

## “The Importance of Covenant”

We've been learning this summer from Nehemiah what it means to build a community after God's heart. Nehemiah's story is really the story of God, his people and their community. It begins with **rebellion**. As God's people living in Jerusalem stepped away from their divine purpose, they put themselves in the very vulnerable place of being overtaken by their enemies. That's everybody's story. When we step away from our divine purpose, we put ourselves out there ... unprotected ... and in the vulnerable place of being overtaken by our enemies. So rebellion is the act of exposing ourselves to our enemies and it leads to exile, slavery and loss of identity, which is exactly what happened to the people of Jerusalem. They were conquered by the Babylonians and sent into exile where they lived in slavery for generations and lost their identity as the people of God. Eventually Persia conquered the Babylonians and the people were restored to their land. With **restoration**, they began the process of **rebuilding** ... first, they rebuilt their temple ... which defined them as God's people ... and then they rebuilt their walls ... which defined them in relation to the people around them. After the wall was rebuilt, they came together and listened for a whole day to Word of God, and it brought them to the place of **repentance**. They recognized their distance from God's purposes. And with repentance came a **recommitment** to their covenant relationship with God and each other. And that's where we are today ... after rebellion and repentance, we are learning to reclaim our relationship with a Father God who loves us and deeply desires to pour His purposes into us. And that is the good news today: If you are in a place where you are frustrated, broken-hearted, angry at life ... exiled from your purposes and your place ... the good news in the midst of your exile is that you are right now in a prime position to be restored to your spiritual homebase and reclaim your own vision for life.

Our passage today begins with chapter ten of Nehemiah, but I want to take up at the end chapter nine ... at the place of repentance. Because this is where we get it that the people of Jerusalem were not just rebuilding a wall, they were rebuilding the character of a community. And **character** ... they discovered ... is **a path, not just a principle**. Listen to how the people word their personal and corporate repentance (Nehemiah 9:36-37) – *But see, we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our ancestors so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces. Because of our sins, its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress.*

So after generations in exile, these people get it that even if they are standing in the right place geographically ... without a right heart they are still slaves. In other words, you can take a great stand and make a great argument and build a structure and have all the right answers, but without the right heart ... you still aren't right. So the beginning of repentance is admitting our sorry state. Which is a hard thing ... it is hard to admit I'm powerless over my own life ... that I'm a slave to the very things that seek to destroy my personal vision ... the higher purposes for which I'm created. That's a hard thing to admit. But I love what my friend said who recently came home to Christ again ... she said, "I get it now ... that repentance is not about guilt ... it is about readiness." About being ready to change. And the wonderful assurance we have from the Word is that true repentance is *always* met by grace.

I want to ask you to do something. There is an index card in the pocket in front of you. Pull that card and draw a big asterisk on it. You know what an asterisk is ... its that punctuation mark at the end of a word or sentence that tells us to look for a footnote. Now ... while you're holding that asterisk, I want to remind you of the story of Barry Bonds. He's the guy who broke Hank Aaron's homerun record last year. Which is a wonderful accomplishment, but a lot of folks question whether or not Bonds ought to be able to claim that record ... because Bonds is alleged to have used steroids. In fact, the guy who bought the ball Bonds hit the night he set the record, branded it with an asterisk before giving it to the Baseball Hall of Fame ... because sports fans say if his name goes in the record book it should be followed by an asterisk ... to show that the record is a questionable one. He should have an asterisk after his name, they say, with a footnote that says, "Sort of." In fact, at games the fans will hold up asterisk signs when Bonds steps to the plate. Isn't that sort of sad?

Now, I don't want to debate whether or not Bonds ought to have an asterisk by his name, but I think his story is a kind of parable. Because spiritually speaking, a lot of us walk around with a mental asterisk next to our relationship with Christ and a footnote that says, "Sort of." We've done the work of coming home to Jesus and maybe we've even rebuilt some torn-down relationships and gotten rid of some bad habits ... but somewhere in there, we haven't really completely surrendered ourselves to Christ. OR ... we don't really, deep-down believe that God has claimed us. Not completely. We secretly suspect that Jesus is in the stands holding up an asterisk to remind us of our faults. We don't really, deep-down believe that grace erases everything that used to be. Surely in the Book of Life, there is an asterisk by our names with a footnote that says, "Sort of. Please review her past." That's what that little asterisk does ... it allows our past to define our future. And it breeds distrust

in our relationship to God and holds us at arm's length from a surrendered relationship to Him. So we step into faith *but with an asterisk* ... a tie to our old junk and a question about our place. Amen?

But here's the *biblical* truth: Remember what we said ... repentance is readiness. When we are finally ready to admit who we are, true repentance sees our guilt. There is no soft-pedaling it or putting the blame on someone else for what hurts. True repentance acknowledges all our junk as ours and claims responsibility for it. *And* ... true repentance gets complete grace because the work of Jesus Christ on the cross was perfect, and it justifies us completely ... covering all our guilt and removing the asterisk. That's the biblical truth. When we honestly repent, God removes the asterisk and justifies us as righteous. (You know the old line about the word "justified" – in kingdom terms, it means "just as if I'd never done it.") True repentance cuts the tie to our junk and places us as righteous ... in God's presence. No asterisk. That's grace.

So that's our choice. We can carry this asterisk around that ties us to the past and keeps God at arm's length or we can accept the justification that comes through repentance and accept God's grace that wipes the slate clean. Which would you rather? An asterisk ... or a clean slate? Whatever that footnote is in your life ... that thing that you deep-down believe keeps you spiritually separated from all God has for you ... Are you ready ... because repentance is readiness ... to believe that Christ has covered this, too? Are you ready to acknowledge it and be justified?

That's the beginning of a covenant relationship, which was the next step for the people of Jerusalem after acknowledging their slavery to sin. (Nehemiah 9:38) *In view of all this, they said, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their their seals to it.* So what they were saying to God and to each other was, "We want our lives to be defined, from here on out, by the things that define the heart of God. And we want to be accountable for that." So they made a binding agreement ... which in biblical terms is a **Covenant: Freedom, not a fence.**

This ends up being a huge point about God. In fact, you may know this, but the word "testament" ... as in Old and New Testaments ... is another word for covenant. So our whole scripture is shaped around the idea of covenant ... the first covenant (in the Old Testament) and the new covenant. In a covenant relationship with God, he agrees to do certain things, like forgive, restore and protect. And we agree to do certain things, like

repent and live righteously. The point of a covenant is unity of spirit. And that was the point of both covenants ... old and new... even though they looked different.

Steve has a great way of describing this, so I'm stealing this from him. He talks about the first covenant and the new covenant this way: The Old Testament is like the fence of a yard. The fence shows us where the boundaries are and it keeps us safe when we need help knowing where the edge is. (Last week Steve came home to find our dog, Phoebe outside the fence begging to get in. She'd gotten spooked by the thunder and dug her way out of the fence, but once she got out there ... between the fence and road behind it, she realized she was in an even scarier place and all she wanted was to get back in. Fear will cause us to question the fence, but the fence is actually there to make us safe.) So the Old Testament rules that make up the covenant are the fence. "Do not kill. Do not steal. Do not lie. Honor the Sabbath." The Old Testament, or the first covenant ... defines what is spiritually safe by giving us good boundaries.

So the Old Testament is the fence and the New Testament ... or the New Covenant ... is everything inside the fence. It teaches us all the things we can do inside the will of God. For instance, we can love God and love others (which is spirit of the fence). We can serve the poor, preach the gospel, baptize, teach. Paul taught us to pray about everything and he taught us to use our gifts for the benefit of the community. Jesus taught us to go from place to place healing and calling people to repentance ... sharing with them the forgiveness that comes through Him.

All this is stuff we can do if we're living inside the fence. So if the Old Testament is the fence, then the New Testament is the freedom we find inside the fence. If the Old Testament is the principles, the New Testament is the practice. Consequently, when practice goes outside the principles, we are beyond God's purposes. If the Old Testament is a system the New Testament is the spirit of that system. If the Old Testament is the harbor, the New Testament is the heart. If the Old Testament is the wall, the New Testament is the way.

If the Old Testament is the grounding, the New Testament is the grace.

Everything we read in the Old Testament sets the foundation for the kind of relationship God is after. And he completed the work through Jesus. So we accomplish the terms not by clinging to a set of standards, but by

clinging to a relationship. A covenant relationship that ... as it is lived out ... reflects the spirit of the Father's heart.

That's what the people of Jerusalem wanted. They wanted life inside the wall to look different than the guy down the street who wasn't there yet.

And that's still the point. I hear Nehemiah's challenge here: If you are willing to live inside God's covenant, then how does your day-to-day life differ from the guy down the street who does not value life inside the fence? Paul says (1 Corinthians 10:31) - *Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.* How does your life reflect the glory of the covenant? Or if you aren't there yet, then how might your life improve if you were to get a vision that might bring into your life the grace of forgiveness you need and a promise of right living that brings peace?

Do you have a vision? Or are you just another slave?

Now ... the covenant is not just with God but with His community. The ushers are going to give you a card right now. On one side is Mosaic's vision statement and core values. This is the vision we've been after as a community since the day God brought us together. This vision and these values ... these are the bricks that are building our community. On the other side of the card is a statement of how we hope to live together as we achieve this vision. I've brought out this statement a few times in the last two of years. It is a commitment to live with each other according to the values we find in scripture. I'd like to ask you to read it together with me:

**“Because I am committed to our community, I will: extend grace, remain loyal in both speech and action, keep a generous heart, honor differences, and practice emotional intelligence”** (in other words, not letting that junk from the past determine how we relate in the present). As we said earlier, the point of a covenant is unity in the spirit, so this is what we're after. Because visions thrive in an environment of unity. Without agreement on our core values and how we will relate those values, we will miss the target of our vision.

Covenant living puts us in right relationship. Which takes us to the last point ... about **Community: A curse and an oath**. Now we're into chapter ten. Nehemiah says (Nehemiah 10:28b) – ... *all who separated themselves from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the Law of God, together with their wives and all their*

*sons and daughters who are able to understand ... (Nehemiah 10:29) ... all these now join their fellow Israelites the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath (remember that) to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD our Lord.*

It says they bound themselves with a curse and an oath. That means they both rejected what was wrong and claimed what was right. That's what covenant is about. It is about letting go of one way of life and taking hold of another. It is about letting go of our junk so we can take hold of the blessings. It is about letting go of all the options outside the fence for the sake of having everything inside the fence. Living inside the fence puts us in the position of what Andy Stanley calls "blessability." I love that word. Blessability. Have you positioned yourself for blessability? Is your vision a blessable vision? Are you converted both to Jesus and to his mission? Stanley asks, "How important is it to you that the Lord strongly support what you are doing? If it is important, then your heart must be completely His. When we embrace what is important to Him, we bring our heart into alignment with his. When your heart is completely his, you are blessable."

Listen to this one last line from Nehemiah, chapter 11 verse 2 – *The people blessed all the men who willingly offered to live in Jerusalem.*

There is deep blessing when we willingly give ourselves to God's vision. When we are ready to give ourselves to God's vision, God stands passionately ready to give us His grace.

So ... we are back to the point of this message: If you are in a place where you are frustrated, broken-hearted, angry ... exiled from your purposes and your place ... the good news of your exile is that you are right now in a prime position to be restored and to build a vision and become a blessable person.

Come inside the wall.