

“Covenant Renewal”
Nehemiah 9-10
October 11, 2020

INTRODUCTION:

How do you make a fresh start in a relationship when it has suffered a serious injury? Perhaps it’s a marriage where trust has been broken. Or maybe it’s a serious and damaging conflict that leaves two friends not speaking to one another. You can’t just pretend nothing ever happened and resume the relationship. Something needs to happen to deal with whatever led to the breach in the relationship, and something needs to happen to address what moving forward in the relationship should look like.

It is the same in our relationship with God. The covenant renewal ceremony of these two chapters describes how we make a fresh start in our relationship with God. Israel was guilty of a long period of rebellion against the Lord, a history summarized in chapter 9. They were guilty of this in spite of the Lord’s repeated kindness to them. Their sin had led to the demise of their nation and finally to the exile. But now they want their relationship with the Lord restored, and this covenant renewal ceremony was the means of doing so.

Perhaps you are here today in need of a fresh start in your relationship with the Lord. Maybe your relationship with God has grown cold. Perhaps you are just going through the motions of such things as Bible reading, prayer and worship. Some believe that our need for covenant renewal is so common that every Sunday worship service is essentially a service of covenant renewal. In any case, covenant renewal always involves the following two elements.

I. Receiving Grace

Renewal of our relationship with God always starts with God’s grace. The driving force for renewal is God and what he has done for us instead of what we might do for God. We see this right at the beginning of our chapter, in the timing of this covenant renewal event. We read that this solemn assembly occurred on **“the twenty-fourth day of this month.”** The Feast of Tabernacles, featured in the previous chapter, ended just two days prior to this, on the twenty-second day of the month. That feast was a time of joy and celebration. Why would a solemn assembly of repentance follow on the heels of seven days of joyful feasting? It is because of something the Bible teaches, that the kindness of God is what leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4). For seven days, their hearts had swelled with the goodness of God toward them. He was caring for them now just as he had cared for their ancestors centuries earlier in the forty years of the wilderness wanderings.

It works the same for us. It is the kindness of God that leads us to repentance. If you are stuck in your relationship with God, begin with thanksgiving and praise. An acquaintance of ours, a college art professor, recently posted the following on Instagram. “The night before the semester started, while I was trying to stop myself from fussing over my first day lectures for the umpteenth time, I sat on the couch and made a paper chain: one link for every day of this compressed, fast-paced COVID semester. Every day, I peel one link off, and write the date and something good that happened that day.” Such a chain of praise and thanksgiving to God would be a good practice for us all. And it would also prepare our hearts for repentance, because it is the kindness of God that leads to repentance.

That is exactly what happened in Nehemiah 9. After a week of feasting and joyful praise of God for his faithfulness to Israel, the Israelites **“stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.”** This idea of confessing the sins of ancestors is not uncommon in the Bible. We’ve already seen it earlier, in Nehemiah’s prayer in chapter 1 (1:6). We also see it in the psalms (106:6) and elsewhere in the prophets (Daniel 9:4-6). This brings up a question in many people’s minds. Are we responsible for the sins of our ancestors? Isn’t it just as contrary to truth to confess a sin we are not guilty of as it is to fail to confess a sin of which we are guilty? I believe it is. And if we are not to confess sins of which we are not guilty, what is going on in passages like these where the sins of ancestors are confessed? Note the language of our verse. They confessed their own sins *and* the iniquities of their fathers. They were similar sins. They saw the sins of their fathers and they saw how they were guilty of the same things. That’s what a repentant, broken heart does. It doesn’t see the sin of another person and say, “I’m glad I’m not like that.” Rather, when the sins of others are seen, even if it’s the sins of beloved ancestors, the repentant heart asks, “How am I like that?” So what they are saying here is that their ancestors did indeed sin, and they have done the exact same things.

Much of chapter nine is a prayer rehearsing the sad history of Israel’s sinful rebellion against the goodness of God. They were aware of this history because they had just read it in Ezra’s reading of the five books of Moses. So their prayer starts with creation, acknowledging God as the great creator and sustainer of all things. And this God called Abram and promised him an inheritance in the land of Canaan. But the people went into bondage in Egypt, called out to God for deliverance, and with a mighty hand he did so. They were given God’s law on Mt. Sinai, and God miraculously provided for them in the wilderness. He rained bread from heaven for them to eat and he brought water out of rocks. And how did they respond to his kindness? They **“acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments. They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them, but they stiffened their neck**

and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt” (9:16-17). It was a complete rejection of God. They rejected the leader God had appointed, Moses, as well as rejecting the entire direction of God’s leadership. In effect, they were saying, “God, our lives were much better off before you intervened on our behalf. We would be better off if you just disappeared.” How might we expect God to react to such a rejection? How would you react? At best, we would say, “Fine, have it your way. If you want me out of your lives, then I’ll leave and let you fend for yourselves. I’m done with you all.” But God doesn’t respond like that. **“But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them”** (v. 17). God graciously rejected their rejection of him. In a competition of rejection, God wins, rejecting their rejection.

This is the grace of God. Even when we reject God, he does not reject us, but graciously woos us back to himself, to the place of fullness and joy. Nehemiah 9 traces this pattern of God’s goodness followed by Israel’s rejection of God, a pattern that carried through much of Israel’s history. He mentions the time when they made the golden calves and worshiped them. He then speaks of God’s provision of the land for Israel, after which they responded in the manner described in verse 26. **“Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies.”** But when they called out to God, he delivered them from their enemies. It was this same pattern that led to the exile, after which God again showed them mercy by the miracle of bringing them back to the land.

There’s one more important point I want to make about God’s grace that emerges from this chapter. It is the difference between self-pity and true repentance, a difference that emerges in verse 33. **“Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly.”** That is a statement of repentance that clearly distinguishes itself from self-pity. The person engaging in self-pity sees himself as a victim undeserving of the poor treatment given him by others. The more he rehearses in his mind his undeserving nature of this poor treatment, the deeper he falls into self-pity. Then the self-pity reinforces his sense of innocence. This is an extremely dangerous pattern that keeps us from an experience of God’s grace to us through Jesus. Repentance says that no matter what sad things might happen to me, I deserve even worse. But the grace of God shines through as we come to receive God’s blessings to us through Jesus, blessings of forgiveness and restoration. We receive not what we deserve for our sin, but what Jesus deserves for his obedience.

II. Giving Obedience

Twice in chapter 9 we read that Israel responded to God's grace by acting presumptuously (v. 16, 29). They presumed upon the grace of God and continued sinning. The last verse of chapter 9 and all of chapter 10 describe the proper response to God's grace. It is a new heart of obedience. We don't obey in order to earn God's grace. Rather, we obey because of God's grace. What this looks like for Israel is a new heart that is expressed in this covenant renewal service. Such a service is not unlike what some married couples do when they have a service of recommitment, renewing their marriage vows to one another.

In Israel's service of covenant renewal, they commit themselves to three primary areas of obedience. These three are singled out because they mark out and distinguish God's people from those not God's people. The three areas concern mixed marriages, sabbath observance and temple support. First was mixed marriages, which had long been a problem in Israel. They commit not to give their children in marriage to those outside the covenant. As many have pointed out, the Old Testament prohibition of mixed marriages was not on racial but religious grounds. There is nothing in the Bible, either in the Old or New Testament, against racially mixed marriages. Several women in the Old Testament are singled out as both non-Jews and ancestors of our Lord Jesus. They include Tamar the Canaanite, Rahab from Jericho and Ruth the Moabite woman. All three became worshipers of Israel's God, though none were descended from Abraham racially. The motivation for unlawful mixed marriages was likely social climbing. Israelites could advantage themselves by giving their children in marriage to the people in the land who were well-connected and economically prosperous. Instead of trusting God, the pursuit of mixed marriages was birthed in self-trust. So their covenant renewal here takes the form of returning to a trust in God.

The second area addressed concerns sabbath regulations, another area that speaks forcefully of their need to trust God. Verse 31 expresses something of a possible loophole in sabbath observance. What should they do when unbelievers, "peoples of the land," bring their goods to Jerusalem to sell on a sabbath day? The Jews could easily rationalize engaging in such forbidden business as being neighborly to unbelievers. But here they pledge not to do so. They also commit to observance of the sabbatical year, in which land is to lie fallow and debts are to be cancelled.

The final area concerns support for the temple through their tithes and various provisions to provide the necessary funds and goods for its ministry to flourish. In the pressure of their resettlement efforts following their return from exile, much of the temple worship had been neglected, and now they pledge themselves to reverse that.

CONCLUSION:

I would like us to conclude today with our own time of covenant renewal. John Wesley instituted a liturgy for Methodist churches to observe in such covenant renewal services. I found the language he employed to be appropriate for us as well.

I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

What specifics should be included in a covenant renewal service for a church in America in 2020? I note that in the covenant renewal service of Nehemiah 10, the three elements mentioned all concerned the call of God's people to be distinctive. What would such distinctiveness look like for us? It's universally acknowledged that our nation is suffering from a time of significant division. We seem to be descending into tribal conflicts centering on our political differences. The great tragedy would be if we allowed these differences to invade the Church. Toward that end, I would propose the following commitments as appropriate steps of covenant renewal for the church in America, not just AVPC but all churches.

1. I embrace my Christian identity as a son or daughter of my heavenly Father as more fundamental than my political party identity.
2. I will pray for God's blessings on our nation and our political leaders, to the end that we in the church might lead peaceful and quiet lives, godly and dignified in every way (1 Timothy 2:1-2).
3. I affirm that the building up of the Church, and not that of any nation or political party, is the focus of the rule and reign of Christ (Ephesians 1:22; Matthew 16:18). Although it is appropriate to love my nation and seek its prosperity, my passion for the prospering of the Church should always be greater than my passion for the prospering of my nation.
4. I commit not to break fellowship with or speak ill of any believer over a political difference or over a difference of opinion about a political candidate to be voted for.
5. I commit that my social media posts and personal conversations on political matters will be marked by love and truth.

Small Group Discussion Questions Nehemiah 9-10

1. In your experience, what are some indications that a relationship with God has grown stale?
2. The opening verse of chapter 9 makes it clear that this time of repentance was preceded by the joyful Feast of Tabernacles. This reminds us of the truth of Romans 2:4, that it is God's kindness that leads us to repentance. What does it do to your relationship with God when you remember his kindness?
3. What are some examples of the kindness of God in your life?
4. The point was made in the sermon that self-pity is one of the enemies of true repentance. True repentance is marked by the attitude expressed in 9:33 – "You have been righteous in all that has come upon us." In other words, he is saying that they deserve even worse than what has happened to them. What is the contrasting mark of self-pity? Are you tempted to self-pity? What does that look like?
5. Our sermon ended with five affirmations of a covenant renewal we might engage in today. These affirmations are all intended to guard the Church against the divisiveness we see in our nation today. Which of the following five is most challenging for you?
 - a) I embrace my Christian identity as a son or daughter of my heavenly Father as more fundamental than my political party identity.
 - b) I will pray for God's blessings on our nation and our political leaders, to the end that we in the church might lead peaceful and quiet lives, godly and dignified in every way (1 Timothy 2:1-2).
 - c) I affirm that the building up of the Church, and not that of any nation or political party, is the focus of the rule and reign of Christ (Ephesians 1:22; Matthew 16:18). Although it is appropriate to love my nation and seek its prosperity, my passion for the prospering of the Church should always be greater than my passion for the prospering of my nation.
 - d) I commit not to break fellowship with or speak ill of any believer over a political difference or over a difference of opinion about a political candidate to be voted for.
 - e) I commit that my social media posts and personal conversations on political matters will be marked by love and truth.