atonement on the 10th of the seventh month was the Feast of the Booths on the 15th day of the seventh month, also known to us as the Feast of the Tabernacles.

They saw it, they'd been ignoring it, and so they did it, they celebrated it. The Feast of Tabernacles called the people of God to look back to the wilderness wanderings and remember God's provision of water from a rock, from a dying, thirsty people, for a dying, thirsty people.

They're also to remember God's presence with them in the pillar of the cloud during the day and the light that led them to the promised land at night time.

[9 : 29] Verse 16, 17 is entering. It says that they hadn't celebrated it from the days of Joshua, son of Nun. That's a long gap. Joshua led the wilderness wanderers into their new home after the rescue from Egypt.

And the next time this festival is celebrated is when the exiled people of God are brought back to their home and established again in the land as the people of God.

They are meant to see the parallels. God has again committed a mighty act of salvation. God has again committed a mighty act of salvation and he has rescued his people and brought them to their home.

And this feast was to remind these returned exiles that their confidence is not in walls. It's not in the city.

It's not in even the strong leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra and others but in their great and awesome God. The Lord Jesus celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles in John chapter 7.

[10:50] On the last day of the feast he stands up and he says if anyone is thirsty let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me as the scriptures has said and I believe when he says the scriptures has said he was looking at Nehemiah 8 and 9 streams of living water will flow from within him.

By this he meant the spirit whom those who believe in him will later were later to receive. Jesus on the Feast of Tabernacles makes an extraordinary claim.

It's an offer to anyone and whoever believes in him. Jesus claims to fulfill all that the Feast of Tabernacles points back to and anticipated in the future.

Jesus is the one true rescuer who will provide for our most essential need. Spirit of God himself. Jesus is the giver of the Spirit as God's ongoing presence with the believer as the guiding toward truth and the rich source of eternal life.

That is what he promises those who believe in him. Our confidence is to be in the Lord Jesus. So the rediscovery of the word of God leads to covenant renewal on the day of the Feast of the Booths.

[12:13] And then there's another service celebrated on the very next day of the Feast of the Booths. This time it's a six hour service.

And this time there will be repentance. Nehemiah chapter 9. We notice there that Ezra's prayer from verse 6 dominates the chapter.

And his prayer surveys the history of Israel's relationship with Yahweh. Verses 6 to 15 in chapter 9 lists the goodness of God in creation, in choosing Abram from all the peoples, in hearing the cry of his people in Egypt, in delivering them with his awesome power, in giving his law, in providing bread from heaven and water from the rock and telling them to take the land.

Verse 16 gives the contrast that people acted arrogantly. They become stubborn and refused to listen.

They refused to remember God's goodness and they even tried to go back to Egypt. And then comes a list of God's added mercies in spite of Israel's disobedience.

[13:30] Verse 17, you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, therefore you did not desert them. And more than that, he didn't just desert them, he pursued them with goodness and mercy again and again and again and again.

Verses 20 to 25 says, God gave his good spirit to instruct them. He gave them manna and he gave them water. For 40 years their clothes did not wear out. They overcame kingdoms.

They entered and possessed the land. They had cities and fertile land. They had houses and cisterns and vineyards and olive grows and fruit trees. The end of verse 25 just sums it up.

They reveled in the goodness of God. Like a dog rolling in something. Oh, this is great.

Contrast to the people of God. Verse 26 in their response. But they were disobedient and they rebelled against you. They put your law behind their backs. They killed your prophets who had admonished them in order to turn them back to you.

[14:39] They committed awful blasphemies. God's response. Verse 27, you handed them over to the enemies. You oppressed them. But when they were oppressed, they cried out to you. And from heaven you heard them.

And in your great compassion, you gave them deliverers who rescued them from the hand of their enemies. The people's response, verse 28, but as soon as they were at rest, they again did what was evil in your sight.

Then you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies so that they ruled over them. God's response, verse 28, and when they cried out to you again, you heard from heaven and in your compassion, you delivered them time after time.

And again in verse 29, you warned them to return to your law, but they became arrogant and disobeyed your commands. They sinned against your ordinances, by which a man will live if he obeys them.

Stubbornly they turned their backs and you became stiff necked and refused to listen. But again, God's response in verse 30, for many years you were patient with them. By your spirit, you admonished them through your prophets, yet they paid no attention, so you handed them over to the neighbouring Gentiles, neighbouring peoples.

[15:52] And yet this is what I mean by inexhaustible grace. In verse 31, Ezra says, in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are gracious and a merciful God.

The focus right through this prayer is on God's faithfulness, mercy and goodness in the face of Israel's rebellion, sinfulness and failure.

It is a history lesson in inexhaustible grace. Notice that the language shifts in verse 32.

Ezra now prays in the first person plural. Now therefore, O our God, the great, mighty and awesome God who keeps his covenant of love, verse 33, in all that has happened to us.

You have been just. You have acted faithfully why we did wrong. Ezra's prayer is not just a history lesson.

[17 : 05] He brings it right down to present ownership of failure and acknowledgement of God's goodness. His prayer here is an implicit plea for mercy.

Verses 36 and 37 twice state the condition of God's people as being slaves. They are in great distress, it says. They might be back now in the promised land, but they are still under foreign control.

And so Ezra's prayer is implicitly asking God, have your mercies dried up? Have your great compassions ceased?

Will you now forsake what you have refused to forsake all these centuries? Notice that they don't direct God to do anything.

They don't know what the outcome will be. They do, however, commit to do something themselves. Have a look at verse 38. this is the great renewal.

[18 : 19] In view of all this, all what? All the century-longs of great, mighty, awesome, covenant-keeping, loving work of God.

In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites, and our priests are fixing their seals to it.

They confess their failure. They ask God for mercy, but they're not taking that mercy for granted. In view of God's mercy from the past, they commit themselves to covenant obedience in verse 38.

The details of what they commit themselves to are in chapter 10. they make six pledges in chapter 10 and they all have to do with the law and the temple.

Time doesn't permit to go into all the details, but the pledges of commitment have to do with how these people are to rightly relate to God. My friends, this is willed, principled, binding, written, corporate agreement to pursue the covenant together.

[19 : 28] God's inexhaustible grace through history is the basis of this covenant renewal. The return to covenant faithfulness is not just seen in walls being built.

And it's not just seen in the reverence for the word of God. Not even in grieving over sin. They're all part of the covenant renewal.

What is needed is a return to God in relationship of obedience. These pledges are, if you like, the fruits that show repentance. Their brokenness of heart is not content to simply moan and groan, but it whips out a pen and a piece of paper and it makes a list of how it will be revealed in repentance. The centuries of God's faithful mercy and provision to the faithless and ungrateful people has stirred the returned exiles to renew their commitment to their covenant with Yahweh.

Their return to the covenant is seen in their faithfulness to the covenant requirements. just before his death on the first Easter, the Lord Jesus said he was establishing a new covenant.

[20 : 56] Luke 22 verses 19 to 20 records the occasion. It says he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and he gave it to them saying, this is my body given for you, do this in remembrance of me.

In the same way after the supper he took the cup saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood which is poured out for you. The apostle Paul picks up Jesus' words in 1 Corinthians 11.

He picks them up to a church that is declared to be the people of God, but you could hardly tell by the way that they lived. Verse 23 of 1 Corinthians 11 says, the Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and said, this is my body which is for you, do this in remembrance of me.

In the same way, after supper he took the cup saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood, do this whenever you drink it in remembrance of me. Notice first of all that the Lord's Supper is about remembering the Lord Jesus and all that we have in him.

As his covenant commitment and obedience is so much about remembrance. remembrance. Jesus is the fulfillment of centuries of God's grace and patience and mercy and goodness and kindness, and Paul calls this church of Corinth to remember Jesus, remember the gospel.

[22 : 24] But reading on, we see that the Lord's Supper is also about covenant renewal. Verse 26 says, whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

When you partake in the Lord's Supper, you are declaring your allegiance to the Lord Jesus and commitment to a covenant relationship with him. And when we read on further into 1 Corinthians 11, we know that this is a very serious commitment.

Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A person ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread or drink of the cup.

For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord, eats and drinks judgment on themselves. When we take this bread and we take this cup, we are saying amongst other things, I remember the mercy and the forgiveness of the Lord Jesus.

And so to take this bread and to drink from this cup, while acting like sin doesn't matter, despising other people, cherishing and nurturing secret sin, malicious talk, slander, gossip, judging motives, embellishing the truth, greed, ingratitude, sharing information that's not yours, sarcasm.

[24 : 07] That's to profane the covenant. it's taking the Lord's Supper and instead of renewing the covenant in that moment, you're blaspheming against the covenant.

covenant. And that's why the Lord's Supper is never to be an automatic, unthought through, ritualistic outward form.

In recommitting ourselves to him, he calls on us to examine our lives, to make sure that we make much of our sin so that we would mourn it rather than conceal it or excuse it and so that we would repent of it and pursue change.

Friends, this is so essential for us. It is the difference between genuine remorse and empty words. And genuine remorse is at the heart of covenant renewal.

At the end of Nehemiah 9, Ezra turns the attention on the people standing right there in front of him and including himself in that. They had a long history of God's goodness and mercy expressed to them.

[25 : 33] They instead had a long history of having unrepentant hearts and lack of change and renewal. Ezra, in praying this prayer at the end, knew his place in history.

Do we? This is a church that has a Bible teaching history that we're proud of. We sit in the biblically rich reformed evangelical tradition.

We've had many great names in our pulpit. We have access to the very best of Christian literature, conferences, Bible colleges. We are part of a diocese with a very strong doctrinal and gospel heritage.

We have access to any number of Bible translations in the English language. We have the word of God. We know the word of God. It's even on some of our laps.

And for those who it's not, make sure it is. Some of the most sobering words of scripture are in Matthew chapter 11 where Jesus pronounces judgment on two cities amongst God's people who did not repent when they were confronted with the Lord Jesus, the word of God.

[26 : 54] He said to them, it would be better off for those other two pagan cities up to the north who have never been experienced the gospel, never even had me in their midst.

It would be better for them on the day of judgment. The principle is, he who has been given much, much is expected. Imagine Jesus saying on the day of judgment, woe to you Chatswood, it would be better for Kabul Afghanistan than for you on the day of judgment.

Or, woe to you St. Paul's Chatswood, it would be better for the Lakemba mosque on the day of judgment than it would be for you. some very sobering words.

And in case you think I am removing myself from this, there's some very sobering words for me personally in James chapter 3 verse 1, not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

every time I call others to obedience as I'm calling you to right now and don't do it myself, I'm compounding judgment for myself.

[28 : 17] To those who have much, much as is expected. When I call us to renew covenant faithfulness with Jesus, what I'm not saying here this morning is take a deep breath and say, here goes, I'm going to give it my best shot, I'm going to pull up my socks.

That's legalism. That's not what I'm calling you to. What I'm saying is in view of the history of God's grace and mercy, with such a God as this, there is hope that I will get the help that I need and when

I fail and repent, he will forgive me and take me back.

I will continue to press on in the promises that I have made to live in such a way that I'll proclaim the Lord's death until he returns. The grace of the Lord Jesus fuels our covenant renewal.

So friends, I'm going to lead us into a time of covenant renewal now. As I've said, do not make much less of your sin.

As we do this, I'm very much reminded of two things that are at the heartbeat of Charles Simeon's spiritual life, a growing downward in humility and a growing upward in adoration and communion with God.

[29 : 50] I once said in a sermon that the remarkable thing about humiliation and adoration in the mind of Charles Simeon is that they were inseparable. They go together. For him, adoration of Christ only grew in the freshly ploughed soil of humiliation for sin.

He actually labored to know his true sinfulness, not to excuse it, not to make less of it. But he had no fear of turning up every sin in his life and looking upon it with grief and with hatred because he had such a vision of Christ's sufficiency.

And so with those words, words from God fresh in our mind in the example of Charles Simeon, will you bow your heads and pray with me? Great and awesome God, we confess our sins this day. You have been gracious not only in the great moments of redemptive history, but in our small history, pouring out reformation and revival in the lives of many.

You have given us your spirit, drawing us to yourself. You have been so good to us, Father. You have given us the Bible, preachers, community group leaders, courses, literature, conferences, theological colleges, mission societies, strong churches and constant exposure to the communion of the saints.

[31 : 30] All in the part of a world where there is relatively little strife compared to many parts and comparatively many freedoms compared to many parts. We can just get in our car and go to Courant.

You are so good to us. But we have been wicked. We have not feared your word. We have not acted as if we believed the promises or trembled as if we feared your judgment.

We enjoy all the trinkets of a passing society and have not lived with eternity's values and views despite the warning you have given us, our Lord.

We have loved ourselves. ourselves. While confessing that we are to love you with all of our heart and our soul and our mind and our strength and to love our neighbours as ourselves, so many of our decisions reveal that we don't.

They have really been bound up with self-interest and self-fulfillment and family promotion. We love money more than service. We want self-fulfillment more than self-doubt.

[32 : 46] We entertain ourselves to death. We have so many things to do that we can't do the important things. We have often drifted towards prayerlessness. We've got multiple Bibles that are hardly read, a domesticated gospel, little passion for holiness and righteousness, worship and the glory of God.

We've drifted towards coolness in all things of the faith so that we exercise them with a sense of duty but no longer a delight. We've become two people.

Outwardly there is still a kind of conformity to expected piety while inwardly we succumb to jealousy and rivalries. Our pleasures are bound up with who wins in the football or shopping or the opera or travel, much more than they are bound up with someone coming to you.

Sometimes, Lord, we even doubt your word. We go through the motions but we no longer believe that Christ is building his church.

We confess, Lord God, that frequently we succumb to covetousness. Some of us dishonour our parents. Some of us really do not hunger for purity of mind or heart.

[34 : 05] We make little of some sin. We make excuses for our failure. We point the finger and we blame others. We're affronted when someone points out to us the obvious sin that we harbour.

We hear your voice saying, be holy for I am holy but it does not stir us. We don't grieve over sin as you do. But you are holy and you are pure.

Will you not forgive us our sins, most mirthful Father, by the merits of the Lord Jesus Christ? Will you not renew a right spirit within us?

Will you not renew your covenant faithfulness to us? Have mercy on us and revive us, we pray, for the glory of your name. Amen.

Amen. Affie B woh tu to the heavenly new work and you can see.
[35 : 35] Let's see.