

## WELCOME 29<sup>th</sup> August 2021 – 14 Pentecost '21 B

Nehemiah 9 – *selected verses*

Welcome! It's great to be together. As has become our custom there are Group Study & Discussion resources for you to use *over the course of the week. As God leads you into the fullness of His word/work in your life he will then introduce you to someone who needs to hear the good news from you. Also... somewhere here today you may feel a nudge - tap - tug. Don't ignore it! That's probably the Holy Spirit prompting you some way. Let's talk about that after worship.*

**As we move into this week...**It's called a "rip" – short for *rip current*. Surfers/beachgoers know to beware of these strong, focused currents of water moving directly out from the shore. They pull you away from solid footing, away from safety & into dangerous water...often you're unaware it's happening...

Sin is a perpetual "rip" humans have to guard against & fight. Part of the fabric of our lives is an inborn tendency to pull away from God & toward our own wants, wishes, & desires...away from solid footing, away from safety & into dangerous territory...sometimes so reflexively we don't even notice...& the world around us will always "help" the wrong way. Dr. David Wells writes, the world spends great energy convincing us "righteousness is strange & sin is normal."

That's why we need each other: to be accountable, to point out danger, & guard one another from being pulled out/away from God through the powerful rip & grip of sin.

It has always been so. Nehemiah discovers to his sadness that the triumphs of rebuilding the wall & re-engaging God's people with God's Word are in constant peril from the "rip" of sin...of pulling away from God to comfort, ease, self-interest, complacency, idolatry, moral compromise...But in their failure they fail into the unfailing love of God who will not stop forgiving...never stop restoring & never cease calling his people to return their hearts & hands to His purposes in His world.

So Nehemiah calls them to swim <sup>b/t</sup> the flags as a community... <sup>b/t</sup> God's promises to his people & his call to faithful daily living God's holy purposes here & now.

*"But you are a God of forgiveness, gracious & merciful, slow to become angry, & rich in unfailing love. You did not abandon them..."*

We dive into the ocean of our daily lives <sup>w/</sup> God's promise etched on our hearts, his Spirit watching over & working <sup>w/in</sup> us, & our brothers/sisters next to us for support & strength. For every word true for God's people then, is true for us today.

We'll experience & share that together. Let's pray...then we'll get stuck into it.

## PRAYER OF THE DAY:

*Father, when we aren't sure, help us be calm; when information comes from all sides, correct and not, help us discern; when fear makes it hard to breathe, and anxiety seems to be the order of the day, slow us down, God; help us to reach out with our hearts, when we can't touch with our hands; help us to be socially connected, when the world says "Be socially distant." Help us to love as perfectly as we can, knowing that "perfect love casts out all fear," and in the perfect love of your Son Jesus we find perfect freedom from all that would steal kill or destroy and life abundant forever. In Jesus' Name we pray...Amen.*

Now let's hear God's Word...

## FAITH CHAT:

1. Have you ever repeatedly made the same mistake? Mistake you make over & over again...word you can never spell right - someone's name you just can't remember... How does that feel? What do you do?
  - a. Is there a particular sin that affects you that way? (like a rip)
2. If you could envision a "happily ever after" to the pandemic & the on-going turmoil of the last two years, what would that look like?

*Then if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves & pray & seek my face & turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven & will forgive their sins & restore their land. My eyes will be open & my ears attentive to every prayer made in this place. – 2 Chr 7:14-15*

*The eyes of the Lord search the whole earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him. - 2 Chr 16:9*

#### 14 Pentecost – '21 B – ROAD TO RECOVERY: RECOMMIT TOGETHER

Robert Fulghum broke into the public eye w/ his delightful bestseller, *Everything I Needed to know I learned in Kindergarten*. But his follow-up work, *It was on Fire When I Lay Down on It*...was what grabbed me. I don't know if he meant to do it... but *It was on Fire*...is about sin...our inborn twistedness that makes us our own worst enemies. The book is filled with tales of people doing things that cause grief & mayhem for themselves & people they love.

Often the disasters are good intentions gone wrong: mother of the bride who tells her anxious daughter to eat/drink something to calm her nerves only for the girl to gorge on snacks/champagne & heave it back all over the groom b/c she can say "I do." Or they're the result of foolishness: the man (for whom the book is titled) rescued from his burning apt after appearing to fall asleep smoking in bed; but when interviewed by the Fire Dept said, "It was on fire when I lay down on it." WHAT?!?! He did what?

In my childhood there was a cartoon character in the daily paper, Pogo Possum. His famous insight was oft repeated in different circumstances, "We have met the enemy & he is us." You may have heard of the "dark humour" of "Darwin Awards:" imaginary "prizes" for people whose foolishness causes serious, permanent & sometimes fatal unintended self-injury...Guy shoots his dog w/ an "unloaded" weapon or blows himself up by sticking a lit match in an oil drum to see if there's anything in it.

From Neh 9...to the end of the book...that's what we read...a recounting of all **THEY'VE** done to create the catastrophes **THEY'VE** experienced as individuals **AND** as a nation. Ch 9 is the longest prayer in the Bible & nearly all of it is confession: personal, historical & communal. It's a prayer of self-reflection/conviction **re:** their circumstances...**AND** the responsibility lies w/ them. Let's start w/ beginning & the end: vss 1-3 & 36-38: "*On Oct 31<sup>st</sup> the people assembled again, & this time they fasted & dressed in burlap & threw dust on their heads. Those of Israelite descent separated themselves from all foreigners as they confessed their own sins & the sins of their ancestors. They remained standing in place for 3 hours while the Book of the Law of the Lord their God was read to them. Then for 3 more hours they confessed their sins & worshiped the Lord their God.*" Their prayer concludes... "So now today we are slaves in the land of plenty you gave our ancestors for their enjoyment! We are slaves here in this good land. The lush produce of this land piles up in the hands of the kings whom you have set over us because of OUR sins. They have power over us & our livestock. We serve them at their pleasure, & we are in great misery."

The wall is rebuilt. Their worship is being restored. They have begun to re-engage w/ God's Word & have renewed the covenant their ancestors had shredded w/ idolatry & disobedience...but they knew...the evil of one generation bleeds over into the next. They recognize clearly the connection b/c the sin in their own hearts/lives & the

terrible conditions - bondage/servitude in which they live. They know they're trapped under a burden of their own making & are suffering from a curse they have made on their own but cannot shake on their own. It is their collective, communal as well as personal sin – self-separation self-isolation from the Father that keeps them under the boots of the Persian/Median Empire just as they were with Assyria/Babylon.

They know they have adapted their lives to the cultures around them rather than blessing the cultures around them with the lifestyle of heaven. The character of God that was supposed to radiate from among them like God's glory shone from Moses returning from Mt Sinai had been dulled & dragged under by the persistent "rip" sin. Anyone looking at their history from the outside would not see the purposes of God displayed in their lives, but the pursuit of self...they've given in to the "rip" & been dragged out to sea...they're adrift & in danger of losing it all again & they know it.

Sounds a lot like 2021. Editor-in-chief of the *Texas Business* magazine wrote, "we gave our kids everything...clothes car computer college education but we forgot to give them a conscience." Forgot to nurture their hearts...neglected to plant them in Christ, decided to let them sleep in & do something other than know the Father & Jesus Christ whom he sent (Jn 17:3). Despite our high-tech lifestyles, our celebrated freedom from moral limits, our Fit-Bits Beemers & Benzes, we really are slaves in today's Western World...Trapped in endless cycles of gratifying satisfying "me." Racking up levels of debt/consumption. Signaling virtue to the latest cause of the day w/ no foundation of moral virtue w/in. Hitting a new high score on the Xbox a new *PB* in our hobby-sport but feeling "an aching emptiness in your innards -- a chronic pain that all the Bacardi Breezes in the world can't numb."

Like those standing hour upon hour in Jerusalem your average follower of Jesus is near undistinguishable from anyone else...adapted to our culture rather than exhibiting the culture of Christ...Kevin DeYoung writes for the Gospel Coalition...most recent article is titled, *The World is Catechizing Us, Whether we Realize it Or Not*. He says the world is teaching us its value system, its belief system its lifestyle (it's got a rip going) & if we're not discipling catechizing teaching the Xn faith to the next generation then the "faith" of the world takes over where we leave off. If you aren't discipling your children...making faith in Christ the driver for your family...not a "sometimes food," then you will lose to the rip of this world.

Writing about the Olympics...he notes...what was once a celebration of incredible athletic prowess & the joy of competition b/c athletes at their best, has become a showcase of every social/political spasm imaginable. A man competes as a woman? Which country competes under a rainbow flag? Competitors take a knee but not in prayer?

His point: if we are not discipling our children/one another the world will do it for us: "...the reality facing every Christian in the West: the money, power, & prestige of mainstream media, big time sports, big business, big tech, & the institutions of education & entertainment are invested in making sin look normal" The world consistently preaches its message in direct opposition to the call of God. Are we doing as well? If not, our own flesh & blood will look more like those pulled out to sea than like those standing <sup>b/4</sup> the Water Gate in sackcloth/ashes simultaneously confessing their sin & praising God who forgives.

When was the last time God spoke to you about things in your life, & it rocked you so deeply you couldn't go on <sup>w/</sup> regular life until you stopped & sought Him deeply beyond an hour here or a few minutes there? They stopped eating & put on the traditional clothes of mourning/repentance...nothing was going back to normal until their hearts were fully tuned to the Father & his will & work in this world. Nothing was going back to normal until they had charted a different course into their future according to God's direction. Normal in Jerusalem wasn't dependent on vaccine or mask mandates but on a mandate from God to come back to him among his people **AND ACTUALLY LIVE AS HIS PEOPLE**...to swim <sup>b/t</sup> the flags as a community... <sup>b/t</sup> God's promises & his call to faithful daily living God's holy purposes here & now.

So together they immerse themselves in the history of God's work in their lives – they dive into the ocean of their daily lives <sup>w/</sup> God's promise etched on their hearts & echoing in their ears: "You alone are the Lord. You made the skies & the heavens & all the stars. You made the earth & the seas & everything in them. You preserve them all, & the angels of heaven worship you. You are the Lord God, who chose Abram & brought him from Ur of the Chaldeans & renamed him Abraham." You alone are God. You created all things & called us to be your own. You are the one who reached into this world & made promises to our ancestors...wandering pagans...to claim them for your glory here. You rescued us from slavery in Egypt, conquered the enemies arrayed against us & gave us a land...a home in your presence...blessings innumerable. "And you have done what you promised, for you are always true to your word."

"But our ancestors were proud & stubborn, & they paid no attention to your commands. They refused to obey & did not remember the miracles you had done for them. Instead, they became stubborn & appointed a leader to take them back to their slavery in Egypt..." The "rip" became too strong & we failed...It has always been so...

In Mk 4 Jesus shares a string of parables...one of them incredibly well known...a farmer sows seed all over the joint...on the path on some rocks in the furrows & out where there are weeds...seeds among weeds he later says are those where "...all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life, the lure of wealth, & the

desire for other things, so no fruit is produced." (Mk 4:1-8, 19) All too quickly the "rip" takes hold & <sup>b/4</sup> you know it...you're adrift out to sea in dangerous water...Rudyard Kipling in his prophetic poem from 1919 The gods of the copybook headings uses biblical wisdom to highlight the same rip: As the dog returns to its vomit & the washed pig returns to the mire, a fool repeats his folly & the bandaged finger wobbles back to the fire

*"But you are a God of forgiveness, gracious & merciful, slow to become angry, & rich in unfailing love. You did not abandon them..."*

Where did the impression ever arise that the Father is cruel & stern thundering judgment upon people, demanding they toe the line or else be punished severely <sup>w/o</sup> mercy? The OT always depicts God as loving compassionate & patient. He disciplines by the trials of rebellion so we will learn the cost of rebellion & return to him so he can bless & restore. Even as these people blasphemed God by creating a golden calf they called their god, he did not wipe them out but spared them. *But in your great mercy, you did not destroy them completely or abandon them forever. What a gracious & merciful God you are!* Ps 103:3-4 - *Lord, if you kept a record of our sins, who, O Lord, could ever survive? But you offer forgiveness that we might learn to fear you.* The greatest joy of the Father is when his children come to him in love/obedience to live out the life & character of his love justice righteousness peace every moment/day.

*The people responded, "In view of all this, we are making a solemn promise & putting it in writing. On this sealed document are the names of our leaders & Levites & priests."*

Together they pledge a new & different future...engaged in God's Word...immersed in worship...enfleshed in community...But there is one other very important point & we can't ignore it...The people failed to follow through <sup>w/</sup> their commitment. Old habits returned. Old sins revived. The nation once again lost the blessing of God. One conquering master gave way to another..."We have met the enemy & he is us."

But in their failure they fail into the unfailing love of God who will not stop forgiving... never stop restoring & never cease calling his people to return their hearts & hands to His purposes in His world. The final chapter begins "This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us & sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins." 1 Jn 4:10 It is the Son who finally holds us where the Father wants us...close to his heart... deep in his will...at work for his purposes...We dive into the ocean of our daily lives <sup>w/</sup> God's promise etched on our hearts, his Spirit watching over & working <sup>w/in</sup> us, & our brothers/sisters next to us for support & strength. For every word true for God's people then, is true for us today. **Take it home...** Who is the one person in your faith circle who helps you "swim between the flags:" willing to warn you when you are entering a danger zone, & supports & helps you when you get caught up in a "rip"? If you don't have a person to "swim" <sup>w/</sup> who is someone you will ask?

*30 secs...I'll pray for us to close - 2 Chr 16:9 – 2 Chr 7:14*