

# Leading Repentance

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[ 0 : 00 ] Good morning. My name is Matthew Capone, and I'm the pastor here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church, and it's my joy to bring God's word to you today.

A special welcome if you are new or visiting with us. We are glad you're here, and we're glad you're here not because you are filling a seat this morning, but because we are following after Jesus together as one community, and we are convinced as we follow after Jesus that there is no one so good that they don't need God's grace, and no one so bad that they can't have it.

And so God has something to say to everyone in his word, and everyone needs to hear what God has to say to us. When I left off a few weeks ago, we had finished the season of Advent, and as I said over and over, Advent's about two comings.

Jesus' first coming that we look back to, and Jesus' second coming that we look forward to. And we're going to be starting a series in the book of Nehemiah, and Nehemiah is in the Old Testament. And the simplest way to think about the Old Testament is that it is everything that happened before Jesus' first coming. So previously, before Advent, we were in the book of Philippians, and that was a church.

[ 1 : 18 ] That was a church that was a community in Philippi that existed after Jesus' first coming. And now we're going to be looking at a community that is before Jesus' first coming. And this book comes at a time in the history of the nation of Israel when they have previously been in exile.

If you were with us when we studied the book of Isaiah, you know that God had given his people a mission in the Old Testament. They were meant to be a light to the nations around them. They were meant to show everyone in the world what it was like to live according to God's ways, that we could see God's goodness and his justice and his mercy and his love.

But the people of Israel had failed in that job. And so God sent them into exile in Babylon. They had to leave their home country, their home city of Jerusalem. And they went into exile, finally in 586 B.C.

And they were there for a long time until they were freed from Babylonian captivity by the Persian Empire in 539. And then in 538, they began returning.

And we're fast-forwarding all the way to 446 B.C. And if all these dates are making you sleepy, the point is this. Almost 100 years before this story, God had set his people free to return back to their land.

[ 2 : 36 ] And yet we're going to meet a man who has still not returned to God's land. We're going to find out that the city that they had left, that had been destroyed, is not fully rebuilt yet.

And so the reason that we are digging into the book of Nehemiah is that as we start a new year together, and as we start a new chapter in the history of our church, Nehemiah asks the big question of what does it look like for God's people to stay close to him?

What does it look like for God's people, if they have strayed far away from him, to return to him? Or if you're someone who has questions or doubts or objections to God and his ways, what does it look like to become close to God for the first time?

As we are starting out on a new chapter together as a church, there is nothing that is more important for us than that we stay close to God.

And so Nehemiah is going to serve as an example, as a model for us, of what it looks like for God's people to turn back to him. And so that's going to be our simple question this morning.

[ 3 : 44 ] What does it look like for God's people to return to him? What does it look like for those who are with him to stay close to him? And what does it look like for people who don't know God to know him for the first time?

And so we're going to begin here in the first chapter of Nehemiah. It is in your worship guide near the very end, if you would like to turn there. And remember that as we come to this, this is God's word.

And God tells us that his word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. In other words, God has not left us to stumble alone in the dark.

But instead, he's given us his word so that we would know the way to go. And so that's why we're going to start now with Nehemiah chapter 1. Please read with me. The words of Nehemiah, the son of Hekelia.

Now it happened in the month of Chisleu in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel, that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem.

[ 4 : 52 ] And they said to me, The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.

Verse 4. As soon as I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days. And I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And I said, Verse 7.

We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples.

But if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.

Verse 10. They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to the prayer of your servants, who delight to fear your name.

[ 6 : 33 ] And give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. Now, I was cupbearer to the king. Please pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word.

Dear Father in heaven, we confess that without you and your word, we would be stumbling in the dark.

Lord, we wouldn't know how to find our way to you. We wouldn't know how to find our way in this world. And so we thank you that you have given us a lamp and a light.

We ask that you would do that for us this morning, that you would speak to us, that you would help us to hear you clearly, and that you would give us light to see the path that you have for us.

We ask all these things not because any of us have earned them from you, but because Jesus has earned them for us. And so we ask it in his name.

[ 7 : 35 ] Amen. We immediately meet this man named Nehemiah, and we find out right away that he has not returned with God's people to Jerusalem.

As I mentioned earlier, God's people had been in exile under the Babylonian Empire, and then they had been freed later by the Persian Empire. And the city that Nehemiah is in, the city of Susa, is the place where the Persian king would spend his time in the winter.

And so this is probably November or December, and Nehemiah receives a visit. Now, it's unclear whether this man named Hanani is actually his brother because the word brother in the Old Testament has a very broad range of meaning.

So this could be his biological brother. It could also just be a family member, a relative. But he comes and brings this news to Nehemiah that apparently is a surprise.

He asks them how people are doing, how his people, the Jews, are doing in Jerusalem. And he finds out that things are not going well. They tell him in verse 3, the remnant there in the province who survived the exile.

[ 8 : 38 ] In other words, the people who had made it all the way back to Jerusalem. When God had exiled his people, it was part of his testing of them, and so there were some people who remained faithful to God in his ways, and some people who fell away.

But this remnant, these people who are in Jerusalem, these are God's people who have stayed, the ones that he has preserved. Because while they have not kept his mission, they have not obeyed him and been a light to the nations.

God is so adamant and persistent in his mission to the world that he always retains a people for himself. And so Nehemiah asks about them and finds out the terrible news.

This remnant is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire. In other words, the city that God had set to be a light to the nations, to show everyone in the world what the world would be like if people lived according to God and his ways. is not a light to the nations, but instead it's an embarrassment. And God's people who've remained faithful to him are not strong and protected, but instead they're incredibly vulnerable to anyone who would come and attack them.

[ 9 : 53 ] So what does Nehemiah do? Did you notice his very first response? When Nehemiah understands how bad it is, the very first thing he does here in verse 4 is he sits down and weeps and mourns for days.

It says, Nehemiah is so moved and impacted by the reality of the destruction that he's heard, that he has no other choice but to pray and fast and grieve.

And so what does it look like for God's people to return to him? How do we stay close to God? There is no way we can stay close to God without doing what Nehemiah does here, and that is understanding and seeing the ruin and consequences of sin.

We have to understand and see and grieve the ruin and destruction that sin has caused not just in the world, but in our lives as well. And unless we do that, we cannot understand the bad news of the gospel that I spoke about earlier that leads to the good news.

We will not repent. We will not return to God. We will not stay close to God unless we see the ruin, unless we understand how much has been destroyed and lost by sin.

[ 11 : 36 ] And you know, everyone in this world agrees that there are ruins. We can look around. We don't have to look far to see destruction in our world. We don't have to look far to see the consequences of sin, whether it is the increasing political polarization that we see as people who believe different things are having a harder and harder time talking to each other.

It could be the pollution that we see in our world as we've taken the good earth that God has given to us and failed to steward it as he wanted. It could be the political turmoil that we watch every day in the news.

It could be refugees coming in with nowhere else to live. It could be the reality of human trafficking. But everyone in this world agrees that there's a ruin. What everyone in the world does not agree about is what role we have in the ruin.

And so what we have to do to return to God, to stay close to him, is do what Nehemiah does here. He doesn't just see the ruin around him, but he also sees the ruin in him. He doesn't just see the ruin around him, but he also sees the ruin in him.

We're gonna see this in a second in verse six when he says, even mine, my father's house, have sinned. But let's pause here for a second. Where is the ruin in our lives?

[ 13 : 00 ] Where is the destruction? Because if we cannot see the ruin and the destruction of sin in our lives, there is no way that we will be able to turn back to God, and there is no way we'll be able to stay close to him.

It could be the ruin of treating people harshly for a long time, and then suddenly in a moment, in a day, like Nehemiah here, seeing the ruin, realizing the damage that it's done, and that it's not gonna be something easy or small to come back from.

It could be having broken your parents' trust over and over, and then suddenly realizing that your freedoms are more limited than you ever thought. It could be the ruin of pure laziness.

You did whatever you wanted to do for as long as you wanted, and now you look around and you realize your house and your life is falling apart. Maybe you've even lost your job as a result.

And so finally, suddenly, the ruin comes into complete relief. Maybe it's the ruin of choosing everything over your children, and now you finally realize and see that they are deciding to choose everything over you.

[ 14 : 23 ] Maybe it's the ruin of refusing to trust God and other people, thinking that it will make you safe. And then you wake up one day and realize it hasn't made you safe. It's just made you very alone.

Maybe it's the ruin of not being able to get the grades that you want. And so one day, you realize that it's a lot easier than you thought. All you have to do is just start cheating a little bit.

And it works well and your grades are good until you get to the point where you've skipped so many things and forgotten so many things that you come to a point where you can't go any further because there's so much that you don't know.

Whatever it is, it's the ruin that pushes us to God. It's the ruin that allows God's people to stay close to him and return to him because as we saw in our confession of faith this morning, it is repentance that leads unto life.

And so we cannot stay close to God. We cannot be his people following with him on his mission unless we understand the ruin that is all around us. But when we see the ruin, when we understand the ruin, that is when repentance is our great hope.

[15:38] And so that's where Nehemiah turns next. First, we see, of course, that he weeps and mourns here over his sin, over the destruction that he sees. By the way, this is a long-term destruction.

This is not something that's happened in a day or a week, right? God's people returned in 538 and this is 446. So almost 100 years since God has set his people free through the Persian Empire. This has been something that's not been in the making for days or weeks but for years. And so it's not a small problem but a big problem. There are some people in this world that will say that the only people who can solve our problems is us.

And that's great advice for certain things in life. It's great to take responsibility. It's great to take the things that are before you and be responsible for them and in charge of them. But what we see here in God's word is that we are not the only people who can fix our problems because our problems are so much bigger than us.

The reality of sin is so powerful and destructive that only God himself can come and help us and save us. And so when we see the destruction, repentance is our great hope.

[16:54] And that's where we see Nehemiah go next. After he's done weeping and mourning and fasting and praying, we then hear his prayer here. And based on what we know from this book, of course it says he prays day and night.

He did this for days. We were going to find out in chapter 2 that it's multiple months later that he takes any action. And so what we see here is Nehemiah's prayer that has been truncated. It's been put down as this is a summary of what Nehemiah prayed to God for months.

And his prayer here is one of repentance. See in verse 6 he asks God to hear because he's confessing the sins of the people of Israel which we have sinned against you.

Even I and my father's house have sinned. And so staying close to God is not just seeing the ruin. Because if all we see is the ruin around us it will lead us to despair.

But instead seeing the ruin and then turning in repentance to God. Nehemiah here repents on behalf of the people. He's a leader. He's going to become a leader. And so he repents for all of their sins but he also acknowledges his own role in it.

[18:01] It's not just a problem that other people out there have caused but Nehemiah and his family are implicated as well. They're implicated in the fact that Israel has failed to be a light to the nations.

They were supposed to remember the poor and worship God. And instead they've forgotten the poor and chased after other gods. They were supposed to build their families and said they'd have destroyed them.

And so Nehemiah repents. He sees the ruin but instead of saying this is a problem only I can fix he realizes that this is a problem only God can fix.

And so as we turn back to God and stay close to him and follow after him it means that day by day we have to do what Martin Luther said which is we live a life of faith and repentance. We look at our sins we see the destruction but then we turn back to God tell him our sins and confess to them knowing that he will forgive us that his faithfulness is for everyone who turns back to him.

So Nehemiah confesses not just other people's sins but his as well. You may remember the story now almost a decade ago in 2009 the former South Carolina governor Mark Sanford had an unfortunate end to his career in June of 2009 he went missing and no one knew where he was.

[19:27] The now famous story that his office told people is that he was hiking on the Appalachian Trail turned out he was very far from the Appalachian Trail he was actually in Argentina and he was in Argentina with a mistress a woman he was not married to and the media finally caught up with him and so when he came back he had a press conference filled with tears and he said this I have spent the last five days of my life crying in Argentina I am committed to trying to get my heart right what I did was wrong period end of story and then he spent the next several years apologizing to the people that he had hurt the groups that he had hurt the political associations that he had let down and he had a real ruin Mark Sanford lost his marriage he was supposed to be a presidential

hopeful which immediately died that day he continued to have struggles he ended up divorcing he didn't continue on a perfect path and whether you agree with his politics or not

I think what we can all agree about is this what Mark did is rare for both Republicans and Democrats which is that he had real repentance he didn't cover over his sins and find someone else to blame for it Nehemiah doesn't find someone who's going to take the blame for him here he doesn't just say the people of Israel it's their fault but he says me and my family and so Mark Sanford's repentance was imperfect it didn't happen until it was caught but it did happen and so he models here what Nehemiah also models for us that when we see the ruin and destruction of sin we don't minimize it we don't cover it up we don't try harder just to make up for what's lost but we come and we repent to other people we say what I did was wrong I'm sorry please forgive me and this is a problem bigger than I can solve it's something that I need God himself to come and fix remember when we talked about the apostle Peter in Matthew chapter 26

I reminded you that our tears are a sign of spiritual life when we're weeping over our sin it's a reminder that God is still at work in our lives because it's possible to see the ruin and not repent there are many people who see the ruin in their lives and instead they try to hide or minimize it maybe they try to work harder maybe they just feel shame or maybe we just refuse to see the ruin but here Nehemiah shows us a different way he shows us God's way for his people he doesn't just see the ruin but he repents he turns back to God as I have spent several decades now in the church I have met many people who want to be great spiritually I've met many people who want to be big men or big women spiritually and that's not a wrong desire it's not wrong to want to be great spiritually the problem is that God's definition of greatness and our definition of greatness are not the same if you're a child if you're a youth being great spiritually does not mean that you get all the answers right in Sunday school if you are a parent being great spiritually does not mean that no one ever sees your children misbehave if you are a Christian trying to follow after Jesus being great spiritually does not mean you have a better quiet time than other people or a more comprehensive knowledge of the Bible but spiritual greatness is found in one thing if you want to be a big man spiritually if you want to be a big woman spiritually there is only one path and that path is the path of repentance in our New Testament reading this morning we read from Paul one of the greatest men spiritually and as he nears the end of his life what he tells people is that he has discovered that he is the greatest of sinners the secret of Paul's greatness spiritually is that he understands his sin and he's repenting of it

Nehemiah we're going to see is a great man spiritually and he's a great man because he sees his sin here and repents of it when I was in college I went to a mentor at one point and I asked him a question I said you know I hear people talk all the time about leading their families and how important it is for men to lead their families and you know I don't really know what that means you know you're older and wiser what does that mean what does it mean to lead your family this man was a pastor and he said you know I'll tell you what it doesn't mean it doesn't mean that I pull my wife aside and I point her to passages in the Bible and say honey you need to know this and learn this because she listens to me as it is but Matthew I'll tell you a story about what it means for me to lead my family spiritually recently I was driving my elementary daughter to school and as I was driving she was fussing and I just got more and more frustrated with her and as I dropped her off at school I finally lost it and I just started yelling at her I was so done and so frustrated he said it impacted her very deeply shortly after that she began having night terrors and difficulty sleeping he said the way that I lead my family spiritually is I repent to them I tell my daughter how wrong it was for me to do that that I'm sorry that her father needs Jesus and so I lead them by repenting because I show them my need for Jesus to help them understand their need as well leadership is repentance and repentance is leadership and if we want to be great spiritually then we must repent if you spend any time in the mountains here in

[ 26 : 19 ] Colorado you know that as the tree line goes up suddenly the trees start to disappear the higher and higher you get on the mountain right the closer you get to the ridge the less there is that's growing now that's for several reasons one is the wind is so high it's hard for anything to grow but the other reason is that there's not much oxygen up there and so as you head up the mountain plants start to disappear they start to drop off because they simply can't breathe there's no ability or opportunity for them to grow repentance is the spiritual oxygen of our lives we cannot expect anything great or good to happen in our church in our families and in our lives without repentance and so if we want to be great if we want to see new and exciting spiritual fruit pop up in our lives in

our families and in our church we want as much oxygen as we can get if we want to see a beautiful forest then we have to provide the oxygen of repentance to the people around us it's easy to tell people that no one is so good that they don't need God's grace but it's also easy to live like we don't believe it if we say that we need

God's grace but refuse to repent of the ruin that we're telling people that by our lives that we don't there's nothing that we need from God and so we stay close to God we return to him by seeing the ruin we return to him by repenting but finally we have to see the great hope that God has for everyone who turns back to him if all we could see is the destruction if all Nehemiah knew is that the walls were broken down and shame and trouble then it would lead simply to him being overwhelmed or it could lead to his self-righteousness here we skipped over verse five do you notice what Nehemiah said there repenting wasn't actually the first thing he did he addresses God and says oh Lord God of heaven the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfastness love with those who love him and keep his commandments this steadfast love is the same phrase that we saw in the book of Ruth and it's the same phrase that we saw in December in the Psalms it is God's never stopping never giving up unbreaking always and forever love God's people have failed him they've created a ruin they've had almost a hundred years to rebuild the city and yet they haven't but we see in verse 9 what this steadfast love looks like starting in verse 8 remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses saying if you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen to make my name dwell there in other words

Nehemiah is able to repent he's able to confess his sin because he knows how great and awesome God's love is and he knows that God offers his grace and his forgiveness for anyone who returns and turns back to him and so as he looks out over a hundred plus years of ruin Nehemiah is not without hope as he looks at something that has been caused by decades of sin and destruction Nehemiah knows that God is still faithful and so the same is true of us as well whether we are looking back on five decades of mistakes or seven decades if we are still alive and breathing here today in this room God has hope for us his steadfast love is still for us and the offer of verse nine is still for us if we return to him he will gather us and bring us back so then we hear in verse 10 they are your servants and your people whom you have redeemed by your great power and your strong hand while Nehemiah starts with crying we're going to see that he doesn't end there because he knows how powerful God's grace is and so as we return to God and stay close to

God if we only see the ruin and our repentance it will crush us but God's redemption is real his hope is real and his offer of grace is real for anyone and everyone who turns back to him and the reason his grace is real is because later there's going to come another son of Israel his name is going to be Jesus we celebrated his first coming in advent and he is going to come and take the penalty for the sins of Nehemiah of his people and of everyone else who turns back to him Jesus is going to tell a story in Matthew chapter 18 about his people that he refers to as sheep and he says this what do you think if a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray and if he finds it truly I say to you he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray God will leave the ninety-nine sheep to pursue the one so that he will return to him and so the same grace that is here for Nehemiah is for us and we get a hint of it here at the end the very last verse Nehemiah has looked at the destruction he has seen what has happened from unfaithfulness for centuries what seems insurmountable and impossible he repents and he cries out to

[ 33 : 33 ] God in this moment for God's help and what do we find out as the chapter closes God's steadfast love is real because as Nehemiah repents and turns back to God God has placed him in the very right place he is cut bearer to the king in other words Nehemiah by no accident but because of God's faithfulness and his steadfast love is one of the most powerful people in the Persian Empire and so God is already at work bringing back the one he's already at work with his steadfast love and so we're going to see as Nehemiah continues that God is going to stay true to everything that we hear here he's going to meet those who repent and help them return he's going to be faithful to his promises and even though they have created a ruin it is going to be God who is going to lead them out famous story is told about the English writer G.K.

Chesterton at one point in his life he saw an advertisement in the newspaper asking for people to write in letters responding to one question the question was this what is wrong with the world G.K.

Chesterton wrote back a very short response says this dear sir regarding your article what's wrong with the world I am yours truly G.K.

Chesterton it's when we understand that the ruin is not just around us but in us and we turn back to God in repentance and say the problem with the world is me that God meets us with his love and his grace no matter how much we've messed up no matter how many decades or centuries of ruin there is because it is his joy and his delight to leave the 99 to find the one and so because that's God's heart and his desire we can pray to him and cry out to him and so let's do that now dear father in heaven we thank you so much that you have called us to yourself you've made us your people we confess that the problems around us are not just around us but in us and so we ask that you would help us you'd send your spirit to give us soft and tender hearts that we'd see the destruction of sin we ask that you would cause us to return to you in repentance but most of all that you would show us that there is hope there is hope in you and your grace because Jesus was willing to take the full punishment for our sins and so we put our trust and our hope in him knowing that you hear our prayers not because we have done anything but because Jesus has and so we ask it in his name amen please stand for our closing songip.com nope independence you you