

Faithful Still

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Work in Progress / Nehemiah 9

By the time we reach Nehemiah 9, the people of God pause to remember where they've been and how faithful the Lord has been to them every step of the way. Their history is marked by human failure, but even more by divine mercy. In this Easter sermon, we'll see how that story finds its fullest meaning in Jesus, whose death and resurrection declare that God is faithful still.

Introduction

- Not sure if you've followed the news this week, but the United States launched the Artemis II mission this week.
 - The massive rocket took off from Cape Canaveral on Wednesday, and if everything goes as planned, tomorrow, the four astronauts aboard will travel further from Earth than any human has ever traveled.
 - This mission sets the stage for what NASA says will one day become a permanent base on the lunar surface.
 - On Friday, Artemis II Commander Reid Wiseman photographed a side of Earth not seen by human eyes in decades.
 - According to NASA, Wiseman snapped the picture after the crew completed their translunar injection burn—the final engine boost to set the astronauts on their rendezvous course.
 - Two auroras at the top right and bottom left along with zodiacal light in the bottom right are visible and glowing brightly as Earth passes in front of the sun.
- That picture reminds me of another extraordinary photograph, taken on Valentines Day in 1990.
 - Voyager 1 had been traveling for over twelve years—past Jupiter, past Saturn, out toward the edge of our solar system—when scientists at NASA sent a simple command:

- Turn the camera around. Look back.
- What it captured became one of the most haunting images ever taken.
- Suspended in a beam of light, against the blackness of space, was a tiny dot. Pale blue. Almost invisible.
 - Same Earth as Wiseman's picture, from a whole different perspective.
 - Maybe you can see it on the screen?
 - At a distance of 4 billion miles, our planet takes up just over one tenth of a pixel.
- Everything—every ocean and mountain range, every city and battlefield, every person you've ever known or loved—reduced to a fraction of a pixel.
- The astronomer Carl Sagan reflected on that image. And he listed it all out. He said:

Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there--on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

- And his point was this:
 - That's all there is.
 - Just a vast, silent universe...and a pale blue dot fading into the distance.
- When you look at that picture, you can't help but feel the smallness.

- You can feel the weight of history compressed into the equivalent of nothing.
- But it's not nothing, is it? That photograph may contain everything about us as a people, but it doesn't tell the whole story.
- Because that pale blue dot isn't lost in silence - rather it is known by the One who holds the stars.
- And every person who has ever lived on that pale blue dot, and every person that will ever live on that pale blue dot are known by that same God.
- And he is not watching in silence.
- Because when you open the Bible, you don't find a silent universe.
 - You find a record.
 - And in [Nehemiah 9](#), we see a people - standing in the ruins of a city they helped destroy - opening the Word of God, and reading that record out loud.
 - Not the cleaned-up version.
 - The
 - real one.
 - The golden calf.
 - The constant complaining.
 - The ignored prophets.
 - The broken promises.
 - They don't look away.
 - They don't edit it down.
 - They hold the whole story up to the light.
 - And what they discover is not silence.

- They discover that someone has been watching the whole time.
 - Not with indifference.
 - Not with distance.
 - But with patience and mercy.
 - With a stubborn refusal to let their story end in ruin.
- In [Nehemiah 9](#), the people of God do something remarkable.
 - They stand—for hours—and they recount the entire record.
 - Every failure.
 - Every rebellion.
 - Every moment they turned away.
- And running underneath all of it is a single, unbroken truth:
 - God kept showing up.
 - Every time they wandered—He pursued.
 - Every time they rebelled—He was merciful.
 - Every time they forgot—He remained faithful.
- And that's not just their story.
 - That's ours.
 - Because the same God who met His people in the wilderness...
 - The same God who answered rebellion with mercy and exile with restoration...
 - He didn't stop there.
 - For we know, on this day we remember Jesus' resurrection, we echo the Apostle Paul's words from [Galatians 4:4–5](#)

- “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”
- The faithfulness that Nehemiah’s generation could trace through their past, we now see in full.
 - Our God is not distant.
 - He is not silent.
 - He is not indifferent.
 - He is not watching from some distant place in the universe.
 - No...God has proven himself faithful in the past.
 - And we know He is FAITHFUL STILL.
- This morning, we’re going to continue our journey through Nehemiah, but not with an eye to the past.
 - We will consider it looking forward.
 - This is certainly not your typical Resurrection passage, but I do think by the time we finish, we will clearly see just how much this text has Jesus’ name and fingerprints all over it.
 - I’ll be covering the entire chapter, but as an exemplary text, I’ll be reading vv. 16-21.

Scripture Reading

Nehemiah 9:16–21 ESV

16 “But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments.

17 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. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them.

18 Even when they had made for themselves a golden calf and said, ‘This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt,’ and had committed great blasphemies,

19 you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness. The pillar of cloud to lead them in the way did not depart from them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night to light for them the way by which they should go.

20 You 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, and they lacked nothing. Their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell.

- When we pick up ch. 9, we find a very similar situation unfolding to what we saw in chapter 8.
 - We’re told that it is now the 24th day of the month.
 - This national assembly began on the first day and was followed up with a week-long Feast of Booths.
 - The text doesn’t say that they continued to meet, but we do know they came back on the 24th day of the month for another sacred assembly.
 - The format of this gathering was similar.
 - The law was read and explained for long parts of the day.
 - But this time there is an added component - intentional confession, worship.
 - And the text is very specific to say that they spent a quarter of the day in these activities.
 - So this literally means they spent 6 hours in hearing the LAW and 6 hours in prayer and worship.
 - It mentions nothing about stopping for snacks.

- It would appear that this gathering is even more physically demanding than the gatherings that occurred back in chapter 8.
- When we pick up at the end of v. 5, the Levites (those are the teachers) lead the nation in a time of confession.
 - But they're not confessing their own private sins, per se.
 - Rather they're confessing the historic sins of the nation and making bold statements about God's faithfulness across the generations.
- And the first things we see in chapter 9 is this:

God introduces himself to us with faithfulness (vv. 6-15)

- Take a look at v. 6...
 - The story begins with God.
 - He is the creator...he made the heaven, the angels, the earth, the seas.
 - And he holds all of them together.
 - [John 1:3](#) "All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made."
 - [Colossians 1:17](#) "And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together."
 - I think back to those pictures of earth from Voyager.
 - Not only can you see the blue dot that represents earth - you can see thousands and thousands of other dots that represent a myriad of planets and stars and galaxies.
 - The psalmist said that the heavens declare the glory of God - and the testimony of Scripture, over and over again is that the heavens are held together by his mighty hand.
 - When we look up in the night sky and see the glory of the heavens, we are bearing witness to God's faithfulness.
 - He is doing exactly what he has promised to do.

- But more than anything, we need to remember, before there was EVER a record of our failures, we have a powerful testimony of God's faithfulness.
- This time of confession continues and recounts God's choice of Israel as the nation through which he would make himself known to the world (7-15)
 - This choice had nothing to do with the faithfulness of these people.
 - Instead, it was a choice made based on the character of God.
 - In [Deuteronomy 7](#), Moses reminded the people why they were chosen by the LORD.

Deuteronomy 7:6-8 ESV

“For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

- God made promises to his people and he kept them.
- And even as his people suffered under the hand of slavery in Egypt, God saw their suffering, he heard their cry and he acted.
- God is not distant from His people's pain—He moves toward it.
- We are reminded here about how God lead them and provided for them
 - pillar of cloud and fire
 - manna from heaven
 - water from the rock
 - law from Sinai

- He guided them when they didn't know where to go.
 - He fed them when they had nothing to eat.
 - He gave them water when they were thirsty.
 - He gave them His Word so they would know how to live.
 - At every step, before they ever failed Him, He was already showing himself faithful.
- Now keep in mind, this passage is ultimately about repentance, but do you see what they're doing here?
 - Before they confess their sin, they rehearse His faithfulness.
 - That's huge. That's not just good storytelling. That is good theology.
 - They don't start with "Look how bad we've been."
 - They start with "Look how good God has been."
 - Before they ever say a word about their sin, they spend hours talking about God.
 - And that's not accidental.
- Because if you start with your sin, you will either minimize it or be crushed by it.
 - You'll minimize it and say, "It's not that big of a deal..."
 - Or you'll be crushed by it and say, "There's no way God would want me."
- But when you start with God...
 - His character
 - His mercy
 - His faithfulness
- That will actually give you somewhere to stand.
 - Now confession isn't driven by fear it's driven by confidence.

- Not confidence in you, confidence in Him.
- And here's what we know now that they could not fully see then...
 - That same God—who created, who chose, who delivered, who provided—was telling a bigger story.
- Every act of faithfulness described in [Nehemiah 9](#) was pointing somewhere.
 - It was pointing to a day when God would not just deliver His people from Egypt but from sin.
 - Not just provide bread from heaven but send the true Bread of Life.
 - Not just guide them through the wilderness, but make a way through death itself.
- But here's the tension, the God who begins the story with perfect faithfulness is met with a people who do not respond the same way.

Man Responds to God's Faithfulness with Rebellion (vv. 16-30)

- You get to v. 16 - after all of these incredible testimonies of God's faithfulness and care - and you run into one of the most powerful 3-letter words that can change the trajectory of an entire nation.
 - In the Hebrew, it is only one letter added onto the word.
 - We translate the word here as but...
- The God who begins the story with perfect faithfulness is met with a people who do not respond the same way.
- And [Nehemiah 9](#) does not soften that.
- Listen again to how the Bible describes it...
 - They acted presumptuously..." (v.16)
 - They stiffened their neck...
 - They did not obey...

- They refused to listen...
- That is not a one-time failure. That is a pattern.
 - God delivers them, they rebel.
 - God provides for them, they complain.
 - God reveals Himself, they turn away.
 - They literally take gold...shape it into a god, and say, "This is what saved us."
- The problem is not that they didn't have enough evidence.
 - They saw miracles.
 - They walked through the sea.
 - They ate bread from heaven.
 - The issue is not information, it is the heart.
- And before we rush to judge them...
 - This is where the Bible stops being their story, and becomes ours.
 - We may not build golden calves, but we take good things...and treat them like they're the ultimate things.
 - We trust what we can see, instead of the God we cannot.
 - We know what God has said...and still choose something else.
 - The same heart that ran from God in the wilderness, beats in us.
 - They refused to listen. We refuse to listen.
 - They forgot His works. We forget His works.
 - They turned away. We turn away.
 - They kill the prophets, they ignore warnings, they fall again and again.
 - We do the same thing...the Apostle Paul says it this way:

- [2 Timothy 4:3–4](#) “3 For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, 4 and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.”
- This is not a bad season. This is a repeated story.
- [Nehemiah 9](#) is not just telling us what they did—it’s showing us what sin does.
 - It blinds our eyes.
 - It hardens our hearts.
 - And it repeats - over and over again.
 - And eventually you realize, this is not something we fix.
 - This is something we need to be rescued from.
- It’s a good thing that God is faithful
 - Because if history could fix us, it would have fixed them.
 - If more chances could save us, they would have been saved.
 - If knowing better was enough, they had enough.
- But sin runs deeper than that.
 - [Nehemiah 9](#) explains why Jesus had to die.
 - Because our problem is not that we need a little help...
 - Our problem is that left to ourselves, we will keep writing the same story over and over again.
 - If the story ended here it would end in judgment.
- But it doesn’t.
- The history of God’s people shows us that sin is not an accident—it’s a pattern we cannot break on our own.

- You ever notice how this works?
- You tell yourself, “I’m not doing that again.”
- And you mean it.
 - You’re serious this time.
 - You’ve thought it through.
 - You’ve even prayed about it.
- And then a few days later, maybe a few hours later, you’re right back in the same place.
 - Same thought.
 - Same habit.
 - Same response.
- And it’s not because you didn’t know better.
- It’s because something deeper is at work.
- We need something - or someone - that can disrupt the pattern and make us new.

God Responds with Mercy (vv. 17-31)

- Because right in the middle of their rebellion...we meet the heart of God.
- Listen to how [Nehemiah 9](#) describes Him...
 - 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)
 - Ready to forgive...
 - Not reluctant. Not waiting for them to get it together.
 - Ready.
 - Gracious and merciful...

- Giving what they don't deserve. withholding what they do.
- Slow to anger...
 - Not because sin doesn't matter...but because His patience is greater than their rebellion.
- Abounding in steadfast love...
 - Not occasional mercy - overflowing mercy.
- You did not forsake them.
 - They rebelled, and He did not forsake them.
 - They built idols, and He did not forsake them.
 - They ignored His Word, and He did not forsake them.
- If God treated them the way their sin deserved...there would be no story left to tell.
 - They fall—He delivers.
 - They cry—He answers.
 - They wander—He pursues.
 - Not once
 - Not twice.
 - Over and over and over again.
- Their sin keeps repeating...but so does His mercy.
 - Their rebellion is persistent—but God's mercy is more persistent.
 - And if we're honest, this is the only reason any of us are here.
 - Not because we've been perfectly faithful, but because God has.
- But here's what Nehemiah's generation had not yet learned.
 - They could see that God was merciful.
 - They could see that He forgave.

- They could see that He did not forsake them.
- But they could not yet see how.
- Because every time God forgave, the question was still there...
 - How can a holy God keep showing mercy to a sinful people and still be just?
 - How does that work?
 - How can He forgive, and not simply overlook sin?
- [Nehemiah 9](#) shows us that God is merciful.
 - But it also leaves us with a question:
 - How far will that mercy go?
 - And that question is exactly what our celebration today answers with confidence and assurance.
 - Because there came a moment where justice and mercy finally met.

Jesus Completes The Story

- Where exactly did God's justice and mercy coalesce?
 - Not in a courtroom - even though the legal demands against our sin are satisfied.
 - Not in a system - even though we are part of a system that is fallen and under the curse of sin.
 - But on a hill called Calvary, on an old rugged cross.
 - It was there where the mercy of God did not ignore sin
 - And it was there where God's justice did not overlook it.
 - It was there where God's mercy was put on full display... and His justice was fully satisfied in Jesus.

Romans 3:25–26 *ESV*

²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

- That's the answer to the question [Nehemiah 9](#) leaves hanging.
- All the mercy Nehemiah's generation could point to, all the forgiveness, all the patience.
 - It was never random.
 - It was never God pretending sin didn't matter.
 - It was mercy waiting for a moment.
 - A moment when sin would be dealt with fully and sinners could be forgiven completely.
- And at the cross, that moment came.
 - Every sin, every act of rebellion, every refusal to listen was placed on Christ.
 - Not ignored, not excused, but paid for in full.
 - And three days later...
 - The resurrection answered the question once and for all.
 - How far will God's mercy go?
 - All the way.
 - All the way through sin.
 - All the way through judgment.
 - All the way through death itself.
- The empty tomb is the proof that nothing — not even death — can stop the mercy of God.

Conclusion

- Nehemiah's generation could look back and say, "God has been merciful."
 - We look back and say, "Now we see how."
 - They saw the pattern. We see the payment.
 - Which means this is not just a story about them.
 - It's about you.
- What will you do with the mercy of God?
 - You can keep trying to fix what you know is broken.
 - You can keep repeating the same patterns.
 - And you know what you're going to find?
 - You're going to find that you can't fix it and that you can't break the patterns.
 - Or, I'd like to propose a better solution.
 - You can receive what God has already provided.
 - Forgiveness for every sin
 - Mercy, grace - the unmerited favor of a holy God.
 - New life.
 - Not because you've earned it—but because Christ has secured it.
 - Turn from your sin. Trust in Christ.
 - Stop trying to carry what He has already carried for you.
- Because the story of Scripture is not the story of a faithful people.
 - It is the story of a faithful God.
 - Faithful in every generation.
 - Faithful in every failure.

- Faithful at the cross.
- Faithful at the empty tomb.
- And He is...faithful still.