

Nehemiah: The Work Before Us

REMEMBER WHO GOD IS

Nehemiah 9–10 | November 1, 2026

WHEN REMEMBERING BECOMES PERSONAL

Last Sunday, we watched something remarkable happen in Jerusalem. The walls had been rebuilt. The gates were in place. The people had been counted. But the most important work wasn't happening on the walls anymore. It was happening in the hearts of God's people.

They gathered together and asked Ezra to bring the Book of the Law of Moses. They listened as it was read. They sought to understand what God had said. And when they understood, they began to respond.

Last Sunday, I invited you into our **Torah Challenge**—seven days of selected readings from Genesis through Deuteronomy. If you've participated, you've seen some remarkable things.

In Genesis, God creates a good world and provides for humanity. Almost immediately, Adam and Eve question His goodness and disobey.

God calls Abraham and makes covenant promises of blessing, descendants, and land—promises Abraham cannot fulfill himself.

Then we went to Exodus. God hears the cries of His people in Egypt. He confronts Pharaoh, provides the Passover, and leads His people through the sea on dry ground. And before very long, the same people who watched God deliver them from slavery begin complaining, doubting, and questioning whether God can be trusted.

At Sinai, God gives His Law. In Leviticus, He provides for atonement.

We saw rebellion in the wilderness and heard Moses call Israel to love God and choose life. Did you notice the pattern?

There's a pattern running through all of it. **God provides. His people rebel. God shows mercy. His people rebel again. And God remains faithful.**

Now, it's easy to read those stories and shake our heads at the Israelites. How could they doubt God after seeing the Red Sea part? How could they complain after receiving bread from heaven? How could they turn away from the God who had delivered them from slavery? But perhaps those aren't the most important questions. Perhaps the more uncomfortable question is this: **How different are we?**

We know what God has done for us. We know the mercy He has shown us. We know the grace we've received through Jesus Christ. And yet, how often do we find ourselves doubting Him, disobeying Him, or simply forgetting His goodness?

Here's the question I want us to consider this morning.

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU REALIZE GOD HAS BEEN MORE FAITHFUL TO YOU THAN YOU HAVE BEEN TO HIM?

Don't answer that too quickly. Because I think the way we answer that question reveals quite a bit about how we understand God, ourselves, and the grace we've received.

In Nehemiah 9, God's people are doing what we've done this week: remembering their history.

Creation, Abraham, Egypt, Sinai, the wilderness, the Promised Land. But notice this:

They're not simply telling one another their history. They're praying their history back to God. Nehemiah 9 is one of Scripture's longest prayers. As they remember His faithfulness, they recognize their unfaithfulness.

We're covering 77 verses in two chapters, so we'll read key passages and trace the larger story. A seven-day reading guide will help you explore both chapters this week.

[READ NEHEMIAH 9:1–3]

They gather fasting, wearing sackcloth and dust—signs of mourning and humility—and confess their sins and those of their ancestors.

And in verse 3, they spend a quarter of the day reading from the Book of the Law and another quarter confessing their sins and worshipping the Lord. Think about that. They aren't simply having an emotional experience. Their confession is rooted in their encounter with God's Word. And I think there's an important distinction we need to make here.

It's possible to stir someone's emotions without ever seeing their life transformed. I learned something about that during my years in youth ministry. I remember preaching messages to teenagers about the things we needed to get out of our lives. The sinful habits, the destructive choices, the things that were pulling us away from God.

And I had what I thought was a pretty effective illustration. I'd put a big trash can at the front of the room. And I'd challenge the students to bring the things they needed to surrender to God and throw them into that trash can. We'd leave it there for several weeks. And you wouldn't believe some of the things we found in that trash can!

Cigarettes. Chewing tobacco. Alcohol. Weapons! Some things probably warranted a call to parents—but I didn't know whose they were. I was more concerned with spectacle than accountability.

We'd gather everything up, take it outside, and burn it. And I'm telling you, those could be powerful moments. There were tears. There were prayers. There were students making commitments. And I would stand there watching it happen, convinced that God was doing something extraordinary. And listen, I believe the Holy Spirit really was working in some of those moments. I don't want to dismiss that.

But here's what I began to realize over time. **Far too many of those students went right back to the very things they had thrown into that trash can.**

The cigarettes were gone, but not the addiction. The alcohol was gone, but not the desire. The objects were gone; the heart hadn't necessarily changed.

I had become pretty good at stirring emotions. I could preach a message that made students feel convicted. I turned on “preacher voice,” speaking in a way that was unnatural to my normal speaking. I could create an

atmosphere that made surrender feel urgent, low lighting, unique technical touches. I could persuade them to walk forward and throw something away.

But I couldn't change their hearts. And sometimes, if I'm being fair to myself, I think I confused the visible response with lasting spiritual transformation. **I had learned how to create a moment. But I couldn't manufacture repentance.**

And that's an important lesson for the church. Because we can do the same thing in adult worship. We can create the right atmosphere. We can choose the right music. We can tell the right story. We can make people cry.

We can persuade people to come forward or make public commitments.

And none of those things is necessarily wrong. God can work through all of them. But we must never confuse the intensity of a moment with the depth of a person's transformation.

Tears are not the same thing as repentance. And a powerful moment is not necessarily a changed life.

Now, notice what's different in Nehemiah 9. The people aren't responding to a carefully manufactured emotional experience. They're responding to the Word of God. They've heard what God has said. They've remembered what God has done. They've recognized how they've failed Him. And they're confessing their sins before Him.

In chapter 10, they also make concrete commitments. Those promises won't finally change their hearts, but their response teaches us something essential.

God's Word is not given merely to make us feel something. It is given to reveal who God is, expose what is wrong in us, and call us to a life of faith and obedience.

Genuine repentance begins with remembering who God is.

That brings us to our first truth.

1. REMEMBERING GOD'S FAITHFULNESS REVEALS OUR UNFAITHFULNESS.

Nehemiah 9:1–37

Notice how this prayer begins. The Levites don't begin by listing everything Israel has done wrong. They begin by declaring who God is.

[READ NEHEMIAH 9:5b–8]

What a magnificent beginning to this prayer. They acknowledge that the Lord alone is God. He made the heavens, the earth, the seas, and everything in them. He gives life to all things. The heavenly host worships Him.

And then they remember Abraham. God chose him, called him, made a covenant with him, and kept His promise. Notice the emphasis. God made the promise. God kept the promise. And the people are remembering that their entire existence as a nation was rooted in God's gracious initiative.

Before they had a land, they had a promise. Before they had a nation, they had a God who had chosen to show them grace. And before they could ever demonstrate their faithfulness to Him, He had already demonstrated His faithfulness to them.

THE PRAYER REMEMBERS WHAT GOD HAS DONE

In verses 9–15, God sees their suffering, hears their cries, confronts Pharaoh, divides the sea, guides them, gives His Law, and provides bread and water. Sound familiar from this week's readings?

The people aren't recounting these events merely to remember what happened. They're remembering what God did. **They didn't rehearse their history so they could remember how bad their ancestors had been. They rehearsed their history so they could remember how good God had been.**

How often do we deliberately remember God's faithfulness?

We remember disappointments. We remember the people who hurt us. We remember the prayers that weren't answered the way we hoped. We remember the circumstances that frightened us. And sometimes we remember those things far more clearly than we remember the mercy and provision of God.

Now, I'm not suggesting that we pretend difficult experiences didn't happen. Some of us have walked through genuinely painful circumstances. Some of us are walking through them right now. And faith doesn't require us to deny the reality of suffering. But here's the question:

Have we allowed our difficulties to become so large in our memories that we've forgotten the faithfulness of God?

Think about your own life for a moment. Think about the ways God has provided for you. Think about the people He has placed in your life. Think about the doors He has opened. Think about the times He sustained you when you weren't sure you could take another step. Think about the prayers He has answered. And above all, think about the mercy you've received through Jesus Christ.

We can become so focused on what we wish God would do next that we forget to thank Him for what He's already done. And sometimes the first step toward renewed faithfulness is simply remembering. But here's where this prayer becomes uncomfortable.

REMEMBERING GOD'S GOODNESS EXPOSES OUR SIN

Because the more clearly we remember God's faithfulness, the more honestly we must confront our own unfaithfulness. Look at what happens next.

[READ NEHEMIAH 9:16–17]

God had been faithful. They grew stubborn, refused to listen, forgot His wonders, and even wanted to return to Egypt. God delivered them from slavery—and they wanted to go back!

But before we become too critical, consider how often we do something similar. God delivers us from the guilt and bondage of sin through Jesus Christ. And then we find ourselves returning to attitudes, habits, and patterns of behavior that belong to the life from which we've been rescued.

We know bitterness is destructive, but we hold onto it.

We know pride is sinful, but we defend it. We know God calls us to generosity, but we cling tightly to what we possess. We know we're called to forgive, but we rehearse the offense again and again. And sometimes we become so comfortable with those patterns that we stop recognizing them as disobedience.

You remember Inigo Montoya from *The Princess Bride*, don't you? He's spent his entire life pursuing the six-fingered man who killed his father. And throughout the movie, we hear that famous line: "Hello. My name is Inigo Montoya." You know the rest! But near the end of the movie, after he's finally accomplished what he's spent his life pursuing, he makes a remarkable admission.

He's been in the revenge business so long that he doesn't really know what to do with the rest of his life. Think about that.

Revenge had become more than something he wanted. **It had become part of who he was.** And I wonder how often we do something similar.

We hold onto a grudge for so long that we can't imagine life without it. We defend our pride so consistently that we no longer recognize it as pride. We become so accustomed to certain attitudes and behaviors that we stop asking whether they honor God.

Sometimes the hardest sins to surrender are the ones we've allowed to become part of our identity.

And that's why remembering God's faithfulness is so important. His goodness exposes the things we've learned to excuse in ourselves.

We may not ask to return to Egypt, but we can still long for what Christ delivered us from.

There's something uncomfortable about remembering God's faithfulness. Because the longer I remember how faithful He has been to me, the harder it becomes to excuse the ways I've been unfaithful to Him.

I remember His patience, and I have to confront my impatience.

I remember His generosity, and I have to confront my selfishness. I remember His forgiveness, and I have to confront the grudges I've refused to release. I remember His faithfulness, and I have to confront the promises I've made and broken. And suddenly, remembering isn't simply an exercise in gratitude. **It becomes an invitation to repentance.**

But look again at the second half of verse 17. The people declare that God is forgiving, gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in faithful love. And then they say something extraordinary. **“You did not abandon them.”**

They were stubborn. God was gracious. They were rebellious. God was compassionate. They forgot Him. He did not abandon them.

THE MOST REMARKABLE THING ABOUT ISRAEL'S HISTORY ISN'T HOW OFTEN GOD'S PEOPLE FAILED HIM. IT'S HOW OFTEN GOD REFUSED TO ABANDON THEM.

Now, we need to be careful. God's patience does not mean He is indifferent toward sin. Israel experienced real consequences for disobedience. The exile itself was evidence of God's righteous judgment. But even in judgment, God remained faithful to His covenant purposes. And the pattern continues through the rest of the chapter.

He gives them the land; they grow complacent and turn away. Oppression comes; they cry out; God shows mercy. Then the cycle repeats. His patience is astonishing.

THE CONFESSION WE DON'T WANT TO MAKE

Now, look at Nehemiah 9:33.

[READ NEHEMIAH 9:33]

This may be the prayer's most important confession. God has been righteous and faithful.

They acknowledge their wrongdoing without rewriting history or blaming God. They take responsibility.

And I wonder whether that's one of the hardest things for us to do. Because we have become very skilled at explaining our behavior. We know how to justify our anger. We know how to defend our words. We know how to blame our circumstances. We know how to point out what someone else did first. And sometimes those explanations contain legitimate details. But they can also become ways of avoiding responsibility for our own sin.

Let me ask you something. **When was the last time you confessed a sin without adding an excuse?**

Not, “Lord, forgive me for losing my temper, but You know how frustrating that person is.” Not, “Lord, forgive me for what I said, but You know what they said to me first.” Not, “Lord, forgive me for neglecting my responsibilities, but I've had a lot going on.”

Just, “Lord, I was wrong.” “I sinned.” “I have no excuse.” “Please forgive me.” That's the kind of honesty we see in Nehemiah 9. And here's the beautiful thing. We don't have to be afraid to confess our sins to a God who has already revealed Himself as gracious, compassionate, and forgiving.

His mercy is not permission to continue in sin. **His mercy is the very reason we can turn from sin and return to Him.** And now, we're ready to see what happens when confession becomes more than words.

Their confession now leads toward renewed obedience in Nehemiah 10.

2. GENUINE REPENTANCE MUST LEAD TO A CHANGED LIFE.

Nehemiah 9:38–10:39

[READ NEHEMIAH 9:38; 10:28–29]

Notice this. Having remembered and confessed, they make specific commitments to obey. In chapter 10, they address their relationships, their observance of the Sabbath, their financial responsibilities, and the worship of God. Their repentance is going to affect how they live.

Repentance isn't simply feeling sorry about what we've done. It's turning away from sin and turning toward God.

And that means repentance ought to become visible. If I've genuinely repented of bitterness, I cannot continue nurturing the same grudge. If I've genuinely repented of dishonesty, I cannot continue defending my deception. If I've genuinely repented of selfishness, something ought to change about how I treat others.

REPENTANCE BECOMES VISIBLE WHEN WHAT WE BELIEVE BEGINS TO CHANGE HOW WE LIVE.

But there's a problem. Remember that trash can I told you about earlier? Here's what I eventually learned. You can throw something into a trash can and still carry it in your heart. You can burn an object without surrendering the desire. And you can make a sincere promise to God without possessing the strength to keep it. That's what makes Nehemiah 10 so sobering.

The people make genuine commitments. But when we reach Nehemiah 13, we'll discover that many of those very same problems have returned. Their promises weren't enough. And neither are ours. Because our greatest problem isn't simply that we need better intentions. **We need new hearts.** That's exactly what God promised through the prophets.

Jeremiah 31 promises a new covenant; Ezekiel 36, new hearts and God's Spirit within His people. Both point to Jesus, who came to accomplish what we could not.

He lived in perfect obedience, died for our sins, and rose again so that through faith in Him we could be forgiven, made new, and empowered by His Spirit to walk in obedience.

Our hope cannot ultimately rest in the strength of our commitments. Our hope rests in the faithfulness of the God who keeps His promises.

REMEMBER, CONFESS, RESPOND

Let me ask you one final time, **What do you do when you realize God has been more faithful to you than you have been to Him?**

You remember His faithfulness. You confess your unfaithfulness. And you respond to His grace. But don't leave here thinking the answer is simply to try harder. The answer is to turn to Jesus Christ.

Perhaps there's a grudge, an excused sin, or an area you've refused to surrender. Don't stop at feeling bad or making another promise. Confess it, trust His mercy, and take the next step by His Spirit.

Church, the most important thing about our story isn't how often we've failed. **It's the faithfulness of the God who has made a way for us to be forgiven and transformed through Jesus Christ.**

There's a line in an old hymn that may be my favorite line in all of hymnody. Robert Robinson wrote in *Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing*:

“Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love.”

Do you hear the honesty in that? He loves God. He knows God's goodness. He remembers God's faithfulness. And yet, he recognizes something terribly wrong within his own heart. He's prone to wander. He's prone to leave the very God he loves.

Isn't that the story of Nehemiah 9? And if we're honest, isn't that sometimes our story? But here's what I love about that hymn. Robinson doesn't simply confess his wandering and promise to try harder. He asks God to take his heart and secure it for Himself.

And that brings me back to that trash can from my youth ministry days. We were asking those students to surrender things. And sometimes, we were so focused on what they were putting into the trash can that we missed what mattered most. **God wasn't simply calling them to surrender the things in their lives. He was calling them to surrender their hearts.** And church, that's what He calls us to do today.

Not merely to feel something. Not merely to throw something away. Not merely to make another promise. But to come to Jesus Christ with our wandering hearts, trusting the One who forgives our sins, makes us new, and holds us fast by His grace.

Our hope isn't that we'll never be prone to wander. Our hope is in the faithful Savior who can keep us.

What do you do when you realize God has been more faithful to you than you have been to Him?

**Remember His faithfulness. Confess your unfaithfulness.
Respond to His grace.**

And give Him your heart.

Let's pray.