

Lean Into God's Grace

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sometimes in movies, there is an intense scene in a lawyer's office, as the lawyer reads the family a deceased loved one's last will and testament; and sometimes the departed loved one had written something into his will that was very surprising. Perhaps he expresses a love for and a joy over a daughter—a love and a joy he never communicated very well when he was alive; and for the daughter to hear this is at once a source of joy, and yet, some pain. She may even find her eyes welling up with tears. Well, in the book of Nehemiah, something like that happens to the Israelites when they hear from God in a way that hadn't happened in generations. It is quite a moving scene. Today on *Groundwork*, we will dig into that story. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, this is the final of four programs of a series we have been doing on Ezra and Nehemiah. We have seen the larger stories—some of the political intrigue of the Persian king Cyrus, who released Israel from captivity; and then some of the goings on with other Persian kings named Darius and Xerxes and Artaxerxes; and there has been a lot of up and down in the story. Things didn't go smoothly for Israel for a really long time.

DAVE BAST

One of the themes that we have pointed out...tried to stress, really...I think for our encouragement...for all of us, is that the life of faith... It reminds me of the line: The course of true love never did run smoothly. The course of true faith never does run smoothly; and there is opposition from without; people may mock and sneer, like Tobiah and Sanballat, you know, laughing at the effort to build the wall at first. There is opposition that can be more overt and physical threats. They threatened to kill Nehemiah and the rest of the people as they worked on rebuilding. Opposition from within when our own sin maybe causes disruption; or social relations break down; or the lack of justice—basic justice—in a community leads to tension. So, we have seen all this, and yet, the people persevered. God saw them through, and they stuck to it, too, with their own efforts.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And as we get into the latter part of Nehemiah, we are skipping a lot; there is, frankly, a lot in Ezra and Nehemiah that is kind of not all that inspiring. There are long lists, there are political correspondence between kings and emperors; but some interesting narrative things bob and weave through all that. Now we are getting to Nehemiah 8; and even though we are in Nehemiah, Dave, the passage we are about to hear is involving Ezra and the role of Ezra...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; he is kind of the star.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we have kind of gotten things rebuilt, and the walls and the temple are coming together, and then we read this in Nehemiah 8.

DAVE BAST

All the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra, the teacher of the law, to bring out the book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel. ²So on the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. ³He read it aloud from daybreak till noon, as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand; and all the people listened attentively to the book of the law.

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁵Ezra opened the book, and all the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up; ⁶and Ezra praised the Lord God, and all the people lifted up their hands and responded, “Amen, amen!” And they bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. ⁹Then Nehemiah, the governor, Ezra, the priest and teacher of the law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them, “This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep,” because all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the law. ¹⁰Nehemiah said to them, “No; go and enjoy choice foods and sweet drinks and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” ¹¹And the Levites calmed the people, saying, “Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve.” ¹²And all the people went away to eat and drink, and to send portions of food, and to celebrate with great joy, because now they understand the words that had been made known to them.

DAVE BAST

So, there are a couple of interesting things in this passage. One is that the people all stood up when the Word of God was read, which some churches still do today. There are some other elements, and we are going to want to unpack this whole thing, but there is one phrase that really jumps out in this section, and that is the verse: The joy of the Lord is your strength.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is probably the only passage from Nehemiah most people know, and most people probably don't know that it is from Nehemiah. It is interesting he says that to them, because they do weep as they hear the Law of God read to them. Why would they weep? Well, I think, Dave, we could think of a couple reasons. One, maybe they sensed the beauty of God's love for them, right? You give rules to people you love. Why do we have rules in our household? We tell our kids: Don't stick a fork in the electrical outlet; look both ways before you cross the street. We want to keep them safe. You give rules to protect those whom you love. So, in hearing the Law of God, which doesn't sound like an emotional thing, but it is if you realize that behind that is the love of God; and maybe they had forgotten how much God loved them, and it moved them to tears.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I mean, the Law of God is a kind of comprehensive phrase that takes in a lot of the Bible...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

But more narrowly, it is the Ten Commandments; and if you think of that passage where the Ten Commandments are given, which is in Exodus 20, it starts out: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. It doesn't start with: Do this, don't do that; it starts with I am the Lord your God—that's who I am. I love you; I have saved you; I have rescued you; and that tugged at the heartstrings of the people, certainly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; a second reason, though...and we will see that this is certainly also validated by the further story...a second reason they might have wept is, well, they hadn't heard this in a long time, and they realized: Oh, boy; God gave these rules to keep us safe and to help us have delight and flourishing in our lives; and we haven't been living this way. So, they saw the disconnect between the will of God and how they had actually been living; and they felt guilty—they felt ashamed—and so, there were some tears of contrition here as well.

DAVE BAST

Frankly, I think our worship services all should contain a time of formal, public confession of sin. Some churches maybe think of that as a downer...and the truth of it is, no, we need to be reminded that we do fall short, and we need to acknowledge that before God; that is just honesty.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and we are going to see in the next segment that they do. They will have a time of confession; but not yet—not yet. First, Nehemiah says, celebrate. Let's have a feast—let's have a party. If you know some neighbors who don't have much food, would you please share your food and your drink with them, because the joy of the Lord is our strength. We are here today to be grateful. We will confess soon, but first let's celebrate; and indeed, as you say, Dave, hopefully that is true of all of our worship every week, that we should receive all over again the good news of the gospel, that God is love; and that God loves us, and that he is a gracious God; and what a wonderful thing for us to experience; and that is what they wanted the people to focus on first; but, coming up in just a minute, Dave, we will take a look at what happens next in the story.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are wrapping up a series on rebuilding the city—the walls of Jerusalem, the temple in Jerusalem—after the disaster of the exile; and sort of thinking about how we need to rebuild at times in our lives, and how to do that...how to go about that. So, we have seen a number of themes related to that, and today we are looking at this wonderful passage, primarily in Nehemiah Chapter 8, where the people come together, they hear God's Word, and they begin to weep and grieve out of this reminder that God does love them, but yes, they fall short...they are still sinful; but they are told again and again: Don't just cry. This is a holy day. I like that. Twice in this passage they are told: Because this day is holy, you shouldn't be grieving. It is just so special. It is like a holiday, I think. That is actually where that word comes from: Holy day; so don't weep, don't grieve. God loves you. What a great reminder.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And there is another aspect of this passage...we won't read it, but we will summarize it, Dave...it is almost kind of funny because as Ezra read the law—the Pentateuch—books like Leviticus and so forth—the people, as they listened, they realized at one point they heard about this thing called the Festival of Booths that they were supposed to do every year. It was a festival that was to remind them of their wilderness time; and at that time you built a temporary shelter in your front yard. It was sort of like, you camp out in your front yard with a temporary shelter to remind you, you know, of that. Well, as Ezra read the law, the people said: Wait a minute, wait a minute; that's today! That's this time of the year! And so, Nehemiah said: You're right. Head to the hills. Go get some sticks. Build yourself a shelter. It would be almost like, Dave, suppose...if you could even imagine this anymore...it would be like somebody forgot about Christmas, and all of a sudden they heard that in December we are supposed to celebrate the birth of Jesus, and it is like: It is December. We gotta go out and get a tree! We gotta go get some presents. We gotta get an Advent wreath...

DAVE BAST

It's like December 24th...we'd better hurry up and decorate the sanctuary; yes, exactly; so, let's go do that; and you realize, wow, how much they had forgotten.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

They weren't celebrating...and if they didn't celebrate Tabernacles, they probably hadn't celebrated Passover either.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, they had lost hold of this precious deposit of their faith, and this precious practice. We need rituals...we need festivals to remind us...we need holy days...holidays; and so, yes, they go out and do that. They celebrated as best they could, but then they come together a little bit later, in the next chapter...in Nehemiah 9...and they scheduled a special worship service just to confess, as they felt they needed to; and so, here is how it is described:

On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads. ²Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors. ³They stood where they were and read from the book of the Law of the Lord, their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshipping the Lord their God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, interesting. They spent half their time listening to more scripture, and then the other half confessing where they fall short from what they learned in scripture; and Dave, you mentioned in the first segment that confession of sin has fallen on hard times in a lot of churches...not all...but there are a lot of churches where it is just rarely, if ever, done anymore, partly because people think it is kind of a downer; and of course, you can go too far and you can become a real downer...

DAVE BAST

It can become pathological, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, it is supposed to lead to joy. After confession comes assurance, and through assurance comes that reminder of God's grace all over again; and Dave, that is exactly what ends up happening in Nehemiah Chapter 9. So, after this period of sackcloth and ashes, and dust on their heads and so forth, then the people respond this way; and Nehemiah and Ezra are talking to the people and they say together:

^{5b}Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise! ⁶You alone are the Lord. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, and the sea and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you. ⁷You are the Lord God, who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans, and named him Abraham; ⁸you found his heart faithful to you and you made a covenant with him to give his descendants the land of the Canaanites...and you have kept your promise because you are righteous.

DAVE BAST

Yes, interesting here; in the midst of this service of hearing the Word and confessing their sins, they not only confess their sins, they confess the sins of their ancestors, it says; and they so identify with all the people of God through all the centuries, that they identify with them in their sins; but they also, then, take that story as their story. So, we go on reading in Nehemiah Chapter 9:

⁹You saw the suffering of our ancestors in Egypt; you heard their cry at the Red Sea. ¹⁰You sent signs and wonders against Pharaoh... ¹³You came down on Mount Sinai; you spoke to them from heaven. You gave them regulations and laws that are just and right... ¹⁶but they, our ancestors, became arrogant and stiff-necked and they did not obey your commands. ¹⁷They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles

you had performed among them... ¹⁹Because of your great compassion, you did not abandon them. By day the pillar of cloud guided them on their path; the pillar of fire by night. ²⁰You gave your good Spirit to instruct them. You did not withhold your manna from their mouths.
They tell the whole story.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They retell the whole...and it goes on!

DAVE BAST

And it is their story, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It actually goes on. We are cutting it short. This goes on from verse 5 to verse 37 of Nehemiah [Chapter 9], rehearsing the story so as to make it their story, so that they situate themselves inside God's grand narrative; and you know, Dave, my colleague John Witvliet of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship has said that that is ideally what all of our worship services should be. Every week we should recapitulate...we should retell our story; from creation through redemption and on into the hope of the renewal of all things, this is our story.

So, the people confess their sins, they hear God's forgiveness, and then they respond by retelling the whole sacred story of the whole Bible; and that locates them in that story; it locates them in that grace and goodness of God; and fills them with joy.

DAVE BAST

I love the thought that the whole story is our story. So, yes, the bad parts of it...that is us, too...we are involved in that. Just because we weren't there...just because we didn't do it doesn't mean...in fact, if you look all the way back to Nehemiah Chapter 1, almost the first thing Nehemiah does when he hears the bad news is, he confesses the sins of the people of Israel; and Nehemiah had never even been to Jerusalem...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

You know, he had grown up in Babylon; but he so identifies himself; and then, the good parts of the story are ours, too...the story of salvation. I love this insight from the great, early 20th Century theologian, J. Gresham Machen, who says that the way God changes people...you think it might be by moral exhortation; you know, just be good; do this; follow the law; here are the rules; do that...and Machen said: No, he doesn't do it that way. He changes people by telling them a story, and the climax of the story, which began with Abraham and continued with Moses and the exodus, and then the return from exile, the climax happened on a cross and at an empty tomb when Jesus died and rose again.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is their story, and that is now the continuation of that story into the era of the Church; and it is great to remind ourselves of that all the time. In just a moment, we are going to finish up this series, and the book of Nehemiah, with just a few final observations. So, stay tuned.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we are finishing up this series on the books of Ezra and Nehemiah; two books that maybe some of us don't turn to that often, and as we have said, there are some long stretches in

those books that are just a little less than inspiring, but the story is there; and Dave, we have been saying that there is great reason to be thankful that there was an Ezra, there was a Nehemiah. They were key leaders of Israel. They helped to begin rebuilding Jerusalem and the temple. God raised them up for a very important purpose. We don't know a lot more about them. We don't know exactly where they ended up. The overall period of time...the history of Israel after the exile...is a little bit murky. We get into the intertestamental period eventually, which is kind of a silent period, before we get to the birth of Jesus. One thing we do know is that despite all the hope and optimism, and some of the praise we just saw in Nehemiah 8 and 9, Israel is never really free again. They are still under the... So, the Babylonians conquered them; the Persians send them back, but still ruled them; the Persians are going to go away soon and Alexander the Great will come and rule over the Jews in Israel; then the Romans come, and they will rule over Israel throughout Jesus' lifetime—throughout the early Church—and up until the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, which was the end of Israel thereafter, unless you count the new Israel that was formed after World War II in 1948.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and God had said to them, you know, you will have a king to sit forever on the throne of David, provided you obey and keep my covenant. The fact was, they didn't; and even Zerubbabel, though he was a descendant of David, wasn't really a king; he was just a governor under the Persians. So, it wasn't until, spiritually speaking, King Jesus came and set people free to become the Church that those promises would begin to be fulfilled.

So, a lot of stuff here; a lot of good things: We talked about the need to kind of persevere in the face of opposition; that the life of faith isn't always what you expected...it isn't always easy. We looked at Nehemiah and some lessons for leadership that we can see in him, and in the wisdom with which he acted...kind of the combination of prayer and faith on the one hand, but shrewd, practical action on the other. So, all those things are great, I think, takeaways from the study of these books.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and as the book closes, Nehemiah twice addresses God in Chapter 13, and we will just kind of combine here Nehemiah 13:22, and then Nehemiah 13:31, where he says: ^{22b}Remember me, also, for this, my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love. ^{31b}Remember me with favor, my God. So, there is sort of Nehemiah's final word...almost his epitaph...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The summary of his life.

DAVE BAST

And it is an interesting combination, because on the one hand, he is saying: God, look at all this stuff that I did; and I did it for you; I did it for your people; I gave my life...really, my best efforts to serve their welfare; so remember me for that. But then, he immediately pivots and says: Oh, and especially, remember me for your great love; show mercy to me according to your *chesed*—your great love; and there is one of the foundational words of the Bible, isn't it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; it's a Hebrew word. It has been variously translated. We have talked about it in other programs. It is sometimes called love; sometimes it is called loving-kindness; loving mercy...

DAVE BAST

Steadfast love...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Steadfast love...

DAVE BAST

Yes; covenant love...

SCOTT HOEZEE

But it is all this little word *chesed* in Hebrew; and particularly when you read the book of Psalms, it comes up all over the place as the number one trait of Israel's God, for which they give God praise: Because you are a God of *chesed*; and as we have suggested before, Dave, I think this is the Old Testament version of what in the New Testament is called grace; for it is by *grace* you have been saved, Paul says. It is all about grace, and in the New Testament that is the Greek word *charis*, but I think this Old Testament word, *chesed*, means the same thing. God is merciful; God is love; and when we ask God to remember us according to his grace, according to his *chesed*—his loving-kindness—we are banking on God's number one characteristic, that he is going to forgive us. We know we are not perfect; we know on our own we don't even deserve favor and mercy and forgiveness; and yet, all those things are ours in abundance now, particularly through Jesus Christ; that final anointed one in the line of David that the people of Israel were hoping for.

DAVE BAST

You know, we called this series: Rebuilding After Life Falls Apart. How do you do that? How do you face adverse circumstances? Certainly, the people under Ezra and Nehemiah faced plenty of those, but it is not a question simply of our strength, and sort of holding onto God, you know? If your life falls apart, make sure you don't lose your grip on God; hold onto God. Yes, okay; but much more important is the fact that God holds onto us; and that can give us confidence and hope. It makes me think of the promise of Jesus in John Chapter 10, when he talks about his sheep who know him, and he says that no one can snatch them from my [Jesus'] hand. I love that image that the Lord is holding onto us. Never mind about your grip on him, what matters more is his grip on us; and that is all suggested, too, by this idea of steadfast love, faithfulness. God will not let us go.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The gospel is good news because of that very fact, Dave. If the gospel message is: It's up to you, Scott; it's up to you, Dave; hang onto God for dear life; that is bad news, because I think I might lose my grip; but it is good news to know that we are in God's grip, and that that is a grip of grace. So, the last line of the Ezra/Nehemiah cycle of stories: Remember us with your gracious favor, O God; that is the prayer at the end of this story; but really, Dave, it is the prayer at the end of all of our stories; but because we know God will remember us, the end of our earthly stories is not the end, it is just the beginning; thanks be to God.

DAVE BAST

Thanks be to God, indeed. Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we continue to look into scripture as the foundation for our lives.

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