

Series: Exiles	Reference: Nehemiah 9:32-37	Title: Hike with Your Head Up!	Date: 11.27.22
Website Writeup:			
The story of Ezra speaks to the need for genuine repentance when sin has nearly ruined us. Acknowledging that their sin had left them spiritually bankrupt, the exiles had to admit their failures & go to extreme measures to correct them. When God calls us to turn back toward Him so we can accomplish what He has set for us, we must be willing to make significant changes to honor Him.			

Color Changes in text indicate slide changes

Turn with me to p336 in your pew Bibles to Nehemiah 9:32-37, and follow along as I read. But keep it open given we will refer to it often this morning throughout the sermon.

It begins...*“Now therefore, our God, the great God, mighty & awesome, who keeps his covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes - the hardship that has come on us, on our kings & leaders, on our priests & prophets, on our ancestors & all your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until today.*

If we remember, God allowed the Assyrians to conquer Israel due to her unwillingness to follow Him. To apply this today, what if we imagined if we were writing this passage now as God’s people. *If we did, we might say, “God, you are faithful to your promise of love! You are incredible, strong & unchanging in your character of love as you have sustained us through & delivered us from so much. Please consider the pain we’ve been through! From the days since we were conquered by our cultural ideologies until now!” Since we know the modern Church has prostituted itself to culture, comprised it’s witness, values & beliefs for the sake of acceptance & ease. We have listened to other voices, and not Gods.*

It continues in v33...³³In all that has happened to us, you have remained righteous; you have acted faithfully, while we acted wickedly. ³⁴Our kings, our leaders, our priests & our ancestors did not follow your law; they did not pay attention to your commands or the statutes you warned them to keep. ³⁵Even while they were in their kingdom, enjoying your great goodness to them in the spacious & fertile land you gave them, they did not serve you or turn from their evil ways.

Again, if we were to write this in 2022 we might say, “In all that has happened to us, you have remained righteous & good; you have acted faithfully, while we acted wickedly. The Church as a whole has not lived in accordance with your Gospel, we have not listened to the wisdom of your Word! Even when you’d blessed us with so much in this free & beautiful land. Even when we’ve benefited from your goodness & provisional abundance, we’ve paid no attention to your kingdom call & refused to repent from our evil ways.”

Remember, Barna Research tells us only 13% of teaching pastors preach from a Biblical Worldview. Which means 87% preach a message maybe using the Bible but it is a

syncretistic message polluted by current cultural ideologies - and we have allowed them because we have agreed with them - we've participated in that sin.

It continues, v36...³⁶*“But see, we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our ancestors so they could eat its fruit & the other good things it produces. ³⁷Because of our sins, its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies & our cattle as they please. We are in great distress.*

And finally, a translation for modern times might be, “We are slaves of our own making, we realize that now. Because of our sins, we lose our freedom, and those who do not know you increasingly exert control over us, colonized by that which is not of You.”

The story of Ezra speaks to the need for genuine repentance when sin has nearly ruined us. Acknowledging that their sin had left them spiritually bankrupt, the exiles had to admit their failures & go to extreme measures to correct them. When God calls us to turn back toward Him so we can accomplish what He's set before us, we must be willing to make significant changes in order to honor Him.

When backpacking, it's smart to do it on a marked trail. Sometimes the trail in a forest is not so clearly followed, not worn away enough, or leaves have covered the trail. If it's marked, you're able to follow easily. So forestry agents mark trees with colored blazes. When there's a turn in the trail, they use two in a certain order to show the turn. So, if you hike with your head down not paying attention to trail markers you can get easily lost. Let's say you're hiking for half a day, and suddenly look up only to find there are no trail markers, and you're lost. What would you do? Would you say, “Well...I'm lost, so I am just going to keep going, I'm sure I will get to my destination if I just push forward.” Although it's exactly that which has gotten you lost in the first place? Logic would tell you, “That will only get me more lost!” It would be pigheaded & idiotic to do so.

The logical & right answer is to turn around & backtrack to find the trail-markers & original trail then continue to hike with your head up, following them to your desired designation. *In other words, you go back to go forward - back but not backwards.* Backwards would actually be to keep on the same course which got you lost in the first place. We all want progress, but progress often means to turn back to find the right path. And in that case, the person who's willing to turn back is wise.

The same's true with math, if you make a mistake & realize it, the faster you erase your mistakes & begin again, with the proper principles which would solve the equation, the sooner you get to the right answer. God's Word to us is like a marked trail through life. It is the safe & healthy route through a treacherous wood which leads to the right destination. The proper steps to the right answers.

Israel throughout their history often got lost like this. By disregarding the marked trail of Gods Word. Verses 1-31 of this chapter, outlines the history of Israel clearly. How God blessed them with all of creation, chose Abraham & made an everlasting covenant with him to build God's people & give them fruitful land. Then in v8 it says...*“You have kept*

your promise because you are righteous.” Then it recounts their time in Egyptian slavery, and how God rescued them from that in mighty ways, sustaining them through the desert to Mt Sinai, where they rebelled again even as Moses was given the Ten Commandments, which they refer to in v13 saying... “You gave them regulations & laws that are just & right, and decrees & commands that are good.” Trail-markers for life!

It outlines how God fed them & gave them water in the desert. Then again how He led them to go & find the land promised to their ancestors. *But again in vv16-19 it says, “But they, our ancestors, became arrogant & stiff-necked, and they did not obey your commands. ¹⁷They refused to listen & failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked & in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. But you are a forgiving God, gracious & compassionate, slow to anger & abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them, ¹⁸even when they cast for themselves an image of a calf & said, ‘This is your god, who brought you up out of Egypt,’ or when they committed awful blasphemies. ¹⁹Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them in the wilderness.”*

For 40 years God sustained them in that wilderness. Then God conquered the evil sin of other nations to bring them into a spacious & abundant promised land. But again, v26 tells us... *“But they were disobedient & rebelled against you; they turned their backs on your law. They killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you; they committed awful blasphemies.”*

So, what was God’s choice in response to a rebellious people who constantly went off trail? It tells us in v27...*“So you delivered them into the hands of their enemies, who oppressed them. But when they were oppressed they cried out to you. From heaven you heard them, and in your great compassion you gave them deliverers, who rescued them from the hand of their enemies.”*

But again they go off trail, v28 says...*“But as soon as they were at rest, they again did what was evil in your sight. Then you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies so that they ruled over them. And when they cried out to you again, you heard from heaven, and in your compassion you delivered them time after time.”*

And then again vv29-31 tells us...*“You warned them in order to turn them back to your law, but they became arrogant & disobeyed your commands. They sinned against your ordinances, of which you said, ‘The person who obeys them will live by them.’ Stubbornly they turned their backs on you, became stiff-necked & refused to listen. ³⁰For many years you were patient with them. By your Spirit you warned them through your prophets. Yet they paid no attention, so you gave them into the hands of the neighboring peoples. ³¹But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious & merciful God.”*

What’s the definition of insanity? Doing the same thing expecting different results. Going off trail, and instead of turning back to the right path, you push forward anyway only getting more lost. The Scripture preaches itself! After this prayer focusing on the

history of Israel, God's promises & provisions, and personal acknowledgement of sin, the Levites lead the exiles in this prayer of restoration. Let's hope this is true repentance, a turning away from a lost & destructive path, in order to return to God's sure path which leads to life!

One commentator claims the Levites' 'prayer' is directed as a sermon to them, as much as it is a prayer to God.¹ Outlining God's presence throughout the history of Israel, painting a picture of His ongoing work in creation. Depicting God as Sovereign Lord of all creation who preserves His divine handiwork, and the appropriate response to such a God can only be lavish thankful worship.²

The Levites paint a picture of the exiles' continued battle with sin & disobedience by identifying the ways their present generation had participated in the same sins as their ancestors (9:26-31). Sometimes the best way to connect the work of God in the past to our present circumstance is to show how in the present, people still behave the same way.

Many of us who proclaim to be followers of Christ stand in the proverbial woods, donning our backpacks full of self-help books & cultural ideologies, looking around not knowing where we are. Lost. Wisdom & Scripture dictate we give careful thought to our ways, asking what's brought us here? The answer is we've lost sight of God's Word. Like Israel in v28, as soon as we are at rest, feeling blessed & at peace, and trouble & strife are not at our doorstep, we turn away. Affluence is the most potent wine we may drink.

We don't sit at the foot of Christ allowing Him speak to us through His Word in order to define our worldview. We pick & choose what we like from here & there. Taking side trails of cultural ideologies designed by the enemy to deceive, and it's gotten us nothing but lost. We let the world define our god, not His Word. Let the world define love, although God is love, and what He says is loving even when it seems countercultural. Even whole Christian movements syncretize the message of Christ with the secular worldview.

In a book review, Emily Morales says culture tells us to find meaning in ourselves, whereas the Christian worldview says we find meaning in Christ; outside ourselves. She says counterintuitively, it's the search for happiness which leads to greater discontentment. The good life is found when we give up pursuing happiness & pursue meaning instead, that are true selves are found in following Christ, setting aside self-interest & serving others. The two worldviews couldn't be more different, one has to be right, and the other wrong.³

¹ Mark A. Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, Interpretation [Louisville: John Knox Press, 1992], 102, Logos

² Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 104

³ Salvo #63 Winter 2022, Want a Good Life? Emily Morales, p12.

But although we do this, the great promise of hope found in the confession of Nehemiah chapter 9 (vv33-38) is that God has remained faithful even when they had not. Is that not the Gospel? That God redeems even when we wander off path & deserve the worst of punishment! That God has remained the same throughout old & new Testament! Constantly redeeming & restoring even when we go astray in the most heinous of ways!

The confession points to what the exiles trust to be true, that God's a covenant God. He makes promises He does not & cannot break, since it would be counter to His character to do so. Breneman explains it well: "The covenant relation between God & His people is central in the Bible. The people knew God was faithful & merciful because of His action in the past. They recognized that God is 'the great, mighty & awesome God,' all powerful & sovereign; yet they remembered His covenant of love with his people."⁴

Knowing this to be true would create a high level of trust for God. When everything & everyone else fail us, God will not. That a thankful attitude is key, despite our suffering. Finding the things we can control in our internal environment in choosing to believe Gods promises are far more fundamental to achieving the good life than are the things we can't control in our external environment. Knowing this, we can acknowledge that we often bring about our own misery when we choose to ignore His word. He's laid the trail, all we need do is follow the markers.

As these exiles returned back to the true marked trail, worshipping God is necessary for humanity, they could trust His promises to hold true even when they hadn't held up their side. Repentance is the key to restoration. Once restored, they knew they could approach God with confidence because they knew His promises they'd heard in the reading of the Law. The promises they'd heard based on passages such as 2 Chronicles 7:14 when Solomon had dedicated the temple which says, "...if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

The key to the exiles turning toward God would be their willingness to acknowledge & accept that God's judgment had been just & that the punishment they suffered was of their own doing (9:33-37). This was no time for excuses. This means scratching our 'buts'. If you've ever been wronged by someone & they say, "I'm sorry, but..." It doesn't feel like a true apology, does it? The 'but' negates the apology. I'm sorry, but I was hungry. I'm sorry, but I was so depressed. I'm sorry, but they told me to do it. None of that flies with a parent when a child does wrong. My mom used to say, "I don't care what everyone else does, I care about you." True repentance means no excuses, it's an acknowledgment of our total depravity before God - not even driven by the desire to experience blessing again, it's simply a contrite broken spirit which says, "You're God, I will listen, since You know best!"

⁴ Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, The New American Commentary 10 [Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1993], 242, Logos

The need for restoration was obvious, but the restoration would happen only when they acknowledged their need for repentance. Once that occurred, the promise would fuel their desire to be willing to do whatever necessary to return to God's covenant.

Breneman describes why the themes for restoration found here are critical for believers today. He says, "This chapter is full of practical theology. It puts the emphasis on three great themes: (1) what God has done, (2) how the people disobeyed God, and (3) what God continues to do in history. These were very important themes for the community of returned exiles as they are for us today. God's providential role in history is displayed with great care in this chapter. What humans may attribute to secular causes, the biblical authors understood to have been derived from none other than the living God."⁵ And we have been drunk on the secular notions of why things are the way they are!

We all make decisions that sometimes require us to admit we've been wrong. It's not easy, but it's a requirement. In the movie *Braveheart*, Robert the Bruce recognizes his own failures & admits his own betrayal in letting his father deceive him into giving up William Wallace, although it was the wrong thing to do. In the scene where he confronts his father, Robert the Bruce says, "You deceived me!" And his father replies, "You let yourself be deceived, you always knew what had to happen here." Deep down we know we've allowed ourselves to be deceived, we've given ourselves over to the Enemy in various ways. We've chosen to go off the marked path of God given it looked interesting, fun, or to be easier. We no longer have the moral backbone, confidence, or strong character to speak Truth to a lost world.

An interesting verse in chapter 9 is v2 where it says... "*Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places & confessed their sins & the sins of their ancestors.*" Symbolizing that they had to separate themselves from the world, its ideologies, philosophies, and lies in order to focus on how they'd turned away from God's perfect ways. We too are called to be separate, although not geographically, but in a Biblical Worldview - how we see reality, defined by the Word of God. Called to take every thought captive to Christ, to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, led by the Holy Spirit. Without which we will always go off trail.

Sometimes personal redemption comes as a result of being in the presence of someone who's been redeemed & lives that out in front of us. Ron Nikkel speaks of this reality in his telling of the story of Chuck Colson. After visiting many people in prison with Chuck, Nikkel states, "I met Jesus, as if for the first time, when I saw His love expressed through Chuck embracing suffering sweaty inmates in the depths of their failure; when I saw one man's story of redemption & friendship with Jesus igniting hope among desolate & forgotten prisoners."⁶

⁵ Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 243

⁶ Ron Nikkel, "Chuck Colson: A Redemption Story," *Huffington Post*, updated June 26, 2012, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/chuck-colson-redemption-story_b_1450214

Colson is quoted in his book, *Loving God*, as saying...“all my achievements meant nothing in God's economy. No, the real legacy of my life was my biggest failure - that I was an ex-convict. My greatest humiliation - being sent to prison - was the beginning of God's greatest use of my life...only when I lost everything I thought made Chuck Colson a great guy had I found the true self God intended me to be & the true purpose of my life. It's not what we do that matters, but what a sovereign God chooses to do through us. God doesn't want our success; He wants us. He doesn't demand our achievements; He demands our obedience...Victory comes through defeat; Healing through brokenness; Finding self through losing self.”

When we consider the significance of being able to commune with God through worship, we must be willing to accept that repentance will always be a key component to this. Repentance reminds us of how the relationship with God works & why we're grateful for it to work this way.

Hike with your head up, follow the markers! Stop following your own path, get back to God's promises through His which will lead us to our right designation. (Tim Keller, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*.)