

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on Nehemiah 9:1-3, 16-21, 32-37 on August 9, 2015 at Victory of the Lamb.

Series: Nehemiah

Today's Focus: The People Confess Their Sin

"Keep God's Faithfulness In Focus"

How many of you wear glasses or contact lenses? I'll never forget going to the eye doctor over Christmas vacation when I was in 6th grade. I got my first pair of glasses. And I remember walking out of the store all of a sudden able to see individual Christmas lights off in the distance, everything all of sudden in sharp focus instead of it all being fuzzy. I had a brand new outlook on life and I remember thinking, "This is incredible! How could I not have noticed how fuzzy everything was before? Why did it take so long to figure this out and get my vision corrected?" That's when I first realized that it wasn't because I didn't notice it at all. After all I had some headaches. My eyes hurt from straining to read the chalkboard at school. And my basketball shooting percentage on the B team wasn't where I thought it should be. But I was stubborn. The reason I didn't get glasses sooner was because I didn't want to admit that I needed them.

Have you ever had a similar experience? Because the thing is....our spiritual life is often like that too, isn't it? This week I got to attend the Global Leadership Summit down in Chicago. It was such an amazing experience to listen to some really smart people from all over the world talk about leadership and things like how to get better at receiving honest feedback from others. And one of the things I was challenged to think about is how we've now learned through research that the average person has on average 3.4 "blind spots". You understand what I'm talking about? In leadership terms a "blind spot" is something you think you're great at but which everyone else knows that you actually stink at. Sounds dangerous, doesn't it? This is why self-awareness is one of a number of important intangibles of leadership because we all have areas where we tend to think that we're really smart or really creative or really good at doing certain things when in reality...we're not. How many of you here have some blind spots?...raise your hand. [Those of you who didn't raise your hand...well maybe you've just discovered one of your blind spots!]

But think about this in spiritual terms. Do you have any blind spots? Is there something you're not seeing clearly? You know when I went to the eye doctor as a kid I had to read that silly eye chart on the wall. "Tell me the lowest line you can read" I was told. But I'll never forget not being able to read anything below the big E at the top. I was flabbergasted. I had no idea my eyesight was that bad. Well friends that's why we need God's Word. We need the Bible. It shows us where our priorities are out of focus, where our beliefs are out of alignment, where our feelings are a little fuzzy. And where we're out of focus or fuzzy is where we'll see our sins which by the way never escape the omniscient, steady gaze of the one, true God.

Friends, where are your blind spots? Is it the condescending tone of voice you use when you talk to others? Is it the skill with which you subtly make yourself look good while making other people look bad? Is it your stubborn denial of a problem that you have with alcohol, pornography, painkillers, or pills? Is it your laziness or your cheating? Is it your slow drift away from God because of the company you keep? Is it the way you can be insulting someone in your home one moment, but as soon as the phone rings you're able to cheerfully say, "Hey, how you doing?" Is it your tendency to point out the speck in your neighbor's eye

while ignoring the plank in your own? Is it spending too much money frivolously while furiously maintaining you're not in a position to give back to God in this season of life because you don't have anything to give?

Friends, where are your blind spots? Is your life out of focus? Is your faith a little fuzzy? Sometimes what happens is we don't even realize how far out of focus our lives have become until all of sudden, mercifully, we do.

Maybe it's when you feel physically terrible after a long night yet again and you think, "How did I end up here?" Maybe it's when you get caught doing something that you thought honestly wasn't that big of a deal before but now you're left thinking, "How could I be that stupid?" Maybe it's that moment when what you thought would make you happy has you wondering, "How did this end up making me feel so miserable?" Or maybe, just maybe, it's when someone like me holds up before your soul the spiritual eye-chart of God's Word, his law. And if that happens today, friends, let me be clear. That's not a bad thing. It's actually a really good thing when it leads you and me to confess our unfaithfulness to God so that we can then focus on God's faithfulness to us so and move forward into the future with God's grace.

Today we're going to see how this happened to the people in Nehemiah's day. If you remember last week when Prof. Bivens preached on chapter eight, the wall of Jerusalem had just recently been rebuilt. They finished the physical rebuilding of the walls in 52 days with a lot of prayer and just as much hard work. But the spiritual rebuilding of the hearts of the people was just beginning. So we go back today and take another look at the Book. Nehemiah chapter 9 today, and by the way, I'm not going to read the whole chapter. You can do that on your own later today. Here are the first couple verses.

On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads. ² Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors. ³ They 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 worshiping the LORD their God.

Quick flashback. Remember last week. We heard that the people celebrated some happy occasions called the Feast of Trumpets and the Festival of Booths. These were times to celebrate and be glad and give generously to the poor and needy. But there was a solemn ceremony in Old Testament times that the people were to remember too. It was called the Day of Atonement or what's known today as Yom Kippur. Now some people think that since the Day of Atonement wasn't mentioned in Nehemiah chapter 8 that's what they're doing here in this chapter, albeit a couple weeks later, because we hear about the people wearing rough clothes made of sackcloth and putting ashes on their heads and fasting. Now today of course we as Christians may also use properly use outward signs of sorrow over sin too. Think of certain days like Ash Wednesday which marks the beginning of the penitential season of Lent. We're not commanded by God to impose ashes on our foreheads or to fast or forgo anything but we can and maybe should from time to time as a way to focus on our relationship with God.

But you get the picture here, don't you? The people gathered together and as we heard they, "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 worshiping the LORD their God." Now quick do the math, that's how long? 6 hours of reading from

the Bible! Then on top of that another 6 hours spent holding a worship service and confessing their sins. That means you could watch about 6 movies here at Showtime in about that same time! But you understand that this was serious business, don't you? It was time to get serious with God. Worshiping the holy Lord God Almighty wasn't just a party or mere entertainment. And it shouldn't be for us either. It was a solemn event. It was a time to focus on their relationship with God and his Word. And the way they did that was to review the history of God's activity throughout their history. I'm not going to read all the verses but here's what happened. The Levites led the people. They did the teaching. They basically said:

"God, you alone are God. You have done amazing things. You made outer space and the earth with its vast oceans and seas. Nobody can do that. Yet that's not even the best part. You chose our ancestors to be your special people. You made a special covenant with them. And you did this completely because you are gracious. You made promises to our ancestors and you kept them. At every turn you rescued them. You, Lord God, are faithful."

¹⁶ *"But they, our ancestors, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and they did not obey your commands.*

¹⁷ *They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. [So what happened, friends? They failed to remember what God had done for them. It wasn't that they didn't know. They thought they had it down. And so they lost focus! They drifted. They turned away from God's Word. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. [But now listen to this...]*

But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them, ¹⁸ even when they cast for themselves an image of a calf and said, 'This is your god, who brought you up out of Egypt,' or when they committed awful blasphemies.

¹⁹ *"Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them in the wilderness. By day the pillar of cloud did not fail to guide them on their path, nor the pillar of fire by night to shine on the way they were to take.*

²⁰ *You gave your good Spirit to instruct them. You did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and you gave them water for their thirst. ²¹ For forty years you sustained them in the wilderness; they lacked nothing, their clothes did not wear out nor did their feet become swollen.*

Friends, I have one main point today and it's pretty simple: **Keep God's Faithfulness in Focus.** Nehemiah chapter 9 is in one sense an extraordinary lesson about human behavior throughout history. It's the human story of repeated faithlessness before God. It's about the blind spots of human beings and their refusal to see them even when others tried pointing them out. And isn't that our story too? Isn't that why we need to come to church and enter into God's presence by confessing, "I am by nature sinful. I'm so faithless I'm not even aware of all that I've done wrong or all that I've failed to do." But at the same time it's also the story of God's indefatigable desire to forgive! It's about God's gritty, fervent, patient, persistent love over the long haul of generations. His Word shows us how far we've lost focus only so that we might see ultimately his faithfulness. Friends, is this not also the story of your life?

Just think, at the very least, you are here today at this just this place at just this time to hear just this message. I mean what are the odds of that? Think of everything that had to happen in your life and in history to make it possible for you to hear of God's faithfulness today?

And perhaps you wonder, “Well where and how does this story of God’s faithfulness intersect with my story of unfaithfulness?” And the thing is for some of you it was first your baptism. Whether you can replay that day in your mind or not is not the point because baptism was never your work to begin with but God’s. That’s what makes remembering your baptism a background check on God’s faithfulness because it was when that life-giving water of God’s promise connected you to the resurrection victory won by Jesus. Or maybe for you it was that moment when you remember how something clicked in your mind or heart and all of a sudden you got it. Your soul went, “Aha! That’s what Jesus did for me. That’s the Gospel. I get it now. It’s pure grace. All gift. So full and free. Forgiveness placed into this precious hand called faith.” Friends, just as in the people of Nehemiah’s day, nothing in your life has ever happened in isolation from God’s bigger picture for your life that you might hear his invitation to believe the Gospel of Jesus. Perhaps you’re even hearing this today for the first time. God wants you to **focus on his faithfulness**.

Someone who I know gets this is Mr. Bill. Now I’m saying this to brag on Mr. Bill. He wouldn’t want me to do that one bit. But in mentioning his name I want to brag on God a bit, ok? You see I was so delighted to receive from Mr. Bill this custom crafted bolo tie {pic}. And I know quite a few of you have received cool



things like this from Mr. Bill the last couple weeks as he’s been with us working as one of the Builders For Christ. And why he does it of course isn’t to get any credit, but to humbly help keep Christ at the center of our hearts. Because how can we **keep God’s faithfulness in focus**? By keeping Christ at the center of our hearts.

Why was God so kind to Adam and Eve after they sinned instead of just scrapping project humanity altogether and starting over with a redesign? Why did God chose Abraham to be the father of many nations? Why was God so patient with Moses? Why did God keeping on sparing a remnant of believers even as so many slipped into idolatry over and over again. Why? Because he stayed focused on keeping his promise of sending us Jesus.

And you want to talk about focus? What did Jesus focus on? Doing his Father’s will, not part-time, not when it was easy, or convenient, or when it increased his popularity and profile on social media. But when it was hard, when it was tough, dark, and painful. When it was uphill and it led to hanging on a cross. When it was the only way to bring you and me back into a restored relationship with God. Hebrews says, “*Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God*” (Hebrews 12:2). And because Jesus is now at the right hand of the throne of God, you know what this means? We now have access to the King on the throne, the Maker of heaven and earth, the LORD God himself who is faithful...and who can still move heaven and earth to help his humble people who know they need His power. Listen to this prayer:

³² “Now therefore, our God, the great God, mighty and 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 and leaders, on our priests and prophets, on our ancestors and all your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until today. ³³ In all that has happened to us, you have remained righteous; you have acted faithfully, while we acted wickedly. ³⁴ Our kings, our leaders, our priests and our ancestors did not follow your law; they did not pay attention to your commands or the statutes you warned them to keep. ³⁵ Even while they were in their

kingdom, enjoying your great goodness to them in the spacious and fertile land you gave them, they did not serve you or turn from their evil ways.

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

Now it doesn't exactly sound like the people are in heaven yet, does it? And in that way I appreciate how they're just like us. In their prayer they've got both feet yet firmly planted on this earth. But their eyes are on God. So here's what we can learn. You and I might not be in the same situation, but sometimes it feels like it, doesn't? We are in great distress. It seems like other people have control over our lives. Other people seem to have power over our happiness. Other people seem to have it better than we do. What we think is what's best for us isn't always happening. Sometimes it seems like there is no end in sight. Am I right? But in times like this, especially like this, we need to **Keep God's Faithfulness in Focus**. He is faithful. And when we focus on his faithfulness then we will not fret but rather we will pray.

And if you've ever felt like you don't have a right to talk to God, like you don't have a right to pray because you feel like you aren't worthy or because you know how faithless you've been...then focus on this, friends. Our right to pray isn't based on what we have or haven't done up to this point but based on Jesus. By his blood shed on the cross he has guaranteed a new covenant with you and me which is pure grace, a free gift. Through baptism our sins are washed away. Through Holy Communion we are given a foretaste of heaven. So through these means of grace we keep our focus on God's faithfulness. And this promise remains forever true:

Isaiah 54:10 ¹⁰ Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,” says the LORD, who has compassion on you.