

who is our great Deliverer and Savior, the light of the World who gave the Word, the Bible, which is now our cloud and pillar for direction and real living.

Look at verse 13, “You gave them just ordinances and true laws, good statutes...” God’s laws are an expression of His goodness. They were given so that we can know life in its truest sense. (V.29) “Obey them and find life.” Know God’s truth and live them out and really live! God’s discipline is an expression of His goodness. (V.27) “So He delivered them into the hand of their oppressors.” We live with the idea that if you love me then you will allow me to do whatever I want. We think discipline, laws, are far from goodness. But God is good in being faithful to discipline his children. A parent who refuses to discipline his child does not love them. Whom the Lord loves, he disciplines. In a sense he is saying, “I love you way too much to let you get away with that.” God will never give us the privilege of sinning and having it our own way. It even got so bad for the Israelites that verse 27. God had to discipline them by kicking them out of their own Promised Land and sending them into exile. It was as if God was saying, “you enjoy living like a pagan, then I’ll let you live with the pagans. It was Babylon that taught them to appreciate the blessings from God that they have ungratefully taken for granted. It was a risky, but tough love. God loves us way too much to allow us to become spoiled children.

God is good. It’s easy for us to see that He provides, He guides, He delivers, He creates and chooses and sustains, but also good in His discipline and laws given. Much of the source of the rebellion that lurked underneath our soft fur, comes from not believing God is good. When we grumble and complain it gives evidence that we question God’s goodness, His fairness. When we demand our rights, what we are entitled too, we are not believing is God is good. When God takes something or someone from us and we grumble over what we’ve lost instead of what we have been able to enjoy we are not believing the goodness of God.

When the Israelites were in the desert and they encountered difficulty, verse 17, they appointed a leader to take them back to Egypt, back into slavery, back to oppression. They chose to believe a lie about God. They believed that God had abandoned them. They believe that God didn’t have their back, that God wouldn’t meet their needs. They believed the lie that God really wasn’t good. When I fear, when I doubt, When I sin When I run back to enslavement of past sins, I am believing a lie that God is not good. God is not great. God cannot come through. I run back to past slavery, forgetting its dark pain and instead remembering only the empty pleasures of that sin.

In verses 36-37 it admits how “we are slaves

today. The abundance of food God gave to them in the land (V.37) is now given to others. It’s another that rules over their bodies. Others have taken their wealth and resources, cattle to do as they please. Here is the point. You know you have believed a lie about the goodness of God and are enslaved to another false god when the harvest God intends for you is going to someone else. You are enslaved to a false God and believing the lie that God is not good when you do not have control over your own body, and lost control of resources God had intended for you to rule over and you are missing out on enjoying what God has promised us.

Do you want to break free from the crazy cycle? We all have a bit of rebel hiding underneath our skin. Are you willing to see it? admit it? Then see the goodness and greatness of God. Know God and believe the truth of His goodness. Stop believing the lies that He is not good. Confess your sin. Confess that He is good. Break free and walk in His joy. Walk in His goodness. As Josh comes and we sing this song, admit, confess where you have believed lies. Choose to see and walk in His goodness and the Joy of the Lord will be your strength.

“Reviving the Rebel”

Sermon Series: Nehemiah

NORTHVIEW BIBLE CHURCH



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Nehemiah 9

Pastor Norm Schwab

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This is our family dog, Lillie. She is very cute, gets an A+ in cuddling. She rarely barks or growls. She doesn’t shed hair. She is a much-loved member of our family. But as adorable as she is, even Lillie has a little rebel in her. Lillie does what she wants to do. It’s very risky to use live animals on stage but we are going to give this a shot. She does not like going into her kennel when we leave and often hides under Olivia’s bed. Let’s try it out. “Kennel, Lillie, kennel.” Ok, now however every single time we go for a “stroll” I purposely avoid the word that begins with “W” because she can spell that word. She gets very excited to obey and runs to where her leash in hanging and sits obediently for us to put her collar on. (Olivia brings out leash from pocket: “Walk, Lillie, Walk”). The rebel wants to do what they want to do. We all have a little rebel in us. (thank you Olivia)

God gave us the ability for us to choose to follow, choose to obey or not. Why? It seems wildly risky for a Creator to give that choice as God could have made us all obey Him like robots every time. But He didn’t because God actually gets more glory when we obey, not because we were forced. Involuntary love is not real love at all. God gave us the ability to love or reject Him, so when we obey in love and not due to coercion, God received far more glory.

Perhaps you are like Lillie and appear to others as very kind and cute and cuddly, but have a bit of rebel under that fur. You want to do what you want to do. You don’t like being told what to do. When the Master clearly gives you direction, you say “no”. Perhaps you have seen a cycle working in your life that goes like this. You want to do what you want to do and what God is saying is different, so you decide you don’t need God. You rebel. You follow your own path. How is that working for you? Perhaps OK for a while, but the slide down is so slow you don’t really notice it. Then you hit a low point, the bottom. A crisis hits. Your eyes are opened. You humble yourself. You turn back to God. You admit, “I was wrong God, you were right. I can’t do this on my own. I’m back to following your way. I’m trusting you. God blesses your obedience in your relationships, your attitudes, your contentment, work life, family life. Now back on track, you start to take your contentment for granted. You become spiritually proud of how well life is going for you, so you that pride goes before a fall. You disobey. You forget God. You don’t need God. A crisis hits. A low point and the crazy cycle hits again. Have you ever discovered yourself caught in the crazy cycle? Don’t feel like you are the only one who has been there.

This morning in Nehemiah chapter 9 we recall the history of the people of Israel. They were constantly stuck in that same rebellion, repentance, mercy, blessing, pride, fall cycle. Some people could care less about history. They didn’t like it in school and are doubtful if it could ever be of any practical use to them. However, in I Corinthians 10:11 Paul wrote, “Now these things happened to them as an example for our instruction today. Israel’s story of indifference, of rebellion is our story... but so too God continues to write His story that never changes. It is a story of His grace and forgiveness towards them and to us. Those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it. We all have a bit of rebel in us. What will it take to break free from the crazy cycle?

In chapter 9 of Nehemiah we read a very long prayer recounting a history lesson from God’s people Israel. Oh boy, some of you are thinking; Long winded prayers and history. I came to church on the wrong Sunday. I should be out at the lake with the rest of them this Memorial Day weekend. Why is it worth our time to review the history? Why study a history lesson? It is important because this history lesson tell us about God; who He is and what He has done. That may not seem like very helpful motivation for you to continue listening but it also reveals to us answers to the questions; Who am I? Where am I going? Why does this life matter? What is my purpose? Knowing who God is and what His plan is sets the foundation, the framework for very practical living.

Perhaps this summer you have decided to do some remodeling around your home. The carpenter you have hired shows up at the door at 8:00am sharp on Monday morning, complete with sledge hammer and Sawzall ready to go to work. Where should I start? And you say, just get in there and start doing your thing. Blast away and remodel this home. Ridiculous! With no plan, no schematic, no foundation there can’t be any practical helpful remodeling. Same for the person you says, “I don’t really want to learn about God, about theology, that’s not practical. Let me just give it my best shot. Let me just start bashing away and see what comes of it.” Ignorance of God lies at the root of sin, of apathy and lack of vibrancy in the spiritual life.

So, lets see Israel’s problem, which is also **our problem** from God’s Word. As I read a few verses in Nehemiah 9 look for that crazy cycle. READ Nehemiah 9:16-20 and 25b-28. Did you see it? When we ignore God’s soft promptings to do right and go His way and stop just doing what we want to do, we get ourselves stuck in the swirling vortex of the disobedience cycle where darkness

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hovers over our life. One minute I am obeying God, enjoying His presence, loving Him. He then blesses my life with a peace, a satisfaction and true rest that I haven't experience before. That smooth stability joins other parts of my life. Relationships are going better. I begin to relate more wisely with my employer, my attitude at work improves. Life become more stable. But then we wonder why it is that when life smoothes out, that my ball then gets so easily lost in the weeds? Why do I then take the good things, the blessings for granted. Why do I get more independent and life is good and I don't need God anymore? Do we think that God plan for us is to become more independent, less dependent on Him? I stop reading my Bible. I stop coming to youth group, to church. I give up on LIFE group. No prayer and the cycle of disobedience and rebellion begins to take root. This is the low point of the cycle but I don't really feel it, recognize it until God allows a crisis in my life to show me I can't make it on my own. We think the crisis is the low point, but it really comes just before it. That crisis is the beginning of God opening up my eyes to direct my pride, squash my ego and turn back to God. The cycle. I obey. Life is stable, comfortable. I am prideful. I take God for granted. I disobey. Crisis hits. I turn back to God. Life is stable, comfortable. Etc. etc.

In a minute I will read verse 5ff and you may have peaked at that section that describes the goodness and greatness of God. But verses 16 and 17 is surprising in the face of God's relentless mercy and lavish goodness. Despite lacking nothing Verse 21 says, "for 40 years in the wilderness they did not want" for anything. That same Hebrew word is used in Psalm 23. "The Lord is my Shepherd... here it is...I shall not want." Despite lacking nothing, they appreciated nothing. Lack of thankfulness is an indicator of a rebel. That is one reason Erin and I have always prayed for our kids to be thankful, because I have never once met a thankful rebel. The essence of rebellion is a lack of gratitude. People who are provided everything will struggle with appreciation. Parents, even if you have it, don't rob your kid's ability to develop appreciation by handing it all to them. The answer to teaching our kids thankfulness is not giving them more. If they have no skin in the game, it robs them of the honor, respect that comes from working. We have so much in America yet we have become the most discontent generation in our history.

Look again at verses 16 and 17 and also 27. It literally says in the Hebrew, "they stiffened their necks." They acted stubbornly, arrogantly, refused to listen, didn't remember. If you ever tried to drive a car with a thrown out neck you know what this is like. You long for a car with a rear backup camera because you can't turn around to see what is behind you. Verse 26 says they put the Law behind their backs. They intentionally put God's law in

their blind spot. They refused to be guided. (V.17b) They refused to look back and remember how God has worked in the past. Proud people with stiff necks can't look back, they can't see it.

How can I break out of that cycle? If we want to break out of the crazy cycle we have to first **see it**, see what we are doing, see our rebellion even if it looks mostly cute and furry to other people. For the people here in Nehemiah 9 they began to see it because they heard the Word of God. Let me read Nehemiah 9:1-5. It was now the 24 day of the seventh month. We find the people fasting and confessing in sackcloth and throwing dirt on themselves. Some astute reader may remember back on the first day of the month during the Feast of Trumpets in chapter 8:9, Ezra read God's word and the people were mourning and crying under conviction of God's Word. He told them then, this is not the time to be mourning over your sin. Yes that is good, but taking joy in the Lord is even better. For the joy of the Lord is your strength. Why, now 24 days later, this time is a call not for feasting and celebration, but confession and fasting? I believe as the Word of God was read they realized they needed to separate themselves from their old ways of doing life, separate themselves from sinful habits and lifestyles and attitudes. In the joy of the Lord's presence we see our need to change. It is that joy that motivates our change. But we must see ourselves rightly and see God rightly to make that change.

Look at verse 1. The people are fasting, in sackcloth and have thrown dirt on themselves. These are all outward expressions of something that is going on inside. People are wanting to express outwardly about what is happening inside. They put on sackcloth. It's like a goat hair gunny sack material, course and rough. They were not trying to dress for success. They were not trying to look respectable. What they wore was an expression of their confession. Some people wear clothes to reflect their attitude. Sweats and a T-shirt sends the message, I'm laid back, I want to be comfortable really don't care what people think of me. On a beautiful summer day one lady may be compelled to wear a bright yellow cotton dress to reflect happiness. Another person, whose life is raw with pain and darkness and loneliness may choose to wear dark clothes, dye their hair black, black makeup to reveal the empty agony inside. Some of us are content just to wear something that doesn't clash, but for many, how we dress reveals our hearts. And these people in verse 1 saw their need for change.

Just the week before they were feasting, but now they were fasting. They were going without food. When you fail to eat, your stomach starts to gurgle and send the message, "Hey, I'm empty down here. Feed me!" They are fasting purposely, not because they didn't have any food to eat, but fasting was a prompting to them to seek God earnestly. As they felt their physical hunger, they remembered to

stay hungry for God. Just as it was tempting to take food for granted, it is also tempting to take God for granted. They reminded themselves that they needed God like they needed to eat several times a day in order to live. They needed to stay hungry for God to really enjoy life.

What about verse 1 when they were throwing dirt on themselves? I think this is another outward expression, of them recognizing where they have come from. It humbly reminds them of the Creator (9:5) who crafted them from the dirt and a sobering reminder that these bodies will go back into the dirt, until God returns to take us home. The dirt reminds us that our time here on earth is short. We put our life into eternal perspective.

Because they saw it, saw their rebellion, saw their ungratefulness, stubbornness, saw their refusal to listen and remember, back in verse 2 it says they "stood and **confessed** their sins and the sins of their fathers." Did you notice the individual confession and also the corporate confession? Confession revealed their need. They were affirming to God, "I was wrong. We were wrong and you were right." I John 1:8,9 says, "If we say we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." In chapter 1:7, Nehemiah who at the time had never been to Jerusalem nor part of the exiles people, confessed in prayer to God, "We have acted very corruptly against you, not kept your commandments." In Daniel 9:5-6, Daniel who was a really great guy, the Bible never records him personally sinning though I'm certain he did, confessed the sins of his fathers; "Great and awesome Lord... We have sinned, we have not obeyed. We have rebelled. We have not listened. America is so strong and individualistic it is hard for us to understand how this could be right. We blame our parents for our sins. "I have a bad temper because dad had a temper." Right? I got it from dad. The Lord knows that the sins of the past continue to impact the present. We can honestly say, "I am sorry for what my ancestors did. We can confess that they have been treated unfairly, admit the past actions were evil and work to make them right. Didn't Jesus do this for us, when completely innocent of any wrongdoing, identified with sinners on the cross and took on our sin. "He became sin for us who knew no sin." II Chronicles 7:14 says, "If my people who are called by my name. (not talking about a secular nation like America or Canada but followers of God) will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will forgive their sin and heal their land."

So let's see the picture here, (V.3) The people stood to declare their allegiance and commitment. (V.38) they would put their commitment in writing identifying they were with God. They read God's word for 3 hours straight. Then they wor-

shipped God for 3 hours straight. Then in verse 4 we see two sets of Levites. One group was standing on the stairs leading up to the Water gate. The other group appears to be on a platform on the other side of the square. They are calling out to each other over the people. One group is confessing and the other group is praising God in sort of an antiphonal choir. Yes, it is important to see our own sin, but we can only see it correctly in the bright light of God's goodness and greatness. Let me point out a few of God's character traits that the Levites speak about during this antiphonal prayer. They are directly pointing toward God. This is not a sad thing. They are pointing out thing about God worth taking joy in. Yes, they recognize the reality of their rebellion, but even more they see who God is and what He has done.

Chapter 9 is not about building a wall, or building a people, but the focus is on God Himself. I think these Levites and Ezra knew something. If we truly are going to break free from the crazy disobedience cycle, we must not only be able to see the elusive rebellion in us we must see clearly the goodness of God. We must **see God** clearly.

The praising group of Levites start praying God's greatness out loud. (V.5) "Your name is glorious, you are blessed. You made the heavens, the earth (V.6) and all that is in it. The seas. I love Psalm 19:1-2, "The heavens are declaring the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands." Every single day pours out speech that reveals the greatness of God. Do you remember a time being awestruck by God's creation, the stars in the heavens? I have powerful memories of backpacking miles from lights and looking up into the clear night sky and feeling very small, but very loved. President Theodore Roosevelt would entertain foreign dignitaries late into the evening and at the end of the meeting he would invite the group out onto the back lawn of the white house. This was a time before the city light blocked the view. He would lead them in gazing up at the stars, then after a long moment, President Roosevelt would say, "Gentlemen, I believe we are small enough now. Time to go to bed." The realization of God's greatness, reveals our smallness. When we see God for who He is we join Isaiah is crying out, "Woe is me for I am a man of unclean lips." Holy is the Lord.

We are small but we are chosen. Look at verse 7, "You are the Lord God who chose Abram." Why did God choose Abram? Until God knocked on his door, his family were pagan idol worshippers. There was nothing special in his ancestry that God should sit up and take notice. But God chose Abram and you too are special to God. John 6:44, "No one comes unless the Father draws him."

In verses 8-12 we read of God's goodness in delivering the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt, directing them through a pillar of cloud by day (V.12) and of fire by night. All that pointed to Jesus