

Let's look forward. Look into tomorrow. No, we don't know the events. But as you look, what tone do you see defining the rest of your life? Looking forward, what words describe the atmosphere of your life in the next ten years? What core values would you name? Look back for a sec; what may have described the last ten? Now, turn and look into tomorrow, look forward with hope and faith and name for yourself what you want to be deeply true. Now: what would it take for this to happen?

In today's passage, the people of God have come to a point where they are looking forward with faithfulness. This is the final week in our series we've called I AM Still Here, and we will be studying the chronological end of the Old Testament, Nehemiah 8-13. Through the series, God's repeated message to His people has been – I AM Still Here. In trauma, in exile, in return, in resettlement. Circumstantially, prophetically, by faith – I am still here.

Though we're broadly covering the whole of how Nehemiah ends, I'll be reading today from Nehemiah 8:5-12. These events take place in 444, about 30 years after the events in Esther that we saw last week. And instead of being in Persia, our focus is back in Jerusalem.

Scripture Reading

This is a significant milestone in the life of God's people. Nehemiah calls it a holy day, a sacred day. In celebrating together, they're recognizing the Lord in their midst; they're recognizing His law and His mercy; they're worshipping Him and taking joy in what He has done.

By God's mercy, they've been regathered from exile. They've resettled in the land. And over the last 90 years they have rebuilt the Temple, rebuilt Jerusalem and now, they've completed the rebuilding of her walls. This is worthy of celebration! Nehemiah 8-10 are marked by ceremony, celebration, dedication, formal prayers and commitments.

But I want to ask: Are these ceremonies recognizing a beginning or an end? Are they looking back or forward, primarily? We could pose this question to many sacred ceremonies. Is your wedding day the finish line or the starting line? Is it the culmination of courtship or the beginning of a life together and the bringing about of something new – a new family. What about a graduation? It's the finish of school, isn't it? Studying and tests and labs and cramming are now behind you, right? OR, is it the beginning of a life of work and a whole different kind of responsibility? Here's one: what about a funeral? Theologically... are we looking back or forward?

All these examples entail a bit of both, don't they? What's behind might be significant, but there's no going back! From this day forward, life is different. Each milestone looks forward with hope.

And it's the same here. Yes, they have arrived at the long-awaited completion of many plans and difficult work, and at the same time are looking forward looking, thinking and dreaming forward, hopeful for what the Lord will do next in his time. They're looking forward in faithfulness. And we too are called to look forward! Do you look forward? Do you allow yourself to dream by faith?

They've turned the corner and they're here to stay, by the grace of God. The intention is to establish themselves for future generations. Through the actions we see here, we see that they're thinking of longevity. This isn't only about themselves and their generation, but of institutions that bring God's transformation to the world. Their law-directed, prophetically-shaped vision was to be a people planted for the display of God's splendor, a people who endure with righteousness, peace and holiness so that the nations will stream IN and learn his ways.

And so in this position of looking forward, Nehemiah 8-13 records and reaffirms **lasting values** that will establish them as they were intended to be. And that's what I want to ask us, personally and corporately. What will define and characterize us from this day forward? As I asked at the beginning, it's a fair question to ponder: if you were naming a few lasting values that would shape and direct your family for generations, what would they be? What comes to mind? When I was thinking of this for our family, I couldn't get away from the NT's trio faith, hope and love. Faith to see and long for, in Christ, what cannot yet be seen. Hope to endure all hardship and loss. Love to obey Christ's new command. May the Maurers be people of faith, hope and love! What are the values that will shape your next season?

Every value we will see affirmed in these chapters has a common center point. God. He is always at the center, the Living God. Listen to the opening words of the corporate prayer in Nehemiah 9:5-6:

Stand up and praise the Lord your God, who is from everlasting to everlasting. Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise! You 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, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.

You are the center of it all! In you all things hold together, as Paul writes about Christ. Let all our hopes and dreams have God at the center. All our forward looking. All our most treasured values. GOD, You are the center!

All the other lasting values that Ezra and Nehemiah helped God's people to form at this point in their history circle this nucleus. As we look at a few of them, my prayer is that they may shape the expression of our faith as well. As WE look forward not just to our lives, but to the generations after us, what will define and form the values we hold most dear?

And then, the second question is this: how will these values get worked out in the day-to-day, year-to-year decisions and routines of our lives? In other words, what are the

essential practices based on these values? Lasting values don't stick without practices, actual actions, to accompany them.

Let's spend a chunk of our time discovering the...

I. Lasting Values

We're going to look at them first as we see them in Nehemiah's time and then turn to apply them as we look at practices. The first lasting value that leapt out to me is that they long to be a people of God's truth.

Ezra opened the book, 8:5. The Levites instructed the people in the Law. They read from the Book of the Law, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood.

In fact, the whole of Neh 8-13 show the people in one way or another valuing and responding to what the law says. In 8:14, they celebrate the Festival of the Booths (or Tabernacles) why? Because *They found [it] written in the Law*. It was commanded and so they do it! In chapter 10 they made a binding agreement for the reformation of their ways of life...why? According to their understanding of God's BOOK. In chapter 13, Nehemiah calls the officials and nobles to accountability for their actions... according to the God's LAW.

The lasting value keeps rising to the surface – we treasure the truth of God's Word, truth that shapes life.

What is a second lasting value? They are a people of God's Grace.

Looking back, they recognize together that they've been carried by grace. A few weeks after the events we read in Nehemiah 8, ch9 records a day of repentance and confession. It recounts the history of God's faithfulness and grace – his acts on their behalf. God chose Abraham, and saw the suffering of His people in Egypt, and delivered them, and spoke the good and right Law to them, and provided for them.

But then we come to 9:16: *But they, our ancestors, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and they did not obey your commands. They refused to listen and failed to remember...* This is a pattern we see again and again. But what do the people recall in prayer? Continuing with v17, *But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them...*

As the prayer continues, the pattern is repeated. God's provision and power is answered by his people's disobedience, but then met with the grace of God. Again and again. Here's a phrase that's repeated: *in your great compassion*. God is a merciful and gracious God.

And so now, looking forward, God's people affirm their lasting value of God's Grace. We do not deserve the abiding presence and care of our God; we have not earned it. We are so thankful. We are carried by grace. How we need your grace! We are a people of grace.

What is a third lasting value from these chapters? They are a people rooted to God's Place. They prioritize Jerusalem. They had returned to this land, the promised land, the land given to their ancestors, the land God himself had chosen. It was important to be there and not just anywhere.

Look what happens at the beginning of chapter 11. *Now the leaders of the people settled in Jerusalem. The rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of every ten of them to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while the remaining nine were to stay in their own towns. The people commended all who volunteered to live in Jerusalem (1-2).* It wasn't easier to live in a bigger city in the ancient world. It was dirtier, louder, more susceptible to disease and crime. And yet the people valued filling the city because they valued God's place and the promises that surrounded this place.

Neh 12 provides another example, which I'll bypass for the sake of time. The Jews were a people of place. Jerusalem was important. The lasting value was to inhabit this land to the glory of God. Why? Because they took the BOOK seriously and trusted in the promises of God. At God's command, the city would be a place of great blessing and prosperity, linking the peoples of the world and providing a structure and space to gather and worship.

God says about her, this is the city of David, the city of my King, the earthly Zion. *The Lord Almighty will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before its elders – with great glory (Is 24:23).*

Okay, so we have Truth, Grace and Place. As God's people looked forward, seeking to be faithful to God, these were three of their lasting values.

Are your values clear enough to write down? What might they be? How do you know? Could they be truth, grace or place? Faith, Hope, and Love? CCC's are the Gospel, the Manifest Presence of God, the Marriage of Word and Spirit, Loving Community. Here's the thing – the specific values don't matter unless what we say we believe changes our actions. Values on their own mean very little. The point is the shape how we live, right?

In order to do so, they must be paired with...

II. Essential Practices

Essential Practices help our talk and our walk be in alignment AS we look forward. And here's where we're going to dig into our lives more. They help us to work out the values in our hearts and minds. The witness of God's people in Nehemiah shows us that each of their values was accompanied by action.

The value of Truth pairs with the essential practice of being a people of the book. They were those who heard, understood and obeyed the Word. Under the leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra, they're renewing the commitment to God's Book as they understand it afresh. They are listening – and being instructed – in a way that leads to change.

What about us? What is our relationship to the book?

The human pattern is to make a commitment – and then forget. Ever done that? A couple hundred years before then during the reign of King Josiah, they literally found the Book of the Law lying in the dust somewhere during a Temple restoration building project. (what's this?). It had been put aside during Manasseh's time.

Have you put aside the book? Do you create the space in your life for the Spirit of God to speak to you from His Word? Are you reading, meditating upon, learning from, submitting to? We can't be people of truth unless we're people of the book.

The second value of grace is accompanied by the practice of prayer. Prayers of confession, prayers of petition asking for help. This is in Neh 9, not to mention other pastoral prayers in the OT: Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the first temple; Daniel's intercession at the end of his life, or even in Psalm 106.

So what about us? Surely we are no less carried by grace! What demonstrates our dependence on grace more than prayer? In prayer we're making it clear that we cannot live for God without God. In prayer, we're choosing to rely on Him. I can't do this life, Lord! I can't battle against strongholds of evil on my own; I can't overcome sin by myself; I can sustain my faith.

If we truly value being carried by God's grace, let us ask ourselves: Are we a people of prayer? Looking forward into our next ten years, into the next generation or two – what will establish and remind us that we can only live as a people of grace? May we not neglect the practice of prayer together.

Now, what about the practice that accompanies this third value of Place? This is the essential practice of actively participating in community life. Israel demonstrated this value by rebuilding the City, inhabiting it, defending it, sanctifying it, providing for it. This is one of the primary themes in Nehemiah.

Now... how do we apply this one? Most of us are not Jews, though we have been grafted into Israel by God's grace as Romans 11:17 says. Yet the new covenant in the Spirit transforms the Dwelling Place of God from one temple in one city to a Living Temple that spreads to the ends of the earth. WE are being built together by the Spirit into God's dwelling place, and so wherever His people gather – there He is, among us. *You together are the Holy Temple*, Paul writes in 1 Cor 3.

And since this is the case, we take our present place and its people more seriously (not less). We are people of place – specifically, the person to your left and right. Our faces before one another. We ARE the temple. The church can only exist for you and I locally, personally, in flesh and blood.

Our essential practice here is active participation in the life of the church. This includes corporate worship; this includes loving one another in word and deed, in speaking truth in love, in discipling and bearing one another's burdens.

Conclusion and Communion

And so: we have these values of God's Truth, God's Grace, and God's Place, supported and reinforced by the practices of Treasuring the Word, Depending on Prayer and Participating in Community. We've seen them for the Jews in Nehemiah's day, and we've applied them to the church.

Now remember how I started: all along this I've been asking about values and practices as we look FORWARD in faithfulness? Now, toward that end, HERE now is the most significant question, the one that can bring you freedom and peace. It is a gospel question.

What do we do when there's a gap between what we want and what we do? Where is the gulf in your life between aspiration and reality, between value and practice? Not, 'is there', but where is it?

And when we recognize the gap, what do we do about it? Guilt, shame, hiding, self-condemnation, striving? HERE is the true call this morning, the invitation to come to Jesus for change.

Into this gap, there's a gospel response. When we can't live up to our values, the Lord says – I know you can't. I CAN. *We no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God who loves me and gave his life for me.*

What is the promise of the New Covenant from Jeremiah 31, do you remember? *I will put my law on their minds and write in on their hearts. They will all know me, from the least to the greatest.* This is the relationship Christ has purchased for us, the way he has opened for us. The WORD written on our very soul by the Spirit of God.

Invite the Lord himself to meet you in the gap. To remind you, as you walk your way forward – I AM Still here. I am with you; walk with me. May it be so for each of us.

Prayer

Communion

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Spend time reflecting on what core values you would want to shape your life moving forward.
2. What repeatable, reachable practices pair with those values?
3. Where are the gaps between your stated values and your actual practices?
4. How does Jesus address those gaps and invite you to walk with him?