

Greenwood Hills Conference 1989-04

Nehemiah 6

by William MacDonald

The sermon emphasizes the importance of prioritizing the gospel and the assembly in Christian service, and making covenants with the Lord to give prayer a greater place, concentrate on evangelism, and train national successors.

Duration: 50:13

Scripture: Nehemiah 8:1-12, Nehemiah 9, Nehemiah 10:28-39, Matthew 6:33

Topics: "Conference"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of confessing our sins as a road to revival. He encourages the audience to approach their ministries with renewed zeal and dedication, especially as they may be in the last lap before the Lord's coming. The preacher urges them to prioritize prayer, evangelism, and church planting, while de-emphasizing other ministries. He also emphasizes the need to train national successors and make themselves expendable in order to continue the work of the ministry. Ultimately, the goal is to receive the Savior's smile and hear Him say, 'Well done.'

Transcript

If I did not speak on behalf of myself and of the guests, all of us who were guests here, and express our thanks to all who had a part in this conference, my words would be quite inadequate. So I would just like to leave a verse of Scripture, Colossians chapter 3, verse 24. Knowing that from the Lord you shall receive the reward of the inheritance, for you serve the Lord Christ.

That is true of all who have arranged this conference and had any part in it. Shall we turn again to Nehemiah, and this time to chapter 6. Nehemiah chapter 6, and verse 1. Nehemiah 6, 1. Now it happened when Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab, the rest of our enemies heard that I had rebuilt the wall, and that there were no breaks left in it, though at that time I had not hung the door in the gate, that Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, Come let us meet together in one of the villages in the plain of Ono, but they sought to do me harm. So I sent messengers to them, saying, I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down.

Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you? Those are magnificent words, aren't they? I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it

and go down to you? Nehemiah had his priorities. He had his priorities straight, and he stuck to them.

In all Christian service, there is always the temptation to be distracted. Nehemiah refused to be distracted. I will not come down.

We saw the first night that he had the vision of a great goal before him. He went straight for the goal, and he would not allow any red herrings across the trail. What is our goal? What is the goal of the missionary? Well, I think that we have a clue to this in Ephesians chapter 3, and we might just turn to that for a minute.

It has spoken very loudly to me, certainly. Ephesians chapter 3, and beginning in verse 8, this passage speaks of the fact that the Apostle Paul had a twofold ministry. A twofold ministry.

I'll read it. Ephesians 3, 8, To me who am less than the least of all the saints this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all people see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God, who created all things through Christ Jesus. Paul, I say, had a twofold ministry.

First, the gospel, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ. Second, the local assembly, the truth of the assembly, that all men should see what is the fellowship of the mystery. To me, this is the core of Christian service.

This is the core of missionary work. The gospel. The assembly.

The gospel. The assembly. Preaching the gospel.

Seeing souls saved. Seeing local assemblies planted and strengthened and built up in the faith. In one of the South American countries, one of the assembly missionaries was talking to a missionary from one of the faith missions.

And the missionary from the faith mission said to him, What do you do? And he said, I plant churches. And the missionary from the faith mission said, You? A brethren missionary plants churches? What did he mean by that? He meant that practically all the other assembly missionaries in that country were engaged in parachurch organizations. That's what he meant.

He meant that they were all busy with subsidiary ministries. But they weren't evangelizing. They weren't engaged in assembly planting.

We should really have a greater devotion for the assembly than Nehemiah had for the walls of Jerusalem and the people of Judah. But, as I said, in all service, whether at home or abroad, there's always a tendency to get distracted. There are so many good things that present themselves to us.

And we have to remember that the good is often the enemy of the best. There are a lot of good causes that you could take up, and yet they will keep you from that which is central. I repeat again, I believe that Paul's two-fold ministry is a pattern for us all, the gospel and the assembly.

And we mustn't be distracted from that. But oftentimes when the going gets rough, it's very easy for us to rationalize ourselves into escape routes. We might be facing intense difficulty in our service for the Lord, and I'm sure that we all do.

And I'm sure it's a temptation for missionaries at times to feel, I think I'd better go back to the state and get a master's degree in the microbic contents of cotton t-shirts. Nehemiah had an opportunity to escape from what he was doing, but he wouldn't do it. I am doing a great work.

I cannot come down. And maybe those words will stick in our hearts when we're tempted to turn aside for something that might be good, but isn't central. Let me say again, the gospel and the assembly, they are the central thing.

Everything else is subsidiary. Nehemiah says, I am doing a great work. I hope we all feel tonight that we're doing a great work.

I would like to paint a word picture for you concerning the great work that we're doing. A good work. What I'm going to paint really never happened in so many words, but it paints the picture just the same.

This is a meeting in eternity past between the father, the son, and the Holy Spirit before the world ever was made. And the father tells the son that he has a secret desire to get a bride for his son. To be a bride who would be with him and share his glory for all eternity.

A bride who would be referred to as the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints. And up to this point, everything was beautiful, but now the father describes the son, describes to the son, the bride, as the son would find her. She would be unclean spiritually.

Filthy clothing. Her stockings rolled down over her shoes. She would have stringy hair and bloodshot eyes.

She would be an unbathed woman of the street. She would love darkness, seeking her satisfaction in the cisterns of this world. She would run after many lovers, materialism, sex, pleasure, status, and similar vain things.

She would be spiritually dead. An ungodly wench and an enemy of all righteousness. She would live for bread alone and have no regard for any word that proceeded out of the mouth of God.

She would be aimless and hopeless and yet have no sense of need whatever. There's more. She would be blind, blind to the glory of God.

She would be deaf, deaf to the voice of God. She would be dumb, unable in any way to speak of the wonders of God or to worship and adore Him. And she would be paralyzed with no ability to serve the one who made her.

Unloved, without rest or peace. She would be only happy when she could forget God and only sad when she remembered Him. The son listens intently and then the father drops the bomb.

The son would have to go down to planet Earth and buy this woman back from the slave market of sin. It would be a tremendous price that he would have to pay. He would have to shed his blood.

He would have to give his life. He would have to endure separation from God the Father. He would have to experience the concentrated essence of hell in three hours on a cross of shame.

Let me ask you what man would ever be interested in such a bizarre transaction. Absolutely unthinkable. But the Son of God was willing.

He did not flinch for a moment. It was a joy set before Him. Who for the joy set before Him endured the cross despising the shame to set down at the right hand of God.

Nothing could stop Him from doing the will of God His Father. Lo, I come in the volume of the book that is written of me. I delight to do thy will.

Oh my God. He was willing to sell all that he had to buy, imagine, the pearl of great price. Rather hyperbole, don't you think? Calling that woman a pearl of great price.

He who was so rich was willing to become so poor in order that his poverty stricken bride might be made eternally rich. In time he came down to earth. He looked for her in Bethlehem but he didn't find her.

He looked for her in Egypt but she wasn't there. He went to Nazareth for her but he didn't find her in Nazareth. He spent time looking in Bethsaida, Chorazin Capernaum, no success.

He even went as far as Tyre but she wasn't there. At length he came to Jerusalem but he went to a place called Calvary but he found her there. He found the bride, the secret of his father's heart.

There he opened a fountain for sin and uncleanness so that she might be bathed from all her guilty stains. The shepherd had found the sheep that had gone astray and the son had bought his bride. The cost was enormous.

Thy father in his gracious love did spare thee from his side and thou didst stoop to bear about at such a cost his bride. Amazing isn't it? At such a cost thy bride. Now this is where you and I cut in.

The search is still going on, isn't it? God is calling out of the nations a people for his name. He's still speaking in every tongue and tribe and nation. Just as David longed for a drink from the well at Bethlehem so he still longs to draft the wells of Africa, Asia, Europe, the Americas and the islands of the sea.

And he uses us by the Holy Spirit to bring them in. We are doing a great work. We're not only part of that bride ourselves cleansed by precious blood but we're sent out under great commission to seek to add to that bride until it is perfect at last.

A preacher once told of a church that had been made out of wasted marble, a church building. It had been gathered from a dump. And he commented, waste marble into that? Well that's exactly what was happening in the book of Acts.

The marble from the waste dumps of humanity being built in a beautiful temple for the habitation of God through the Spirit. That's what's happening today. That's the work that we are called to.

We are doing a great work. Let us not go down. Just think of the bride in a coming day.

She will be without spot or wrinkle or any such thing. The Lord Jesus presents her to Himself. Nothing that would compare to a wart or a mole or a defect of any kind.

I want to tell you that's truly marvelous. God should ever take such raw material and save such by His grace and transform and sanctify. So the Lord Jesus presents to Himself a glorious church in that coming day.

She will be a glorious church, beautiful in glory. The wedding will take place at the rapture and I believe the marriage supper of the Lamb in the millennium and then throughout all eternity. God will show to a wondering bride the exceeding riches of His grace and His kindness toward us through Christ Jesus.

We are doing a great work. We cannot come down. What a wonderful privilege to be partners with God calling out of the nations bride for His sons, a people for His name.

I'd also like you to move on to chapter 8 and verses 1 through 12 and speak just briefly about the centrality of the word during Nehemiah's service here. When Ezra reads the law of the Lord, the centrality of the word. I think every once in a while it's good for us to stop and ask ourselves the question what place does the word have in our ministry? And we mentioned the other night that there are so-called preachers and teachers who are nickeling away at the truth of the word of God.

There are some people who don't talk about the inspiration of the scriptures anymore. They talk about the authority of the scriptures. I'm frank to tell you I don't like the word.

I like to hear people coming out saying frankly, we believe in the verbal, plenary inspiration of the scriptures. We believe that the words as originally given were given by God. And we believe that this book is inspired from cover to cover.

I believe in the authority of the Declaration of Independence, but I don't think it's inspired. And it's possible to use these words and weaken the idea in the minds of people. And I want to say again that men who nourish doubts about the inerrancy of the scripture should get out of the ministry and go back to peddling groceries.

That's what they should do. Let us think about the message that we preach. What is the message we preach? I like the expression the gospel of the glory of Christ.

The gospel of the glory of Christ. You know, that's what they preached in the book of Acts, wasn't it? A risen, ascended, glorified Christ at the right hand of God. Paint it with a big brush, I say.

Exhaust the vocabulary of excellence. Harness figures of speech as we were saying this afternoon. Set him forth as the all in all.

I'd like to say tonight it's a sin to preach a pale, anemic Jesus or an amateur Savior. And with all the powers that are in us, we should set him forth in all his grandeur, in all his glory, in all his power as the only Savior and the only Lord. We must move on.

In chapter 9, verses 1 through 38, the subject is confession. All the key things are found here in the book of Nehemiah. Confession.

Here they come together and they confess sin. Confession is the road to revival. You can live and die in many, many assemblies and you'll never hear confession.

It's almost as if people think that it's washing your laundry in public or something like that. But if you're engaged in some work of God, or even in an assembly here at home, and you've been going months and perhaps years and no one has been saved, and no one has been baptized, and the chariot wheels of God are dragging on heavily, maybe you'd better think about getting together for a time of confession. Wonderful what happens when God's people come together and say, well, we have nothing to confess.

Really? We can confess our materialism. We really are a materialistic people, aren't we? We really are a materialistic people, and even a dime can come between your eye and the sun, and material things can come between your eyes and the Savior as well. We're a pleasure-loving people.

Sometimes a lady told me, since I've been here, a sister told me that in certain places a meeting has to stop on time so people can get home and watch the football game or something like that. I wonder what the Holy Spirit thinks of that. I was in an assembly.

I won't name the country. Maybe I'd just better not name the state. The meeting began at 11 o'clock Sunday morning, and I got up.

I think I got the meeting at 11.20, and at 11.45 I lost my audience. People weren't with me at all. I could tell.

It was obvious. Lost my audience at 11.45. And driving back home in the car, I said, well, I certainly had an experience this morning. They said, well, what's that? I said, I lost my audience at 11.45. They said, of course, the meeting was supposed to stop at 11.45. I said, why? They said, they like to get to Marsden's Cafeteria before the church crowd gets there.

You know, that's playing church, isn't it? That's really playing church. That's not Christianity. Think of a grieved Holy Spirit in a situation like that.

Pleasure loving people. A lack of commitment to the Lord. That's where we are today.

A lack of commitment to the Lord. We should confess it. Gossip.

Mixed motives. Broken marriages. Wayward children.

Scandals. Immorality. Biblical illiteracy.

People of God today are really not studying the Bible, largely. Not. Sad, sad conditions.

The death of evangelism. To say nothing of false doctrine, pride, racism, and personality conflicts in the church. I want to tell you, I really believe, in many local fellowships, we get together and get down on our knees and cry out to God and drag these things out into the open and confess them to the Lord, we see blessing.

Sin is holding back the blessing of God. This would be true in the foreign field as well, wouldn't it? Hard feelings among the workers. God can't work those circumstances.

Sins of every kind. Confessions. Well, had a wonderful effect here in the book of Nehemiah as Ezra read the law of God.

Then he said to them, go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared. For this day is holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.

Then in chapter 10, verses 28 through 39, they weren't content with reading the scriptures and confessing their sin to the Lord, but in chapter 10, verses 28 through 39, they drew up a covenant with the Lord. A covenant. And if you look it over, you'll find, first of all, the covenant was against mixed marriages, against commercial violations of the Sabbath day.

It was a covenant to keep the seventh year, and it was a covenant to support the temple services. You say, what has that got to do with us? We don't keep the Sabbath, we don't observe the seventh year, we don't have a temple and temple service. No, it occurs to me that here at the close of this missionary conference, it might be a good thing for us to make certain covenants with the Lord.

It would be a wonderful thing if, as we leave here, we could covenant with the Lord to give prayer a greater place in our lives and ministry. We talked the other night about prayer and the power of prayer, and since then we've heard about men that are going around saying prayer doesn't change anything, all it does is bring your will into conformity with the will of God. But you and I know better than that.

It's around God and His sovereignty, He's ordained everything that's going to happen whether you pray or not. That's not the way I look at it. I believe God in His sovereignty has given man a will in the matter too.

Just as God in His sovereignty gave Adam a will to do or not to do, and I believe He does that with regard to prayer. Remember what we said the other night. Without God, man cannot.

Without man, God will not. But I really believe that's true. You've seen answers to prayer where the hand of God was moved in response to the prayers of His beloved people.

Let us covenant. As we go away from this, and I want to do it too, I tend to be more of a Martha than a Mary. I really do.

I say to my shame. I tend to be more of a Martha. And I get down on my knees in the morning and I think, 60 things I have to do that day.

And it's easy to cut short prayer. Let's covenant to give prayer a more central place in our lives and ministry. Two, we should covenant with the Lord to concentrate more on evangelism and church planting and de-emphasize other ministries that are good but subordinate.

Wonderful thing, wouldn't it? Take up Missions Magazine and hear a read of assemblies that are springing up in countries of the world because you went back from this conference with a new determination to see this happen under God. Three, we should seek under God to train national successors and turn the work over to them as soon as possible before we're forced to do it by governmental decree. In other words, this covenant is that we want to make ourselves extendable.

The gifts were given for perfecting of the saints for the work of the ministry. For perfecting of the saints for the work of the ministry. All right? A missionary is a goer, not a stayer.

A missionary should not be a resident pastor abroad, should he? The longest the Apostle Paul ever stayed in one place was two years. He stayed in Ephesus for two years. During his total ministry he spent three years in Ephesus, but any one time he only spent two years there.

This is tremendously important to see national workers trained up so that they can do the work and you can move on. Next, we should constantly pursue holiness without which no man shall see the Lord. The Christian ministry is primarily a ministry of character.

What we are is far more important than anything we ever say and do. You can't get away from it. A good tree brings forth good fruit.

A bad tree brings forth evil fruit. Pursue holiness in our lives. And in that connection we should pray for one another.

Because, I think I said the other night, the closer you stand to your captain, the more you'll be in line for the devil's shots. We need to pray for one another. And we should, next we should cultivate simplicity in our lives.

Why? Why should we cultivate simplicity in our lives? Well, first of all, because the Lord Jesus commanded it. He sent his disciples forth as poor men. Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Secondly, we're representatives of the Lord Jesus. What kind of a representation do we give of him? I don't think we can ever totally identify with the nationals in third world countries. I don't think they expect us to.

But it's nice to have a home where they can come in and where they can feel relaxed in the home, isn't it? Certainly that way we can identify with them. And finally, another covenant. In as much as lies within us, we should live at peace with our fellow workers.

It would be nice if we could go forth from this conference, and I'll just leave a few blank lines here for you to fill in perhaps other things that you would like to covenant with the Lord. Chapter 6, verse 15. And with this, we close.

Chapter 6, verse 15. My heart beat just a little bit faster when I read those words, So the wall was finished. Great, doesn't it? Tell you, they had a vision of a work to be done.

They went at it with all their heart, and the work was finished. Now that's going to be true perhaps very soon, the work of the Lord. So the work was finished.

What's it going to mean? Well, the best thing it's going to mean is the Savior's smile. Praise is sweet, but it's never as sweet as when it's the praise of Christ. When He says, well done.

The poet says, when the harvest days are past, shall I hear Him say at last, Welcome toiler, I've prepared for thee a place. Shall I bring Him golden sheaves, ripened fruit, not faded leaves, When I see the blessed Savior face to face. When the books are opened wide and the deeds of all are tried, May I have a record whiter than the snow.

When my wraith on earth is run, may I hear Him say, well done, Take the crown that love immortal doth bestow. The Savior's smile, nothing will make up for that. And second, the work is finished, a welcoming committee.

I think that's great. Paul says, for what is our hope or joy or crown of rejoicing Are not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming. I tell you, some of the people here are going to have a welcoming committee.

It's wonderful when you think of years of faithful service for the Lord And of those who will be waiting at the ramparts of glory for them. When in the mansions above, the saved all around me appear, I want to hear someone saying, it was you who invited me here. The satisfaction of having planted and strengthened New Testament assemblies, What a monument to leave behind and to be rewarded for in that coming day.

The Savior's smile, a welcoming committee, And I think too it's going to mean vindication for some of you. It makes me think of a man who wrote this, When full-time service was a career for which I had no interest or inclination. In my early Christian life, I had no leading to it, nor was it attractive to me.

Yet about midnight one night in May 1972, I found myself on my knees telling God that I was available And that I would resign from my career as an Air Force officer To be in full-time service for Him. What do you think happened? Many were critical of my decision. Some were skeptical.

One retired officer told me I was insane. My grandmother cried. My wife was initially apprehensive.

Most of my relatives were shocked. Others thought it was a great step of faith. The step seemed illogical because I had only six and a half of my 20-year service left until retirement.

Many thought I should wait till then. Till then. He didn't wait.

He stepped out. It's going to be a time of vindication for a man like that, isn't it? And this happened to C.T. Studd too. When C.T. Studd told his friends that he was turning his back on a brilliant career in cricket, they said, You're mad leaving your cricket and going to be a missionary.

Couldn't you wait until you finished your cricketing days? Couldn't you make more of an impact for God as a cricketer? This last one's marvelous. Why go as a missionary to a place where they've never heard of cricket? The fact they never heard of Christ didn't seem to make any difference, did it? Why go to a place where they've never heard of cricket? A day of vindication, won't it? A people who made the choice, and they made the right choice too. They sensed the divine tap on the shoulder, and they heard his call.

They left all, rose and followed. That was all. And it strikes me here at the close of this meeting that perhaps we're on the last lap right now.

I'd like to think that. That we're in the last lap, and the Lord's coming is just around the corner. The thing to do is let us go back to our ministries with renewed zeal, with greater dedication, and with a greater desire to finish the course in a blaze of glory.

It's like a marathon, and you've been running for 25 miles, and you're beginning to feel it. Maybe you feel like just stepping aside, and yet you give that burst of energy to cross the finish line victorious. Or maybe it's like climbing a mountain.

Those of you who have done any mountain climbing know what that's like. It just seems that when the top comes into view, when your energy is at its very lowest, and you just have to step on the gas and take that last push to the top of the mountain. I think the poet said it well.

Go on, go on. There's all eternity to rest in, and far too few are on the active list. No service for the Lord is risky to invest in, and nothing will make up should his well done be missed, shall we pray.

Father, we thank you that you've not left us without direction, that you've told us what our priorities should be. Help us to see those priorities and to give our very best in seeing them through. We pray, Lord, that we might be a confessing people, that we might keep short accounts with you, that in our ministry and in our service we might not let sins accumulate.

We pray that we might see you moving in revival fires as we come to you and confess our materialism and our pleasure-loving and our lack of commitment to the many things that characterize us now. Help us,

Lord, to give centrality, too, to the word of God, to preach the word. To the instant in season, out of season, we do ask.

Keep us, Lord, O keep us, cleaving to thyself and still believing till the hour of our receiving promised joys in heaven. Hear the covenants that are made before you tonight. Give us grace and strength to see them through.

Father, we do look forward to that day when we'll hear the shout, the voice of the archangel, the trump of God, and when our blessed Savior and Master appears and we're caught up to meet him in the air. We pray that we might do so with joy and confidence in that hour. We commit ourselves to you.

Thank you for this week together. We love you, O Father. We love you, blessed Lord Jesus Christ.

You are truly our all in all. We give thanks in your worthy name. Amen.

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