

Nehemiah 8:9-9:37 One More Chance

A sermon delivered at Calvary Chapel DC Metro
www.calvarydcmetro.org

There is one big lesson to learn this morning: God is the giver of good gifts.

He gives to us things that are good, and right, and beautiful, and then we drop them, they slip out of our hands and shatter in a thousand pieces on the floor. And then, He gives back to us again and we get our muddy, filthy fingerprints all over it and ruin it. So, He gives to us again and we drop it again, or we set it down and get distracted and go wandering off after other things.

Even when we blow it and wreck or neglect what He has given, God gives us second chances, and thirds, and fourths... He is long-suffering, patient and kind. He is merciful and He is willing to forgive if we humble ourselves and ask.

But, He's not just a doormat for us to walk all over – He is also just and fair, and if we don't see the need for change in our lives, He will allow consequences to come our way – sooner or later there's a price to pay for persistent rebellion against God.

This morning we see both the mercy of God and the justice of God as we look back on the history of Israel.

Remember, the events we're seeing in Nehemiah involve Jews who had returned to Jerusalem, a city that had been destroyed. Invading armies had captured the city and carried away its people and its wealth. Now, several decades later, some of their children and grandchildren have returned to rebuild. When we pick things up in Chapter Eight, they're gathered to celebrate what they've accomplished and to read the Scriptures.

9 And Nehemiah, who *was* the governor, Ezra the priest *and* scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day *is* holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn nor weep." For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the Law.

10 Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for *this* day *is* holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

11 So the Levites quieted all the people, saying, "Be still, for the day *is* holy; do not be grieved." 12 And all the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly, **because** they understood the words that were declared to them.

Did you catch that? When they heard what the Bible says they were broken. It shredded them emotionally, they saw the difference between what God said and what their lives had been like.

Have you ever had one of those moments? I know we're all wired differently, and we all show our emotions differently -- we live in a culture where 'real men' don't cry unless it's at their mom's funeral or something, but you find men crying all over in the Bible, and it's not because they're weak or soft, their tears are almost always shed when they're thinking about God.

Those tears are often an external sign of the cleansing that either needs to happen, or that is happening, on the inside. It's God scrubbing away the gunk of our lives.

The tears being shed in Jerusalem this day were a sign of the conviction that was going on inside of the people. But, Nehemiah and the other leaders said, "don't mourn or weep today, that puts the focus on *you*. First we need to celebrate *God* and what He has done for us." And once they had done that, there would be another opportunity to mourn, weep, and confess sins.

13 Now on the second day the heads of the fathers' *houses* of all the people, with the priests and Levites, were gathered to Ezra the scribe, in order to understand the words of the Law. 14 And they found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, 15 and that they should announce and proclaim in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, "Go out to the mountain, and bring olive branches, branches of oil trees, myrtle branches, palm branches, and branches of leafy trees, to make booths, as *it is* written."

16 Then the people went out and brought *them* and made themselves booths, each one on the roof of his house, or in their courtyards or the courts of the house of God, and in the open square of the Water Gate and in the open square of the Gate of Ephraim. 17 So the whole assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and sat under the booths; for since the days of Joshua the son of Nun until that day the children of Israel had not done so. And there was very great gladness. 18 Also day by day, from the first day until the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God. And they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day *there was* a sacred assembly, according to the *prescribed* manner.

This may not sound like much to you, but it is actually incredibly significant. God had given the Feast of Tabernacles to the people of Israel after He delivered them from Egypt, as they were on their way into the Promised Land. It was a seven-day feast celebrated in the seventh month, and it was supposed to be observed every year. God tells them why in Leviticus 23:

43 "**that** your generations may know that I made the children of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: *I am* the LORD your God.'"

In other words, the point of the Feast was to remember what God had done for the people when He delivered them from a foreign power and brought them to the Promised Land. Obviously then, it's quite fitting for the current circumstances as well – God has just

brought these men and women and their families out of the place that they were taken as captives and brought them back to this very same land.

But stop for a minute and realize – He had already delivered them once from Egypt. Why did He have to deliver them again, this time from Persia? Why were they all gathered together rebuilding what had already been done once? Because they had lost sight of what He did the first time – as a nation they had wandered away from the God they had once known and worshipped.

Has that ever happened in your life? Have you ever had to try to rebuild something that God gave you in the first place and you mistreated it? He gave you something nice and you neglected it or broke it?

Fortunately for them, and for us, He is the God of “one more chance.” As they lived in their booths that week and heard more reading from the Scriptures, that fact became more and more apparent to them.

1 Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads.

Now is the time for mourning and weeping as they realize what they’ve done.

2 Then those of Israelite lineage separated themselves from all foreigners; and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. 3 And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for one-fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshipped the LORD their God.

Notice that pattern – they heard what God had to say, and then they confessed and worshipped. Confession comes from the realization of who we are – imperfect human beings with aspirations of greatness and purity and love that we never quite seem to reach. Whether it’s because we’re just in a bad mood and feeling ugly, irritable, or moody; whether it’s because of some health issue that’s plaguing us, or whether because we just woke up on the wrong side of the bed and haven’t had our coffee. Whatever the reason, we fall short of our greatest hopes and mental images of who we really want to be.

And if we are open to God, we confess that. We say, God, please forgive me for the way I treat You and the way I treat others.

But after the confession is worship. We worship because we recognize that God doesn't ever have to ask for our forgiveness. He is love – He never fails. He never has a bad day. And though we are accountable to Him, though He is in authority over us, He is patient with us and frequently does not give us what we deserve.

That's a lesson they were learning personally, but as the Scriptures were read to them, they noticed that's who He had been to them and their ancestors throughout time – it's who He is by nature.

4 Then Jeshua, (and these other seven guys) Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, *and* Chenani stood on the stairs of the Levites and cried out with a loud voice to the LORD their God. 5 And the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabniah, Sherebiah, Hodijah, Shebaniah, *and* Pethahiah, said:

“Stand up *and* bless the LORD your God
Forever and ever!

“Blessed be Your glorious name,
Which is exalted above all blessing and praise!
6 You alone *are* the LORD;
You have made heaven,
The heaven of heavens, with all their host,
The earth and everything on it,
The seas and all that is in them,
And You preserve them all.
The host of heaven worships You.

They start with worship, just like we start our services with worship, and they stand – just like we stand in worship.

And notice the content of their worship - they reflect on God's name, on His character, and on His creation. We need to start with an accurate understanding of WHO we are worshipping, praying to, and serving.

And then, they recall the history of God's relationship with their nation from the beginning.

7 “You *are* the LORD God,
Who chose Abram,
And brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans,
And gave him the name Abraham;
8 You found his heart faithful before You,
And made a covenant with him
To give the land of the Canaanites,
The Hittites, the Amorites,
The Perizzites, the Jebusites,
And the Girgashites—
To give *it* to his descendants.
You have performed Your words,
For You *are* righteous.

“Look at what You did!” they say, “And remember how great it was. We’re standing in that land right now.” And then they move on to the time in Egypt and what God did through Moses.

9 “You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt,
And heard their cry by the Red Sea.
10 You showed signs and wonders against Pharaoh,
Against all his servants,
And against all the people of his land.
For You knew that they acted proudly against them.
So You made a name for Yourself, as *it is* this day.
11 And You divided the sea before them,
So that they went through the midst of the sea on the dry land;
And their persecutors You threw into the deep,
As a stone into the mighty waters.
12 Moreover You led them by day with a cloudy pillar,
And by night with a pillar of fire,
To give them light on the road
Which they should travel.

God delivered them out of Egypt by using Moses as their leader – God did massive, mighty, miracles to set them free. And then, He told them even more about Himself – giving the Ten Commandments and other instructions.

13 “You came down also on Mount Sinai,
And spoke with them from heaven,
And gave them just ordinances and true laws,
Good statutes and commandments.
14 You made known to them Your holy Sabbath,
And commanded them precepts, statutes and laws,
By the hand of Moses Your servant.
15 You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger,
And brought them water out of the rock for their thirst,
And told them to go in to possess the land
Which You had sworn to give them.

As they traveled across the desert from Egypt to Israel, God miraculously provided food and water for them.

He had delivered them from slavery, given them a place to go, and everything that was necessary to get there. He was taking care of everything.

16 “**But** they and our fathers acted proudly,
Hardened their necks,
And did not heed Your commandments.
17 They refused to obey,

And they were not mindful of Your wonders
That You did among them.
But they hardened their necks,
And in their rebellion
They appointed a leader
To return to their bondage.

Here's the first mention of how people responded to all the good things God was trying to do, and how they responded to the directions He had given – they actually tried to go right back to what He had just saved them from.

And now look at how He responds:

But You *are* God,
Ready to pardon,
Gracious and merciful,
Slow to anger,
Abundant in kindness,
And did not forsake them.

18 “Even when they made a molded calf for themselves,
And said, ‘This *is* your god
That brought you up out of Egypt,’
And worked great provocations,
19 Yet in Your manifold mercies
You did not forsake them in the wilderness.
The pillar of the cloud did not depart from them by day,
To lead them on the road;
Nor the pillar of fire by night,
To show them light,
And the way they should go.
20 You also gave Your good Spirit to instruct them,
And did not withhold Your manna from their mouth,
And gave them water for their thirst.
21 Forty years You sustained them in the wilderness;
They lacked nothing;
Their clothes did not wear out
And their feet did not swell.

Even when they were being rebellious, God was still showing them mercy! For forty years, He continued to guide them and provide for them.

Can you relate to that? Can you see times in your life when you have not been faithful to God, but He continued His kindness to you? I know I can.

It didn't stop there for Israel; God was actually trying to give them even more!

22 “Moreover You gave them kingdoms and nations,
And divided them into districts.
So they took possession of the land of Sihon,
The land of the king of Heshbon,
And the land of Og king of Bashan.
23 You also multiplied their children as the stars of heaven,
And brought them into the land
Which You had told their fathers
To go in and possess.
24 So the people went in
And possessed the land;
You subdued before them the inhabitants of the land,
The Canaanites,
And gave them into their hands,
With their kings
And the people of the land,
That they might do with them as they wished.
25 And they took strong cities and a rich land,
And possessed houses full of all goods,
Cisterns *already* dug, vineyards, olive groves,
And fruit trees in abundance.
So they ate and were filled and grew fat,
And delighted themselves in Your great goodness.

Are you picking up on that? God gives good gifts. He doesn't shop at the dollar store. He is generous and even luxurious. Can you agree with that? Have you ever been blessed by God in this way? Has He ever done “exceedingly, abundantly, beyond all you could hope or imagine?” Is there anything that you look at in your life and say – the only reason I have this is because of God.

Do you still praise Him for that? Do you still remember it? Because too often, He gives us a great gift and we forget all about the Giver – that's what we see next:

26 “Nevertheless they were disobedient
And rebelled against You,
Cast Your law behind their backs
And killed Your prophets, who testified against them
To turn them to Yourself;
And they worked great provocations.

So now, finally, after extending grace after grace after grace, something has to be done lest they think there are no real consequences, lest they think God is all bark and no bite.

God isn't going to let Himself be walked all over, there is love, there is mercy, but there is also justice and sometimes, if people don't respond to repeated verbal warnings, you have to fire a warning shot to get their attention.

27 Therefore You delivered them into the hand of their enemies,
Who oppressed them;
And in the time of their trouble,
When they cried to You,
You heard from heaven;
And according to Your abundant mercies
You gave them deliverers who saved them
From the hand of their enemies.

Awesome! The intent of the discipline was always to bring them back to where they belonged – they were wandering away, and they needed to know that there are dangers out there. And it worked. Sometimes you get your hand slapped in life and it's a good thing.

Unfortunately, we are quick to forget the lessons of the past.

28 "But after they had rest,
They again did evil before You.
Therefore You left them in the hand of their enemies,
So that they had dominion over them;
Yet when they returned and cried out to You,
You heard from heaven;
And many times You delivered them according to Your mercies,
29 And testified against them,
That You might bring them back to Your law.
Yet they acted proudly,
And did not heed Your commandments,
But sinned against Your judgments,
'Which if a man does, he shall live by them.'
And they shrugged their shoulders,
Stiffened their necks,
And would not hear.
30 Yet for many years You had patience with them,
And testified against them by Your Spirit in Your prophets.
Yet they would not listen;
Therefore You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands.

Over the course of centuries the Israelites drifted away from God then came running back, but each time they drifted, they drifted a little farther from the past, so each time the pain they experienced was a little more severe.

But looking back they realize -

31 Nevertheless in Your great mercy
You did not utterly consume them nor forsake them;
For You *are* God, gracious and merciful.

32 “Now therefore, our God,
The great, the mighty, and awesome God,
Who keeps covenant and mercy:
Do not let all the trouble seem small before You
That has come upon us,
Our kings and our princes,
Our priests and our prophets,
Our fathers and on all Your people,
From the days of the kings of Assyria until this day.

33 However You *are* just in all that has befallen us;
For You have dealt faithfully,
But we have done wickedly.

34 Neither our kings nor our princes,
Our priests nor our fathers,
Have kept Your law,
Nor heeded Your commandments and Your testimonies,
With which You testified against them.

35 For they have not served You in their kingdom,
Or in the many good *things* that You gave them,
Or in the large and rich land which You set before them;
Nor did they turn from their wicked works.

This is confession – it is admitting, we have done wrong. We have received what we deserve, but You, You O God are gracious, merciful, patient and kind.

36 “Here we *are*, servants today!
And the land that You gave to our fathers,
To eat its fruit and its bounty,
Here we *are*, servants in it!

37 And it yields much increase to the kings
You have set over us,
Because of our sins;
Also they have dominion over our bodies and our cattle
At their pleasure;
And we *are* in great distress.

They’re sitting there in front of God recognizing the just consequences of their sin, but also recognizing the mercy of the God who brought them back to this city, this Promised Land.

I wonder if the same thing is going on for any of you? You’ve also been hearing the Scriptures read this morning – has that caused you to reflect on any of the issues in your life?

Have you seen the goodness of God and the tendency of your own heart to wander?

If so, you need to know that God is patient, He gives one more chance. We may wish He didn't have too – we may be working to rebuild things in our lives that He already gave us once, but which were torn down over time. But the good news is, He is willing – He knows our weaknesses and He is willing to forgive.

You've just heard the story of how that played out time and time again in the nation of Israel. And now, this is your chance to confess and worship – to admit your failings and to praise Him for His goodness. Take a minute and do that now as we pray and worship.