

Do We Really Have It In Us?

3-Year Bible Reading Plan

By Dr. Jeff Meyers

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Crossroads Ministries
301 S. 8th Street
Opelika, Alabama 36801

Website: www.fbcopelika.com
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/jeffmeyers

First Baptist family, I want to welcome you again to our Sunday evening service. Again, the room is empty and I want to thank you for allowing us the privilege and the opportunity to be a part of your lives tonight.

You know, in recent days when I say the First Baptist family, we have broadened our footprint, so to speak. In fact, one of the blessings that we've had via social media is seeing where everybody is tuning in and watching from. Of course, we have a great saturation for those that are here in the East Alabama and Western Georgia area, as well as other continental states, but in recent days we've had some faithful viewers and listeners from Canada, Ireland, South Africa and other countries and continents and we want to welcome you and thank you for being a part of the larger First Baptist, Opelika, family.

Well, tonight let me encourage you to get a copy of God's word and turn to the book of Nehemiah 8 and 9, and tonight we come to one of the most strategic chapters in all of the Bible and maybe one of the strategic times in all of our lives. What I've entitled tonight is "Do We Have It In Us?" Do we really have it in us? Now the big question to that is what is "it"? Over recent days and weeks I've had the privilege of having numerous conversations with those that I would consider much wiser than myself. Oftentimes they lived life a little bit longer than myself but wise when it comes to the things of God, wise when it comes to the things of just living life, and there is an interesting theme that I'm hearing from those that I would categorize as the wise ones or maybe even the sages of our day when it comes to people of our faith. There is this theme of not missing the old, not relishing for the normal to return, but a curiosity and a concern: will we the people of God, will we the church of Jesus Christ take advantage of the incredible opportunity that he has given us? Now you look back on the last nine weeks in a world of virtual church services and social distancing and such, and you're maybe wondering to yourself how could this be an opportunity by God?

As we're walking through Ezra and Nehemiah, I think we find ourselves in the same scenario and in the same situation. For years prior to the Babylonian captivity, they had been marked as a culture and a society and even as a people of faith who had become carnal, materialistic and self-serving. They did not listen to, "Thus saith the Lord." They

listened to the loudest voices, the majority opinion, or whatever their feelings told them to do. They found themselves in captivity for 70 years and it is the records of Ezra and Nehemiah, of the Israelites, of the Jewish people returning to their homeland with a renewed passion for the things of God, a renewed focus for the person of God, and the big question that I think we have to answer tonight or we have the privilege of answering tonight is do we really have it in us, do we have it in us to return as they did or do we simply just want what it used to be? Are we just longing for a carnal, materialistic, self-serving, based on my feelings gathering again, or will we learn the lessons from the people of Israel, will we learn the lessons from our own, shall we say, captivity though it not be 70 years, and will we follow in the footsteps of Ezra and Nehemiah with the privilege and the opportunity of seeing a genuine, refocused, re-prioritization, and if you allow me to say, even revival take place in our lives? I believe that you and I are in a privileged position in life. God has allowed us our own captivity, he's allowed us our own opportunity to sit back and reflect on our relationship with him and how we relate to one another. Do we really have it in us?

You see, when we ask that question today about the church going from the scattered to gathered as I addressed specifically this morning, what we naturally begin to think is do we really have it in us, do we have enough hand sanitizer, can we really socially distance, how we operate our services, how do we do traffic flow, and tonight I don't want to address any of those physical matters, I want to address the spiritual matters because we can have all the social distancing, all the hand sanitizers, we can have all the great procedures and processes but if we miss the spiritual element, we will simply regather in vain, we will simply come back to this campus just spread out but with nothing re-prioritized or refocused.

So tonight when I ask the question do we really have it in us, it's not about a fear of gathering in public, it's not about do we or do we not acquire facemasks, it's not about can we do small groups or just large gathering, it has nothing to do with the physical return to our campus but the spiritual mindset when we do so, and in Nehemiah 8 and 9, we have a record of one of the great revival movements of God. When his people came out of 70 years of being sheltered in Babylon, 70 years of being distanced from their homeland, from their temple and from their people, they returned, they established the walls, the city, and what we know as an incredible revival of God is about to unfold before them and I think tonight we should learn the lessons of what is it that they did so that we can emulate it and imitate it because if we do not do what is here in Nehemiah 8 and 9, we will have wasted the quarantine, we will have wasted sheltering in place, and we will just simply return to a world of carnality, materialism, selfishness and feeling-based theology just six feet apart with a lot of hand sanitizer.

So that being said, when we come to Nehemiah, I am going to read verses 1 through 14 of Nehemiah 8, and then a few verses in chapter 9 so we can kind of get a sense of what's happening at this incredible time. Remember, the city is being built, the temple is being built and worship is about to be initiated for the first time in Jerusalem in 70 years. I hope you get the parallel tonight. Beginning in verse 1, it says,

1 And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel. 2 And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month. 3 And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law. 4 And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose; and beside him,

If you'll allow me, are a lot of names that are difficult to pronounce, some on his right hand, some on his left.

5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was above all the people;) and when he opened it, all the people stood up: 6 And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground. 7 Also Jeshua, and Bani, and Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, caused the people to understand the law: and the people stood in their place. 8 So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading. 9 And Nehemiah, which is the Tirshatha, and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said unto all the people, This day is holy unto the LORD your God; mourn not, nor weep. For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law. 10 Then he said unto them, Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the LORD is your strength. 11 So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, Hold your peace, for the day is holy; neither be ye grieved. 12 And all the people went their way to eat, and to drink, and to send portions, and to make great mirth, because they had understood the words that were declared unto them. 13 And on the second day were gathered together the chief of the fathers of all the people, the priests, and the Levites, unto Ezra the scribe, even to understand the words of the law. 14 And they found written in the law which the LORD had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths in the feast of the seventh month:

Now I want to fast-forward into chapter 9, verse 1, and it says,

1 Now in the twenty and fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, and with sackclothes, and earth upon them. 2 And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers, and stood

and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers. 3 And they stood up in their place, and read in the book of the law of the LORD their God one fourth part of the day; and another fourth part they confessed, and worshipped the LORD their God.

What we have read is a synopsis of how one of the greatest revivals, one of the greatest moves of God in all of history took place. What happened in these passages and I know we read it somewhat quickly and maybe it's the first or maybe even the second time you've read through it and maybe it hasn't soaked in quite exactly what occurred, and so tonight I want to walk through the items or the focuses or the things that occurred in their life that need to occur in our life if you and I are going to return to the church gathered with the proper spiritual focus.

Now the first thing that you'll notice tonight is that the primacy of preaching. Now I know what some of you are thinking, "Well, Jeff, makes sense you would say that because you're a pastor and you're a preacher." I understand that I spend a lot of time in front of this camera, I understand that in days past I spent a lot of time in front of large gatherings but I want you to know and my family can testify, probably for every sermon or Bible study that I teach and lead, I probably listen to two or three other sermons by other individuals to challenge me.

Now when we gather as a body of believers, there are a lot of different things or, shall we say, attributes of us that describe who we are. We are a people of worship and you saw here how they raised their hands and they fell on their faces and we are a people that have a rich history of singing the truth of God's word together to affirm our faith through worship or maybe through musical instrumentation or vocals, so to speak. We're also people who participate adamantly into what we might call discipleship. Discipleship happens in small groups and one-on-one where we walk alongside individuals and we challenge them and we hold them accountable and we pray with them and we pray for them. We're also a people who love fellowship. You know one of the jokes about Baptists, when we meet, we eat. We love to interact with each other and encourage one another and just enjoy the fellowship of one another. We believe in evangelism, going out and sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the lost world. We participate in what we call missions, going out into peoples and people groups that we may never associate on a daily basis to propagate the message of Jesus Christ. And all of those things are valid biblical aspects of who we, the body of Christ, are designed to be and how we are to operate. Notice I didn't say preaching and preaching only, I said the primacy of preaching. In other words, it should be the dedicated proclamation of the truth of God's word that drives our worship, and drives our discipleship, and drives our evangelism, and drives our missions, and drives all these other aspects. Allow me to share what none of us are really willing to confess openly: we've gotten our priorities messed up in days past.

If you don't believe me, you ought to hear some of the conversations I've had with people in recent days. One of such was with an individual not a part of First Baptist Church of Opelika, but in our conversation this individual was bemoaning the fact that no longer being able to gather as in days past, that somehow, some way, the music, the worship just

didn't translate into their home as it did in a room such as this, and I began to kind of push back a little bit and discuss and I couldn't believe what came out of their mouth and I don't think they meant ill, I just think the Lord allowed what Scripture says that our words reveal our heart. The statement was made, "When I'm not in the room with the music that I'm used to, it's just not the same spirit." Can I be honest with you? That frightens me that we would say that if we can't sing corporately like we used to, or we can't gather in groups like we used to, that it's not the same spirit. Last time I checked, the Holy Spirit of God dwells within us and empowers us whether we're all alone or in a group of 10,000, whether we're singing or whether we are silent, and I know that their heart's intent was probably to say it just isn't the same and I get that, but I think all of us at some time have made the attributes of our faith the primacy of our faith, and how did revival happen here? They stood up and they read, they proclaimed, they taught and they explained what do the Scriptures say. You and I if we ever want true revival to come into our lives, we have to have a primacy of Scripture. Now hear me clearly, I love good worship, I love singing, I love evangelism and missions and fellowship and small groups. I love all that stuff but all of it needs to come under the primacy of the proclamation of the word of God.

Now years ago many of you are familiar, I had the opportunity to spend a great deal of my lifetime and money at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary earning a PhD in evangelism and missions, and one of the seminars that I was privileged to sit in and participate in was a history of spiritual awakenings which was led by Dr. Roy Fish. Now for those of you that may not have a Baptist background or a seminary background, truly one of the legends when it comes to an understanding of evangelism not only in time going back but particularly evangelism since what we know as the Protestant Reformation, and one of the things that they would do in our seminars and it took place in this one, is they would send us a list of potential paper topics. Now this would come out in May and we would begin to present our papers in September and there would be one paper presented each week, we'd read, we'd peer review while writing our own, about 30 papers a year in each one of these seminars. Now the reasons that's important is there's about 30 papers per year per seminar but there would be about 50 to 60 topics or identities that would be listed and he allowed us the opportunity to choose the one that most interested us obviously so we would be passionate about our research. That being said, all of us submitted that which we desired to write about and to research and I got a call back from Dr. Fish, not an email back, I got a call back and he made a very specific request to me, he said, "Jeff, I want you to write a paper," and I said, "Okay, Dr. Fish, which paper?" I had made my selections, the problem was none of my selections were the one he wanted me to write. He wanted me to write one on the history of evangelistic music. I said, "Dr. Fish, with all due respect, I can't carry a note, I can't carry, I'm not a music guy." He said, "Exactly." He said, "Every time someone writes this paper, they do so to promote their preferred style or a specific agenda. Everybody who knows you knows you don't sing, you can't sing, and you like it all." I said, "Well, you're right, Dr. Fish." He said, "So please would you do an honest academic analysis of the history of evangelistic music since what you and I know as the Protestant Reformation?"

Now I'm not gonna bore you tonight with all that research but I do want to share something very strategic in light of the recent 90 days and the developments of our "faith culture," at least in our community and on Western civilization is what we call evangelistic music, new styles, new genres, passionate hymns and songs and spiritual songs that have been written, here's what I want you to hear: in a history of all the great revival movements since the Protestant Reformation, the music, the worship, the singing was always a residual effect of the revival. In other words, the music did not lead into the revival but was a response thereof. In other words, because revival came, then the music changed or because revival came, the songs were written. When God moved among his people, then his people were inspired to pen the words and the music to some of the great songs of our faith. You say, "Why is that so important?" Because when we look back at the great revival movements even of this land in recent centuries, we think of names like Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, and R. A. Torrey, and Chapman, and Sunday, none of which were musicians, all of which were preachers and proclaimers of the word of God. Now there were some great musicians and some great song leaders and worship leaders that came out of those on the backside. You say, "Why is that important?" Because when you and I have a mentality that we can't wait to gather so that we can eat together, or we can't wait to gather so that we can sing together, or we can't wait to gather so we can do this together, we're going to miss the opportunity. When the Israelites gathered together, the sole primary purpose was for the reading, the hearing, the explanation of the word of God, and maybe just maybe God is allowing us the opportunity to re-prioritize.

Now hear me clearly, I did not say that worship was not important. I did not say that discipleship was not. All those things are critical to the mission of the body of Christ but the proclamation and the preaching of the word of God is supposed to be the primary means by which God instructs, motivates his people. How many times did we just read they stood up, they read the law, they heard the law, they explained the law? In fact, it even says from morning until midday. And so if you and I are gonna take advantage of this very strange opportunity that God has given us, it doesn't mean that these other aspects aren't important, it just means that you and I should seek the primacy of preaching for our lives. If we don't, we may just, in fact, miss the opportunity.

The second thing I want you to notice about that which we read is that they had a rejection of hypocrisy. In fact, beginning in verse 9 of chapter 8 he says, "This day is holy. Why are you mourning?" And here's what's interesting, verse 10, he said unto them, "Go your way." Now one of the things that we tend to overlook and I do so myself when we're reading through the Scriptures, are these little lines that give us the time and the date of which events happened. In other words, the timeframe between the "sermon of chapter 8 and the worship service of chapter 9" is about three weeks. Why is that important? Because he gives them instructions to go into the land, gives them instructions to go to their home, gives them instructions to go back to what we would call the workplace and the schoolhouse, and here's what he basically says, "Take what you've heard from the word of God and live it out." If you and I are going to return to the church gathered with a renewed focus, then we've got to be willing to reject hypocrisy. In other words, we've got to see the life that we live on Monday as just as holy as an event as our

worship together on Sunday. We've got to realize that our testimony among those we work with and go to school with and interact with and do business with is just as holy an event as when we gather in a small group or when we sing music together or we fellowship or we hear the word of God explained.

How many times have you heard somebody reject the tenets, or more importantly the person of Jesus Christ, because of the hypocrisy of some believer's life? And I know the natural response is don't judge Christianity based on the Christians but on the Christ of Christianity. I get that. I know none of us are perfect but let's be honest with each other tonight, that days prior to this global pandemic the church of Jesus Christ was marked more by its hypocrisy than by its holiness, and if we're going to regather in regards to the social distancing and all that, that will all work out, if we do not have the primacy of preaching, if we do not reject hypocrisy, if we fail to see that how we wake up and go to the office on Tuesday is just as holy an event as when we gather on Sunday, then you and I will have truly wasted this opportunity that God has given us to refocus and to re-prioritize. So we see that the lives that they went out until they returned again, the picture that we get is everything that was explained to them, they lived it out and did not vary from it; the declaration that all of those activities were just as holy as their gathering together among the people of faith to be encouraged in their faith from the word of faith.

The third thing that we see that I think is very critical is actually found in verse 14 of chapter 8. It says they found written in the law, again when they gathered for the primacy of preaching which the Lord had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths in the feast of the seventh month. Now what's being explained here is what you and I know as the feast of Tabernacles. Now hear me clearly, I'm not trying to encourage going back to what some people call the Hebrew Roots Movement, in other words, let's go back to the feasts of the Old Testament to enhance our faith as New Testament Christians, that's not what I'm saying. I'm using this as an illustration, I'm using it as an allusion, so to speak. When they understood that the word of God as explained particularly in what we know as the Torah, the Pentateuch, the first five books of Moses, this feast of Tabernacles probably next to what we know as Passover and Pentecost, the most critical of the feasts and one of what we might call the big three, here's what's important about the feast of Tabernacles: that all of the men that were of age, now you say what is of age? Well, we know that's at least north of age 20 according to the book of Numbers 14 and potentially even those north of age 13 due to what we know as the historical celebration of a bar mitzvah and all the things surrounding that, that all of the men that were of age were to go into the booths or go into the Tabernacles for a celebration that lasted upwards of two weeks. In fact, when you get into the book of Leviticus, there's actually what we call a second tithe. Obviously the first 10%, the firstfruits were given unto the temple for the means of worship, the second 10% of their income or their resources were to be set aside so that they could go to the feast whether that was Passover in Jerusalem or Pentecost and, yes, the feast of Tabernacles. It would have been a very expensive and extenuating celebration.

Notice it says they found it written and they made the decision to follow therein. What is this? If we are going to gather ourselves again with purpose, then you and I must

collectively have what I want to call tonight a willful inconvenience. Last time I checked, when it comes to gathering for the purpose of edifying and encouraging and holding accountable the body of Christ, it is oftentimes inconvenient. How many times at least in days past have we found anything or something else to do than to gather? We have found something that takes a greater priority in our life, that has completely a temporary satisfaction and what are we willing to do? We're willing to compromise. You see, compromise is when we trade an eternal truth for a temporary blessing and we go after the temporary job offer, the temporary success on the field, or the temporary this, and we reject the eternal value that the person of God among the people of God can bring us when we gather.

When they went to the feast of Tabernacles, it cost them financially. What we might call the main breadwinner of the home was gone for two weeks and in those days it was substance living. If you didn't till it out of the field, you didn't have anything, and so therefore it would have been economically challenging, it would have been time challenging. Imagine having that individual that was so critical in the home being gone for upwards of two weeks. And for those men who went to the feast of Tabernacles, could there be an activity more contrary to who we are as men, sitting in tents for two weeks? Now I'm not talking about a deer blind, guys. I'm not talking about going on a hunt. I'm talking about sitting in a tent with the sole purpose of focusing our heart, our mind, our soul and all of our physical faculties on the person of God alone. That, my friends, is willfully inconvenient. You see, they had just gathered in Jerusalem, they had just started rebuilding the wall, they had just started building the temple, in other words, we're finally getting things going and now all the men are gonna leave for two weeks? Now when we need resources we're not gonna have any sustenance? Now you're gonna....? In other words, this would have been the last thing they would have wanted to hear from the word of God is that for two weeks the breadwinners and all the men are gonna be gone, focusing on the things of God, and we're just gonna have to push pause. But what do we see happen? They simply followed what God's word said.

A primacy of preaching, a rejection of hypocrisy, a willingness to inconvenience themselves to focus on the things of God rather than the things of the flesh. Speaking of the things of the flesh, let me encourage you to turn to chapter 9. As we turn into chapter 9, it's been about three weeks. They've gone out and lived out that which they heard from the word of God, they've realized that this feast of Tabernacles is now on the forefront of their lives. They're willing to be inconvenienced. They're willing to make Wednesday and Thursday just as holy as what you and I would call Sunday, and they gather for the hearing and the preaching of the word of God. Notice what it says in chapter 9, it says they gathered there in verse 1 with fasting and sackclothes, they were separated and such, and it says there they stood for a fourth part of the day in verse 3 and they heard the word of God proclaimed again. In other words, that primacy of preaching was still the focal point of who they were when they gathered. The fourth thing that we have to ask ourselves, do we really have it in us: are we willing for a rejection of the flesh?

Ladies and gentlemen, it's now where we're probably gonna get, as we jokingly call, to meddling. Notice what it says in verse 1, it says, "Now in the twenty and fourth day of

this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, and with sackclothes, and earth was upon them." Now when I say the rejection of the flesh, I'm just gonna speak as an individual and I'm gonna speak as a Baptist: I don't know if there's anything I like more than eating. It satisfies my flesh. I enjoy it. I like it. It's just part of life. Well, that being said, when they fasted, they rejected what we know as the consumption of food for the focusing on the things of God.

Now I want to unpack that for just a moment because in our world today I don't know if fasting from food, though it is biblically suggested, I think we need to take that term or that concept of fasting and broaden it just a little bit because today when it comes to food, if I so desired I could walk off of this stage, I could get in my car, I could go to a local drive-through, I could return to this stage before the hour is over and I could have a complete hot meal before me. In biblical days the process of acquiring and preparing the meal for the day would have taken an enormous amount of time. They oftentimes would spend hours and hours in the preparation thereof, and so when they fasted, it wasn't just a rejection of physical nourishment for spiritual edification, it was also taking all of those hours and all of that time that would have been spent on the things of the flesh and they focused it on the things of God.

Let me ask you a difficult question, particularly walking through a global pandemic. When you turn your "smartphone" on, what's your screen time been in the last nine weeks? You know, we talked about fasting from food, how about fasting from social media? How about fasting from the things of this world? How about fasting from the pleasures of the flesh? You know, one of the beauties, can I just speak candidly tonight? One of the blessings of my, I've had to fast from sports. I love sports. Do you know how much time I wasted watching games I didn't even care about, where I could be focused on more important eternal matters? I would sit and watch a football game for hours that I didn't care about either team just because it was football. I have somewhat been forced to fast from it. It's amazing how it kind of rewires your priorities.

When they gathered together, they were fasting. In other words, they were taking the things of this old world and relegating them to the sides and focusing on the things of God. Do we really have it in us to make the gathering of the saints – oh, forgive me for saying this – more important than football? I said it, didn't I? I did. Because you and I know particularly in our culture here in the South, football season is on the edge and everybody's wondering is it or is it not gonna happen, and trust me, I want it to happen for a lot of different reasons but I think we have put ourselves in a position in recent past days where oftentimes we'll spend more time and more money getting ready to tailgate and watch a football game than we would in preparation to hear the things of God.

Can I tell you one of the things that's just, I'm gonna go old school on you for just a moment, it's just nails on the chalkboard to me when I have individuals in times past who say they cannot afford to send their child to student camp but I know they're season ticket holders at the local college football stadium. They'll spend ten times as much money going to football games as youth camp, but all of a sudden we don't have the finances there. Why? Because you and I need to do what they did, we need to fast, we need to

make God more important than football. I just said it and I know I frustrated some of you but that's what the Israelites did and if we're going to gather together again, I'm not saying we don't watch football, I'm not saying we don't enjoy football, but can we please for the love of God put it in its rightful place? They fasted, they rejected those things that fed their flesh so that they could focus on the things of God.

Well, if that didn't take half of those of you that were watching and just check out, hopefully the rest of you will hang in there with me. I didn't say it was gonna be fun, it's just how revival happens and it may just be why we haven't seen it in a long time, and the next thing we see is the separation from the world. Notice in verse 2 it says, "And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers," and what they did and we call this the doctrine of separation. We see this in the New Testament, it says, "Come you saints and separate therefore yourselves"; that they were not willing to associate with the carnality of the world for the violation of their own personal holiness.

Now before you go ahead and go there, I'm gonna do it for you. How many times do you say, "Well, Jesus ate with sinners and Jesus hung out around the derelicts of society." You're absolutely right but I dare you to look at the stories of the woman at the well, look at the stories of Zacchaeus, look up all these stories and what will you discover? That when Jesus ate with Zacchaeus he didn't just sit there, consume a meal and walk out as a guest, he confronted him with his sin problem, put him on the proverbial spot and Zacchaeus confesses he has sinned and says, "I'm ready to live a different life." Jesus did not hang out with sinners for the sake of hanging out but so that he could be an impact and an influence with the message that he was proclaiming and that we proclaim through his name and his blood that was shed for the sins of humanity.

They separated themselves. They no longer went where the world went. They no longer spoke as the world spoke. They no longer thought as the world thought. How difficult is it for us to say, "I'm just not gonna go there. I'm not gonna participate in that. I'm not gonna associate with." You know why it's hard? It's difficult because as soon as we say no to whatever it may be, there is tension in the air, there is tension within relationships, and most of us unfortunately in days past were willing to compromise our faith just to go along with the status quo than to take a stand for righteousness and holiness.

Ladies and gentlemen, now do you see why it's been so long since revival has come to this land? You know, one of the great evangelists of days gone by was a man by the name of Billy Sunday. I appreciate him for a lot of different reasons, one of which was the fact that he was a former major league baseball player, but one of the things about Billy Sunday was that when people heard that he was coming to town, when people heard that he would be preaching in their community, the people who owned places of ill-repute, the people that owned the bars, the people that owned all the places that the people of God have no business spending any time in, would close down before he even showed up. Do you know why? Because there was a history of wherever he went and when revival showed up, people purposefully no longer attended those places because God had moved on their lives and they no longer sought the things of the world. They separated themselves from the world. You know, if we could go back to verse 1 where he talked

about the primacy of preaching, that seemed difficult at the time, did it not, but as we go into the rejection of hypocrisy, when we go into the area of being willing to sacrifice our time, our resources, as we talk about our flesh and separation from the world, we see why revival is so rare.

Verse 3 it says, "they stood up in their place, and read in the book of the law of the LORD their God one fourth part of the day; and another fourth part they confessed, and worshipped the LORD their God." Now here's what's important: they were willing to confess not just their sins but the sins of the past. You know, one of the things particularly in our culture here in the South, and for those of you who are in other places and particularly other countries, I can't speak particularly to your specific culture but I know here we have a certain way about us that we don't speak ill of the dead, in other words, we're just "being respectful." But one of the things that we see here in Nehemiah 9 is that for a fourth part of the day, by the way that's three hours, they stood up and they confessed their sins and they were also willing to confess the sins of their father. You say, "What does that mean?" It was the sins of their fathers that led them into captivity to begin with. It's because their fathers and their grandfathers and their mothers and their grandmothers rejected the words of Isaiah and Jeremiah, they rejected all these men that God was trying to get their attention with, their rejection of God's word, their rebellion against God led them into captivity and they confess they were willing to say, "We spent 70 years in Babylon because my parents, my grandparents, my uncles and my aunts did not heed the word of God."

Now let's make this real. It's been nine weeks since we've been in a virtual environment. It's been nine weeks that we've been walking through this very unusual saturation of a global pandemic. When we talk about confessing the sins of our fathers, I've got news for you: that's you and that's me. What was it about our life nine weeks ago, what was it about our life just a few months ago that we've gotten so apathetic about our faith, that we've gotten so, shall we say, lazy or ill-focused about our faith that maybe, just maybe it took sheltering at home and isolated from the campus of our local congregations to get our attention? Are we willing to say, "God, we were selfish, carnal, materialistic and self-serving"? Or do we just want to get back to normal? You see, that's a hard question to ask because if we say to ourselves, "I just want it like it was," then we'll have large gatherings again, we'll have huge crowds again, we'll have loud music again, but we will have missed the opportunity for God to move mightily in our lives. When it says they confessed their sins and the sins of their fathers, it wasn't just their own personal issues or those of multiple generations, at least in our context, it's the sin of our lives and others just recent days ago.

As we continue in our study here of chapter 9, when you get to verse 4 it says, "Then stood up upon the stairs," and there's a whole group of those guys, remember back in chapter 8 I kinda skipped over the names because they're hard to read and even harder to hear? A whole group of guys get up and they begin to split up the congregation and instruct them in what Ezra and Nehemiah were proclaiming to them. It's almost like what we might call Sunday school or discipleship, they're just taking the preaching of God's word and expounding it on a more personal detail, and for the rest of what you and I

know as chapter 9, they begin to go back into the history of Israel and show how God moved and worked in their lives. And it's this next thing I want to address, if we truly want to see a spiritual rebirth in our lives as we begin the process of coming from scattered to gathered, then we need to be willing to no longer put God in a box. In other words, use statements or phrases like, "we've never done it that way before," or "we've always done it that way before." I will make you a promise, as we begin the process at least here at First Baptist, Opelika, whenever and whatever it looks like to begin to regather, the first time you're on this campus for whatever reason you are, it will have never looked like that before. Why? Because we've never gathered with social distancing. We've never gathered in a global pandemic. So when we say, "Well, that's not how we do it," we no longer have the freedom anymore to use those phrases.

Now if we go back biblically and historically here, I want to bounce around some of these passages and just read you some names and then kind of focus on what happens. Notice in verse 7, it says, "Thou art the LORD the God, who didst choose Abram," or who we would later know as Abraham. Fast forward to verse 14, "You made known unto them thy holy sabbath, and commandedst them precepts, statutes, and laws, by the hand of Moses your servant." Go to verse 19, "Yet thou in thy manifold mercies forsookest them not when they were in the wilderness." Verse 23, "Their children also multipliedst thou as the stars of heaven, and broughtest them into the land, concerning which thou hadst promised to their fathers, that they should go in to possess it." Then you get to verse 27 and you see this cycle of the Israelite people as they come into what we know as the Promised Land, going into apostasy, coming into revival, into apostasy, out of revival. Why is that so critical? Because when you look at the life of Abraham, when you look at the life of Moses, when you look at the wilderness, when you look at the Promised Land, how tempted are we to say, "But this is different than it used to be"? Last time I checked in the Bible it says Jesus Christ the same today, yesterday and forever. And it was those individuals who made the statement, "We've never done it this way before," that died in the wilderness.

Allow me to illustrate. Four hundred years, 10 generations of Israelites in captivity. They get through what we know as the Red Sea. They've survived the 10 plagues. A journey that should have lasted 11 days took 40 years. Why? Because they said, "We had it better in Egypt." What is that mentality? The mentality is, "I want it the way that is comfortable to me even if it's not pleasant. I want that which is familiar to me and I desire that which is comfortable for me." It was Egypt. Here they are in the wilderness and, yes, they don't have what they called three meals a day but they've got manna from heaven which is basically free food that you can't get fat on. In Egypt they had to make and sow their own clothes, in the wilderness they never wore out. An incredible illustration. As you look in the life of Abraham and Moses, the wilderness, the Promised Land and even throughout the Old Testament, how tempted we are to say, "But God, this doesn't look the way it used to look. It doesn't sound the way it used to sound. I don't like this." I've got news for you: as we begin the process of regathering, it's not going to look, it's not going to sound, and it's not going to feel like it did 90 days ago and you and I have got to be willing to embrace that even if it looks, feels and sounds different, maybe just maybe because of all we've addressed tonight God wants to do something greater in our lives when it looks,

feels and sounds different than he ever did in the days in which it felt, sounded and looked the way that we personally desired. We cannot put God in a box. And let me challenge you to no longer say, "Let's just get back to normal." Do you know why? Because when it comes to the church of Jesus Christ collectively, at least in the culture of Western civilization, it was broken. We had large crowds, we had huge budgets, we had massive buildings, but we had carnality, materialism, selfishness and mis-prioritization of our lives.

Can you imagine if Abraham had said, "I just want to be back in Ur of the Chaldees doing the shepherding things." Can you imagine if Moses had said, "I'd like to go back to Egypt." Can you imagine when they went into the Promised Land with Joshua if they said, "Oh, if we could only go back to the manna." You know, it's funny, they griped about the manna so much that eventually the Lord brought meat that came out their noses. I'll make you a bet that somebody somewhere in the Promised Land griped that they didn't have manna anymore. Why? It's human nature. We get caught up in the flesh of what looks and feels and sounds good in our lives.

We can no longer put God in a box, in other words, the look, the feel and the sound, but wouldn't you be willing to exchange all of that physical response to a true genuine move of God in our lives and in our lands? You know, I don't know how many times I've heard somebody allude to 2 Chronicles 7:14, that famous passage in the Old Testament, "If my people who are called by my name, if they will humble themselves, turn from their wicked ways and seek my face, I will heal their land." We love to quote that verse but you know it begins with, "If they will humble themselves." Do you know what that means? You've got to be willing to say, "God, it's no longer about what I want, it's no longer about what I feel, it's no longer about my preferred taste or preference. It's what do you desire?" No longer putting God in a box.

Last but not least, let me encourage you to fast forward all the way to verse 34 of chapter 9. We've gone through all these illustrations of how God has moved in days past in different ways but yet with the same purpose. It says,

34 Neither have our kings, our princes, our priests, nor our fathers, kept thy law, nor hearkened unto thy commandments and thy testimonies, wherewith thou didst testify against them. [Listen to verse 35.] 35 For they have not served thee in their kingdom, and in thy great goodness that thou gavest them, and in the large and fat land which thou gavest before them, neither turned they from their wicked works. 36 Behold, we are servants this day,

In other words, there must be a willingness to serve. In other words, it's not about what pleases us but what will reach others. It's not about my own personal preference but of what will reach others.

Let me remind you of Mark 10:44-45, Jesus Christ the Savior that we claim, the Savior that we say we believe upon made this statement, he said, "I came not to be served but to

serve and give my life as a ransom for many." John 13 in that famous Last Supper occasion just hours before his crucifixion, Jesus did not sit on a throne in the Upper Room, he actually got on his knees with a towel and a basin and he served the feet or he washed the feet, he served his apostles and his disciples. You know, humanity's, one of our many desires is we always want to be in charge, we want to be in control, we want to call the shots, we want to be the decision maker, and if we're gonna see a genuine heart-felt, Spirit-sent revival in our land we've got to be willing to say, "God, I would rather," and by the way, this is a quote from Psalms, "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of God for all of my life than to rule in the house of iniquity." In other words, "I would rather be someone who just stands there with the door open, I would rather be someone who doesn't have a title or a position or a say in how things move and operate than to be in control if we go back down the old paths."

That being said, I know that tonight is not what we might call seeker friendly, I know that tonight is not one of those encouraging, uplifting, your best life now kind of messages, but that's part of the problem, that we had become such a culture of faith that we wanted to be patted on the back, and we wanted to feel good about ourselves, and we wanted what we wanted, when we wanted it, how we wanted it, and where we wanted it. Allow me briefly to just run through this list quickly and we'll close tonight. I'm gonna ask the question: do we really have it in us? Do we really have it? Not social distancing, not hand sanitizer, do we really or are we really willing to make the proclamation of God's word the primary focus of our life? Are we willing to reject hypocrisy and make Tuesday and Wednesday as holy as Sunday? Are we willing to inconvenience our life of pleasure and fun for the gathering of the saints and the preaching of his word? Are we really willing to reject the flesh, separate ourselves from the world, confess our sins, not put God in a box and to serve rather than to be served?

Now tonight is not the time where I'm gonna seek an answer to those questions because I think that we've got a few more blessed days. You say, "What do you mean a few more blessed days?" Well, as we begin the process as a culture, a community, even as a church body of "regathering" our worship services are not gonna be on what we might call full-bore in the days ahead immediately but it is possible in the days to come. Maybe just maybe even though it's been nine weeks, God's given us just a few more days to focus, to re-prioritize and to make sure that when we regather it's not so that we can recapture the glory days but to see him working in new days.

I close tonight with an illustration that most if not all of us are familiar with, it's called class reunions. I've been to a class reunion, I'm sure many of you have as well, and in our mindset whether it's been 10 years, 20 years, 25, 50, whatever it is, we still have in our mind what those individuals used to look like and used to be about, and we still have in our mindset what we used to look like and in a mirror no longer do. Isn't it funny how many people – now listen – how many people about six or nine months out from a class reunion all of a sudden go on a diet because they want to look like what they used to look like when they were in high school. Or how many people began to maneuver their funds to acquire a new car or automobile so they can drive up. Or a new set of clothes so they

can present themselves either, A as the person they used to be or, B as the person they said they would be and they never became.

You see, it's interesting that when you get to Nehemiah 8 and 9, none of them said, "Let's do it like we did it 70 years ago." None of them. They realized that God had given them a second chance, an opportunity for him to move in their lives removed from the carnality, the materialism, the selfishness and the mis-prioritizations. Ladies and gentlemen, it's quite possible that God's given us a second chance. He's given us the opportunity that maybe we gave lip service to but never serious consideration for. Maybe tonight God used the preaching of his word to get ahold of your heart. Let me encourage you if necessary to reach out to us, to call us, to email us, to text us, to reach out on social media. We would love the opportunity to dialog and discuss, to pray with and to pray for you.

I want to just share my heart and then we'll close. I don't want to come back to this campus like it was 90 days ago, and don't get me wrong, it was wonderful and it was fun, but I want to return with a new vibrancy, a new focus, a passion for the person of God rather than the things of our Christianized culture. It's my prayer tonight that you'll join me in this endeavor.