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February 2, 2020

NEHEMIAH 9:1-5

Series: Life Lessons from Nehemiah

[PRAYER] Lord, help us to integrate our faith and our scriptures and our spiritual life with the other things that are going on right now in each of our hearts. Those things we walked in with, we need an infusion of your grace. So we're asking that you would do a work inside of us and teach us what it means to be Christ-followers and to trust you in every area of our lives. Lord, I ask particularly that you would use this message to create something new inside of our hearts today. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

We're studying the book of Nehemiah. Some of you like to know what's coming next. So let me tell you that after Nehemiah is done in a couple of weeks we're going to go on to the book of 1 Thessalonians in the New Testament. So we're going to a new book and that will be 1 Thessalonians. You can read it if you'd like. I'm going to give you a book. Everybody is going to get a book to take notes in for our study in 1 Thessalonians. I think it will be a great way for you to remember the things we're studying. At Calvary Chapel we're interested in investing in you in God's word. So this will be a way for you practically to take notes. I'm excited about those books that are coming in the next couple of weeks.

Now in Nehemiah 9 we enter a place where the Jewish people have finished something. They've produced something. They've completed the wall. The wall that took them 52 days, that's a miracle that they could do that. But families working together in order to create this wall and it is complete. Now they're before the Lord, as we've seen the last couple of weeks, and they feel convicted about all the loss they have. They've made some mistakes in life, they have some regrets, and they want to start over. They're trying to create a new start in their lives. I think it's just a great time for us to reflect on our own lives. Because we all need spiritual renewal in our hearts. What does it mean to experience spiritual renewal inside of our lives? I think that's an important question and I'm going to show you these four words that we're going to see in the passage in Nehemiah 9 today.

But as I was trying to think of the what (What is important out of this passage? What is it that we're going to take away today?), I was trying to think of a sermon title. If I were going to summarize it into a word, what would we need? I came up with this idea first. I thought the fresh start effect. It seems like that's what they're talking about as they're gaining the spiritual renewal. I thought about that in reference to this verse in Lamentations 3 that says – *Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning* (every morning is a new morning with the Lord); *great is your faithfulness*. So the fresh start effect seemed like a great title or a summary words for this message.

Until I started thinking a little bit more and I came to this other title called the new life gift. Because I'm thinking wow, you know, I look at this verse in 2 Corinthians 5:17 that says – *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!* So there's this new life effect that also describes spiritual renewal that they're experiencing in Nehemiah and going forward. I'm saying oh that's a great title or a summary of what we might call this.

And then I got another one, another idea – the joy restoration project. I got that idea because I read this verse here in Psalm 51:10 about this renewal that David needed after he sinned with Bathsheba. He comes back and this whole prayer in Psalm 51 and he says this: *Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.* This spiritual renewal that we all need is a joy restoration project that God wants for us. Great sermon title. Great idea. I think it summarizes it.

Until I came to another one. I don't usually vacillate this much, but I was trying to think what would the title be if I was going to put a title on this sermon. and then I thought the soul cleanse. That seems like a great name for this idea that's taking place in them, this renewal. It reminded me of Psalm 23 where he says – *The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul.* Wow. Spiritual renewal. I don't know which one of those connect with you. But this idea of spiritual renewal is something we all need and so the what is spiritual renewal. No matter what you call it, it's something that we all need in our lives.

But I want to look at our passage today at these verses and I want to answer the question, how does spiritual renewal take place in our lives? And those four words (confession, separation, the word, and worship) describe what we're seeing in Nehemiah 9 in the story itself. So before we get into the actual what's going on in those four things, let's look at the passage itself.

Why don't you stand with me please as I read this passage to you. Let's ask God for some more renewal for our spirit, some more spiritual renewal in our lives, and see what He has to say about the people here. They're trying to obtain this in their lives. Let's see how they did it.

On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads. 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. They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the Lord their God for a quarter of the day (probably about three hours), and spent another quarter in confession and in worshiping the Lord their God. Standing on the stairs of the Levites were Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani and Kenani. If you're looking for names for your children, we have list here. They cried out with loud voices to the Lord their God. And the Levites—Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah and Pethahiah—said: “Stand up and praise the Lord your God, who is from everlasting to everlasting.” It's like the worship leader says, “Let's stand and worship the Lord your God.” So we'll end with worship today as we see the four words played out in this passage.

So you may be seated.

I want to look at these four different ideas that are represented in our passage today. Now maybe if you were starting from scratch and creating your own ideas about spiritual renewal you might have some different points. When we look at another passage we might see God doing spiritual renewal in a person's heart using other points. But our job is to go to our text and understand what it is saying to those people and what they're doing and then apply it to our lives. We all need spiritual renewal and so as we look at these four words, we're going to see it take place.

The first one I want to look at is the word confession. We're going to see that in chapter 9:2-3. I underlined the parts where confession is described or mentioned. You see there it says in verse 2 – *They confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors*. And then later on it says they spent another quarter of their day *in confession and in worshiping the Lord their God*. Confession. Why does God include confession in His plan for renewal? I think the reason God does this is because we end up being real, being willing to take responsibility for our part of the problem.

I find sometimes when we're working with children that they don't want to take responsibility for their part of the problem. You know five years old and fighting with her brother and we go in and we say, "Okay, what did you do wrong?"

"Well he hit me."

"Well okay, he hit you. I want to know what did you do wrong?"

"I grabbed the CD out of his hand."

"Oh okay."

So we're taking responsibility for our part of the problem. I think that even from young children they need to learn what confession is about. They need to learn how to say, "I was wrong when I did this," when there's a temptation in our lives to say, "Let me explain to you why I did what I did." In other words I'm going to rationalize or defend, I'm going to somehow excuse myself from my offense because someone else's offense is so much bigger. Maybe your part of the offense is only 10% and the other person's is 90%. We still take responsibility for our 10%.

Part of the process of renewal is being able to deal with sin, mistakes, failures, and regrets in our lives. We must have a plan for addressing those inside of our heart. What is that going to look like? God has a plan for dealing with those offenses.

It's not like the world. The world will say, "Well just think about all the good that you've done." In other words, you've done more good than bad, so you can be happy with yourself. But we still have the bad. Christianity is something completely different. Christianity says alright, let's look at your bad. It's okay to look at it. Not only are we going to look at it, you're going to admit that you did bad, that you did something wrong, and then when you do then there's something waiting for you and that is forgiveness. Spiritual renewal involves forgiveness, but it starts with confession. We come to God and we say, "God I am weak. I can't do this. I messed up again today. Lord, I'm trying, but I need help here." And God forgives us. Spiritual renewal is about forgiveness and it starts with confession. It's about being real.

You know when we start recognizing that we are broken people, that we have sinned, then we're willing to address some of those deeper issues inside of our heart, but we're also able to relate to other people who are hurting. We don't become victims in life and so if everybody else in the world would change, I'd be fine. No. We take responsibility for our part of the problem. I messed up. I just didn't have what it takes to handle that situation where I sinned, I did the wrong thing. I know I shouldn't have done that. I just didn't know what to do at the time, but it was wrong. So we take responsibility.

Confession is an important part. And if you're going to have spiritual renewal, you want confession to be a part of what you're doing. We look at sin straight in the face and we acknowledge our sin. And when we do, we know that we're waiting there for a loving and forgiving heavenly Father to wipe it away, to give us a clean slate, setting the bases for the spiritual renewal. It's a beautiful thing they're doing here and it all makes sense because if you're going to have spiritual renewal, you have to deal with your sin. That's number one.

Let's go to the second one. We go back to our little diagram I created. Then the second one is going to be separation. The word separation is used right in the passage. Separating. You see it in verse 2. *Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners.*

What they'd done is they'd separated themselves from worldliness, the worldliness of those people around. You know sometimes just the being in the world it starts to make us feel dirty. Our souls get dirty. It just starts to corrupt us. There's a point where we say, "Okay look. I'm going to pull back and separate myself from these people or these things for a little bit." But we weren't created to be checked into monasteries and to be separated from the world. Jesus prayed in His prayer, "Lord, I know you're going to leave them in the world, I just don't want them to be of the world." In other words, I don't want worldliness to corrupt them. I want them to be able to live within the world. That's why we have the Holy Spirit. That's why we have the presence of Jesus with us is because He wants to protect us in the world. But there's sometimes when the worldliness starts to affect us. If we're going to get spiritual renewal, we need to somehow separate ourselves from worldliness, worldly thinking.

So in the process they're separating themselves from the foreigners, the worldly people, but they're also separating themselves from food. Fasting. Here's what fasting does. If you fast for eight hours or sixteen hours or thirty-six hours, you are going to be hungry. So you have those pains of hunger that are telling you, "Feed me! Feed me! Feed me!" So what happens when you fast is you say, "Look, I'm in charge of you. You're not in charge of me." So you say to those hunger pains no. So you're able to realize there's a spiritual component that's more powerful than the fleshly component that tends to dictate how we move around and what we do. When you don't eat food, you separate yourself from food, then it's an opportunity for you to say no to fleshly desires. Is it wrong to eat food? No, it's not wrong to eat food. But sometimes that can just overtake us. So separating from food for a period of time for a spiritual reason is great.

They not only fasted, but they wore sackcloth. This morning when I got up I put on this shirt and there was a tag right here. It's not there anymore. I had to cut it off because it was irritating. Any of the rest of you tag cutters? Okay, I understand that. Now you would not like putting burlap on. So that's what it was. It was a sackcloth. You put it on and it was really itchy and scratchy. It just

makes me uncomfortable to think about the tags and all of the stuff. Okay? They're separating themselves from comfort. Why? Because comfort sometimes causes us to do things that maybe aren't the best for us. We seek comfort in the wrong places. We do the wrong things. So they're making a statement and saying, okay I'm going to separate myself from comfort by putting burlap on and I'm going to say no to comfort. Is comfort wrong? No, it's not wrong. But sometimes worldliness can creep in through the comfort mechanisms that we set up.

And they put dust on their heads. They feel dirty. They're wanting to separate themselves from this uncomfortable feeling that they have. Oh I got to do this. You know if I had dust on my head, I'd want to go take a shower. I want to get cleaned up. And so what they're doing is they're putting themselves in a situation where they're separating themselves from things so they can spiritually make God the center of their lives. God, you're more important than food or comfort or friends or anything.

Ed Miller and I both work with young people and we connected on a podcast a couple weeks ago that's online all about electronics and children to try to help parents know how do you deal with this challenge of electronics in young people. Because the reality is some young people do not have the internal character and ability to manage electronics. And you'll know that when you're trying to have a conversation with them. They're always looking down at their phone. There are two major areas of electronic problems and one of them is video games and the other is social media (YouTube, Snapchat, Facebook, and a whole bunch of other things that are available that we get involved in). So video games and social media. So sometimes young people will become so attached to those things they become their comfort, they become their safety, and they become addicting for young people. That addiction means they have to go back to it. They can't spend time with people. They're walking around the house with earbuds in and you can't talk to them. When that starts happening we know we have a problem. Parents are saying, "What are we supposed to do with this? How do we live in an electronic age?"

In some cases children are so captured by this and it's ruining their emotions that we suggest a fast from electronics. Usually with young people it's going to take three to five weeks for them to come back to a place where they can have more balance in their lives if they're really addicted to electronics. It's a fast that takes place. It's separating myself from something that would otherwise overrun my life, something that would dictate my life. So separation is an important part of renewal. Just think of the attachments that you make, the roots that you make into the worldly life we live in. Not wrong necessarily, but it's an opportunity sometimes for worldliness to come in. So having a break from that or a separation contributes to spiritual renewal in our lives. That's the second one.

The third one is going to do with the word. It's amazing how many times we come back to the Bible, we come back to looking at God's word, studying God's word in our lives in the scriptures. It's talked about how important that is. Let's go and see what they did in the passage first of all. Verse 3 says – *They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the Lord their God for a quarter of the day* (about three hours I would suspect if you break the day into twelve hours). And about a quarter of the day (three hours) they were spending time in the word. When they spent time in the word it does something.

You see the first two, confession and separation, are about getting stuff out of the way, but I need to be infused with something else and that's going to be God's word that's going to provide the life for me. It's going to give me the insight I need. It's going to help me understand how to think rightly, how to connect with God in the right way. So God's word becomes strategic in our lives. What mechanism do you have that gets you into the word regularly so that you can experience spiritual renewal inside of your heart?

One of the ways I do it is this app that I told you guys about. Solid Joys it's called. It's John Piper's app. Today when I was looking at it, it's called the forgiveness cycle. I thought this was intriguing. He looks at the Lord's Prayer where he says forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us and lead us not into temptation. So he looks at the Lord's prayer and then he asks this question: Who forgives first? And then he goes in this little article, not too long, about how God has forgiven us. And when God has forgiven us then we have this greater understanding of what forgiveness is all about. So it takes me on this path in my mind of what God has done and what I need to do.

What mechanism do you have in your life to get God's word into your heart, into your life? Solid Joy is a great app. I recommend you use it. Or get into a Bible study or a weekly study where God's word is getting into your heart. You'd need it for spiritual renewal. You can't just confess your sins to get them out of the way. You can't just separate yourself. You've got to do something else to put something in and that something in is God's word and very powerful here and important. So that's the third element in this spiritual renewal that the people are experiencing in Nehemiah 9.

The fourth one is worship. Worship is this ability to admire God. Worship is this sense where I fall down before God's greatness and I say, "Wow. I'm coming back to the heart of worship. It's all about you, God. Worthy are you, Lord. Like the lamb that was sacrificed for us so that we could celebrate communion, Lord, you are worthy of all." It's just this sense of worthiness that worship does. When we worship the Lord, Chante leads us and it's not like she's performing and we're the audience. It's like she's the worship leader. We are all the performers so to speak and God is our audience. We are worshipping God together and something happens in the midst of that.

Now we worship on Sunday morning certainly. But you can worship on your own in the course of the week. I find myself singing these same songs that we sing on Sunday. I find myself kind of replaying them in my mind during the week. Oh yeah that was that song that we sang on Sunday. I might not know all the words, but I can worship the Lord again. In the course of our day we are worshipping the Lord in different ways, seeing Him work, demonstrating His power. Let's go and see how they did it in the passage.

It says – *another quarter* of the day they spent *in confession and in worshipping the Lord their God*. I stop there because I'm saying whoa. I don't usually put confession and worshipping in the same sentence, in the same quarter of the day. If I were the organizer of this event, I probably would have said okay one hour for confession, another hour for worship to separate them. But do you see what happens? When you start confessing your sin, you're so awestruck about God's

forgiveness. We start worshiping God in His greatness and how majestic He is. You're drawn to see your own weakness and your own sins. The two go together in such a beautiful way.

But I don't think there's an order here. I think that when you're worshiping the Lord sometimes you just pause in the midst of the song and you say, "God, I forgot to come to you and talk to you about this. Lord, I'm feeling overwhelmed about this. I just need to give it to you. Lord, my emotions are taken away and it has something to do with my values. They're not centered around you." So worship contributes to our confession and the two help us to grow together.

I love that last statement here in our passage where the worship leaders are calling out in a loud voice. We see up there – *They cried out with a loud voice* and they say, "*Stand up and praise the Lord your God, who is from everlasting to everlasting.*" There was no beginning. As far as you can go that direction and as far as you can go that direction, God is so big. It's so amazing who God is. So worship becomes an important part of spiritual renewal.

As you're thinking about spiritual renewal in your heart, you want to think about those four different ingredients that are involved there. Confession, looking at yourself, and being willing to admit where you've done something wrong. Separation. Separating yourself from worldliness and from passions and from fleshly kind of things. The word, just acknowledging the word of God and how powerful it is and what it can do for you. And then this ability to worship. Those are the four things that fall under the how.

We started with the what. Spiritual renewal, whether it's called the fresh start effect or the restoration project, it's this idea that God is doing something inside of me. We all need spiritual resources and renewal inside of us.

So we talked about the what. This is the how. Now let's talk about the when. When are you going to do this? How often should we do this? Every year at the Feast of Tabernacles? Is that when you have spiritual renewal? I think so. But as I look at that and I start asking the question, I'm thinking well is this daily? And I'm thinking it's more than daily. This is a lifestyle that we're talking about. This isn't just a time frame on this. Yeah I suppose we should have a quiet time every day where we're getting the word in and we're confessing, we're worshiping. That's good to do that in an event, but I think this is more than an event. I think this is a way of thinking about life – living with God and trying to understand how we live with God. Spiritual renewal takes place inside of us. Good things happen in the midst of that. So the when is all the time. All the time we're coming before the Lord.

When it comes to confession, just think. If sin separates you from God and you have a confession time every night, every night religiously you say, "Okay God, I'm going to bed now, I want to confess my sins," but you sinned in the morning, that means from morning to the time you confess, you're out of fellowship with God. I think what we need to do here is we need confession on the run. Maybe you can't bow down on your knees and confess. As you're driving you can say, "Oh Lord, the way I talked to that person on the phone, that wasn't the best thing. The things I said or the way I handled myself, Lord, would you forgive me for that." So we're confessing on the run to keep ourselves in this lifestyle. That we're saying no to certain things because we're separating ourselves. Not because sometimes they're bad. Certainly we separate

ourselves from bad things. But there's some things we say no to because they're getting in the way of something bigger that God wants for us. There's this idea of spiritual renewal that we all need.

I hope when you go out of here today you can feel this sense of spiritual renewal in your own life. That when you leave here, you'll say, "Wow. I feel a fresh start before the Lord. I feel like God is doing something in me that allows me to go out and move forward." Which leads me to one more point. We've talked about the what. We've talked about the how. We've talked about the when. I just want to address the question why. Why do we need spiritual renewal? Here's why. When we have spiritual renewal it clarifies our calling before God. It clarifies our purpose that God has for us. It clarifies our mission that we have. It clarifies our identity. It's this cleaning up of our soul.

I feel great after a shower. I take long showers. It's okay. I'll pay for the hot water. I like long showers. And when I'm done out of the shower I feel good. I feel refreshed. I feel clean because of that. Now I want to feel that same way inside of my heart, inside of my soul. I want to have that cleanliness, but there's dirt in there. So it requires confession. There's worldliness trying to creep inside of my heart. I've got to get that out of there. I've got to allow God's word to do that washing and cleansing that it promises to do. I need to come and worship the Lord. And when I do then there's this shower I have inside where God is cleaning me up. I need that daily. That's how we can walk around with joy in our lives. Yeah, bad things happen, challenging things happen in the course of our week. But we come in with joy in the midst of that because inside of our soul our values are on God and who He is and what He's doing in our mission before God.

Why do we need spiritual renewal? Because it's what gives us the energy to live today. This is what empowers us to do what we need to do. It allows us to take on the challenges of teachers who are trying to communicate their humanistic thoughts and thinking. We want to take the good they're sharing, but sometimes the things they're sharing are not all that helpful. We're doing all of that in order to have the spiritual renewal inside. We don't want to lose that. We want to keep that. I just find that these people in this passage have something. They've got something I need. Spiritual renewal. And then what they're doing here is just strategic in their life. So just remember why. Why do we need spiritual renewal? We need it because it's going to point us in the right direction. It's going to help us to be able to deal with the past, live in the present, and know where we're going.

I can hardly wait till next week because next week we're going to read this whole long prayer they go into after this. You're supposed to take all of chapter 9 together. I had to stop here because there's so much there. But starting in the next verses, this is the longest prayer in the Bible next week and it's a great prayer. We'll look at it next week. Meanwhile this week let's experience renewal in our hearts.

Would you stand with me? Let's pray together.

[PRAYER] Heavenly Father, we do want to thank you for Jesus Christ again who died on the cross for us and because of His sacrifice we're able to come and confess and have forgiveness of our sins. We thank you for the power of the Holy Spirit who restores our souls. We thank you,

Lord, for the gift of your word to provide us with insight into ourselves and who you are. We thank you for your love and your compassion. Father, we ask that you would give us the strength this week to live a life that you've called us to live. Lord, we love you. We want to serve you. We ask that you would do this spiritual renewal right now in our hearts. Clean us up. We want to do business with you, Lord, and we want to walk out of here with a fresh start today. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.