

The Soul-Restoring Grace of Repentance

Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

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Chapter 9, Nehemiah 9. As you're turning, we want to say a word of welcome to some dear friends of our church who are worshipping with us today. They're in the other building, Ray and Debra Gentry and their daughter Allison and also their daughter April who is now April Witkowski and her husband Peter, their three children, Luke, Lily and Lacey. And I wanted to say a word about them because they've been such a blessing to our church. It was 15 years ago this year that Ray led our first seminar on biblical counseling that was ever held at our church, and Ray Gentry was the man who brought the word to us that weekend and how blessed we've been as a church to understand what it means to apply the word of God to your life, which is really what biblical counseling is about. It's about understanding that the Bible is sufficient for the concerns of the soul, that it's the Bible that restores the soul, and biblical counseling is where folks in crisis are helped by other believers to see how the word of God relates to the particular circumstances that they're in. And so we're so grateful for Ray and his ministry, and Debra, and their friendship and also for Peter and April. Peter's a pastor in Virginia and you will remember, many of you will remember praying for them. April's been battling with cancer the last few years and so we've been praying for them a number of times and continue to pray for them and rejoice in God's continued faithfulness to them and through them. But we're delighted to have you guys with us worshipping with us, and count it a joy every time we can spend time with you in the presence of the Lord.

Well, we come to Nehemiah 9 and one more thing I want to mention before we go on. I'm going to be out this week. Wednesday night, Dalton will be teaching in our Renewing the Mind series because Patti and I are going to be spending some time away. Tomorrow is our 35th wedding anniversary, 35 years ago tomorrow that the Lord blessed me with my precious wife. So praise God. Thank you for your encouragement for us and looking forward to some time together.

But anyway, now the word of God. Nehemiah 9 and today's message, we looked at this and we've been looking at how Nehemiah 8, 9 and 10 really are, in one sense, a unit in describing a great movement of God, nothing less than a revival where spiritual awakening is described in these chapters, and so instructive and encouraging for us to show us how God works and when he works and how we might seek his continue working in our lives. So today, the title of the message is "The Soul-Restoring Grace of

Repentance." The soul-restoring grace of repentance. I think it will take us today and, Lord willing, next Sunday as well to unpack this. The soul-restoring grace of repentance.

What we see in this is spiritual awakening that is happening in chapters 8, 9 and 10. Really we're going to see it is a wonderful illustration of repentance, that we see it lived out before us, what repentance really is lived out in the lives of the people of God in these chapters. And just to clarify for a moment, though the word itself is not used, it's really pictured. What repentance is in the Bible, scripturally repentance is a whole person turning from sin unto God. It is turning of the whole person from sin unto God. It is something that is essential to the Christian life. Jesus began his ministry, John the Baptist began his ministry before Jesus begins his, but Jesus when he first appears preaching, what's the substance of his message? We read in the first pages of Matthew and Mark that his message was, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The New Testament ends, Revelation, with exhortations to repent. The seven churches of Revelation, that is one of the key refrains in those chapters. Revelation 2 and 3, the last book of the New Testament, Jesus is telling the churches to repent. Five of the seven churches are commanded to repent in Revelation. So the New Testament begins and ends with calls to repent.

Martin Luther, the German Reformer who sparked the Protestant Reformation in 1517, he did so by posting his 95 theses or statements of theology that he posted to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. The first thesis of those 95 reads this way, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said repent, he willed that the entire life of every believer be a life of repentance." The entire life of the believer was to be one of repentance, continually turning from sin unto God.

And it's a whole person thing, the mind, the affections, the will, and the life. It's not merely a change of mind. You'll sometimes hear that by really common, really false teaching today that misreads the New Testament doctrine of repentance. What they do, it's one of the dangers that can come from assuming that the lexical definition of the word controls it. This is one of the things you should watch out for if you're reading your Bible and you're looking continually up a Greek word or something in the lexicon, you know, now you can do it online continually, and I'm not saying it's a bad idea, just be wise and careful about it because what happens is they take the word "metanoia" which is the normal word translated "repentance or repent, metanoeo." There's another word, "epistrepho," that's used, but "metanoeo" is the most common word, "metanoia," and this word in Greek, the lexical definition of "metanoia" in Greek in the culture of the time was "to change your mind. Metanoeo" means "to think again; to think after."

So it's seen as a change of mind. That's what the word meant in Greek but when the New Testament authors are inspired by the Holy Spirit to use the word "repent," they're bringing with them conceptually the entire Old Testament's framework for repentance. Do you see that? They're using, they're taking a word because they're writing in Greek, they're taking the best word they can find to approximate the meaning of the biblical term of repentance and it's dangerous if you read the lexical thing and you forget to realize all of the context of Scripture. You might think it means merely to turn, to change your

mind, and some people will teach today that repent means just to have different thoughts about sin. "I now know sin's a bad thing and I've repented." Not biblically, you're not repented because the Old Testament concept of repentance, the word "shub," the Hebrew word, means "to turn." It means to do a 180. It's to turn or to return. It's to be going one direction and then to go completely different direction.

So that's the concept that they're trying to translate into Greek. Do you see that? And so the word is not a precise, as often is the case. There's not a 1:1 perfect rendering of any words from language to language. You try to translate from English to Spanish or English to French, you can't do it perfectly often and so that's the case here. So metanoia, repentance is not merely a change of mind, it's a whole personed change. It's a change in the thinking that leads to a change in the affections, that leads to a change of will, that results in a change of life.

Thomas Watson said repentance is an inward humbling of the soul evidenced in a reformation of the life. An inward humbling of the soul evidenced in an outward reformation of life. That's the idea and what we see here in these chapters is that kind of change, a whole personed response of the people of God. Their thinking is changed, yes, but their affections are engaged and changed and their will follows. It's not merely an intellectual change that happens, it's a change of the whole person.

So we see this is a great illustration of repentance and how does it happen? How does repentance happen? It's effected through the word of God. The word of God produces repentance. In fact, it's important the title I said, the soul-restoring grace of repentance, hear this very carefully: though the Bible calls you to repent, you must have God's gracious enabling power to do so. Repentance is a grace. It is a gift. Christ must give it to you. It's not something you can do in order for Jesus to receive you. No, you cannot repent in your own strength. You're commanded to repent but you're also commanded to believe and neither one are you completely able to do, you're not able to do in your own strength because what God does, he commands and he also empowers by his own Spirit through his word. The Spirit takes the word and applies it to the heart, brings you to Christ. You come to Christ not because you've repented sufficiently, you come to Christ because he's your only hope and he gives you, by his grace, repentance and faith and then you keep expressing those throughout your whole life and you continue to rely upon it. It's all by grace. Even as a believer we need his grace to continue repenting. It's not something we can work up in our own strength. "Not by might nor by power but by My Spirit says the Lord." And this is an illustration of the Spirit of God working but one of the things that's instructive is that how do you get yourself into place for God to grant repentance? You put yourself under the teaching of Scripture. You put yourself in the word of God. It's the word of God that brings forth repentance. It's the word of God that brings forth faith. The Spirit of God must do it but he uses the word of God.

And so this is what we see in this situation. This spiritual awakening, this revival that is unfolding for us on the pages of Scripture that took place 445 years BC, it happened as a result of extended preaching. Remember we talked about that in recent weeks. Hours and hours of preaching over weeks. I mean, we saw the first day of the month they had a four-

hour preaching service. They are brought to great remorse and conviction. The next day, they have a preaching service. Then 10 days later, they get together for weekly meetings of preaching and hearing the word of God for a full week. And then on this particular day, we're going to read in a moment, they are again gathering for a three-hour preaching service that precedes a three-hour worship and confession service that is unpacked for us in this chapter.

So the soul-restoring grace of repentance. We're going to read the first five verses here and then we'll read the rest as we go through the message today. Nehemiah 9:1,

1 Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt upon them. 2 The descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. 3 While they stood in their place, they read from the book of the law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God. 4 Now on the Levites' platform stood Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani and Chenani, and they cried with a loud voice to the LORD their God. 5 Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah and Pethahiah, said, "Arise, bless the LORD your God forever and ever! O may Your glorious name be blessed And exalted above all blessing and praise!

Let's pray together.

Our Father, we ask now that You would make Your word effectual in our hearts by Your Spirit, that You would take away the dullness, the hardness of heart, dullness of mind, and by Your power, the power of Your word, cause to be born in us deeper repentance, truer faith and, Lord, we pray that You would be glorified in the hearts of people who delight in Your Son. We pray this in His name. Amen.

The soul-restoring grace of repentance. So what we see here is, and I'm not going to go through it again but I'm just going to remind you just in general what we saw previously is that the preaching of the word brought great emotional response from the people. Remember, they're weeping in chapter 8. They're weeping and wailing and so the priests have to tell them to stop wailing, stop weeping, it's a day of joy. Sends them home and they then realize the next day they're supposed to celebrate the Feast of Booths, and they celebrate the Feast of Booths with great joy but they still have this conviction of sin, and so in chapter 9 after the time of joy is past, now they're still motivated by the word of God that's convicted them to come together and they come together with fasting, sackcloth, dirt upon them, ready to humble themselves before God. And we see that this movement of the Lord is going to result, as we go into chapter 10, in a covenant renewal ceremony. It's not just emotionally being impacted by the word, it is emotional impact, yes, but it's change of life, complete change of direction, separation from worldliness and devotion to God. It's a turning from sin to God.

And what we see in this passage is chapter 9, what we want to see today is how the repentance, the grace of repentance is such a beautiful thing. It is true that it is sorrow that comes upon the soul that is repenting. God convicts the sinner and the weight of sin, to really see sin as it is, to see God as he is, is a great burden upon the heart and it brings deep sorrow and mourning over sin, and yet that deep sorrow has a sweetness about it and it leads to joy unspeakable and full of glory because the soul is restored. Remember, I mentioned Psalm 19:7, "The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul," New American Standard translation. "The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul." The ESV says, "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul." King James, "The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul."

It's changing. It's actually the word is "shub, returning the soul; repenting the soul; returning the soul to what the soul was meant to be." And so when God brings repentance to the heart, to the life through the word, what is happening is the soul is being restored to what it was made to be, and even as there's mourning and there's pain, there is this growing awareness that all things are being made right. "This is what I've needed." Every single human being, the one thing they need is to repent. That's why Jesus' message, "Repent. Repent. Repent."

And there is a beauty about this gift. Remember it is a gift. We have to ask God for it but you seek him in his word. You don't just pray and wait and just keep praying and keep praying and keep praying. You pray and you read. You pray and you meditate. You pray and you listen to preaching. You pray and you act on what you're hearing. But you keep praying for repentance. You keep praying that God will give you that grace, that gift, because it is the most desirable thing that we can encounter as fallen men. It is the beginning of life as we were made to live it.

So it's the soul-restoring grace of repentance. What we're going to see is that the experience, we're going to talk about the experience of repentance. We're going to look at the experience of repentance in this message this morning and next week, Lord willing, and how this reality affects the people of God, and we want to see the desirability and the beauty of it so that we would want always to ever be repenting, to do what Luther said and to have our lives, the entire life of the believer be one of repentance.

What we're going to see is that repentance brings about a renewed vision. It is a restoration of sight. It's approximated best by what it would be like to be blind and then to see. This is actually what salvation really is, the repentance unto life that happens when someone is saved. It's like they were blind but now they see. Jesus gives that illustration by healing the man who had been born blind in John 9, remember, and the man says, "I was blind but now I see," and the point is we're all blind, that unbelievers are blind. They cannot see things as they are. And to come to faith in Christ and to be granted the grace of repentance is suddenly to be able to see things as they are.

Imagine what that would be like to be blind and then see. I mean, I can't imagine that. The closest thing I could even approximate it with from my own experience was when

we were visiting a missionary, one of our missionaries, Johnny Gravino, in Sicily some years back, and we had heard about Mount Etna which is a huge volcanic mountain on the island of Sicily, you know, which is part of Italy. And when we got there, we got there at night as I recall, couldn't see Etna. It seemed like the next day it was even cloudy, couldn't see Etna. But we were in Catania, the city that is closest to Mount Etna of all the cities. If you look at Mount Etna, Catania is right there in the pictures that they show of Mount Etna, there's the city. Well, we were in Catania but we couldn't see Mount Etna, never seen it before, but when the clouds lifted the next day and the sunlight is out, suddenly, bam, there it is 10,000 feet tall Mount Etna in all of its majesty. It had been there all along the first day we were there but we could not see it. It was obscured by the clouds, but when the clouds lifted, then we could see what was really there all along.

That's the effect and the force of repentance in the life of the believer. In the life of the unbeliever, it's from going from being blind to seeing it all. In the life of the believer, it's something more like that, the clouds are obscuring the things that I need to be seeing and when I repent and when the Lord restores me to a right mindset and I see my sin and I see him and I understand what repentance is again, suddenly I see. And we see this in the lives of the people, their vision. We're going to look at four things, probably two today and two next week, four ways their vision is restored. The people of God experience this extraordinary recovery of vision in this movement of God's Spirit through the preaching of the word during this revival, spiritual awakening.

The first thing that happens when God's Spirit restores us, restores our vision, is we begin to see our circumstances as they truly are. First point: you will see your circumstances as they truly are, not as you have been seeing them but as they truly are. You'll see them rightly. This is what happens for the people. Their circumstances have been bleak but what we see in this prayer of repentance, this prayer of confession, is that they are now seeing their circumstances as they truly are in context.

Their circumstances, we noted last time, in reality, you look at them just objectively, they're not good circumstances. In fact, in verse 36, they say, "Behold, we are slaves today, And as to the land which You gave to our fathers to eat of its fruit and its bounty, Behold, we are slaves in it." Verse 37, "Its abundant produce, of the land, the land flowing with milk and honey, the abundant produce of this land is given to the kings over us, the kings of Persia, the governors over us, whom You have set over us because of our sins. They also rule over our bodies And over our cattle as they please, So we are in great distress." We talked about that word "great distress" last week. It pictures the emotional anguish of being pressed in and unable to move, to being bound in. It's an external pressure that produces a great inward turmoil and angst.

So their circumstances were bad. Their circumstances were, in many ways, hopeless. I mean, if you really think in worldly terms. It's 445 BC. They've just completed an extraordinary accomplishment. They've rebuilt the wall in record time, the wall of Jerusalem. The wall is complete but the city itself is barely habitable. Nobody wants to live there. I mean, think about it. It's been abandoned for 90 years. Actually, it's been well over 130 years, 140 years since it was really wrecked. Buildings in ruins. Houses

dilapidated. Streets filled with debris. Probably dogs and cats running around. I mean, I like some of those animals but, you know, feral cats, stray dogs. It's not a good thing. They're in this city, the wall is rebuilt but now we've got to inhabit this city. They're experiencing poverty, we've seen that in chapter 5, that real poverty is striking the people. God's not pouring out the windows of heaven upon them. They're struggling to make ends meet. They're surrounded by enemies. They're surrounded by heathens. The north, the south, the east, the west, people groups that have intense hostility for the Jews, encircled entirely by enemies who despise them and who hate them.

Then you look at it, though they've done this work, think about it from their perspective. Here they are, they've rebuilt this wall, the city is still kind of in ruins all throughout, and the people are mocking them all around them. And they had envisioned a return of the glory days of David and Solomon and something so far below that is happening. It was beyond their ability to anticipate. Their circumstances have not met their expectations or come anywhere close. God has actually been working among them but they can't feel it. I mean, think about it, the way God works in Nehemiah is very different than how he worked in Exodus and Numbers. He was doing miracles that were clearly miracles in Moses' day. I mean, the plagues. The Red Sea opening and closing and destroying the Egyptian army. I mean, they would like to see that happen to Tobiah and the Ammonites. These guys, remember, they spend all their time when they were building the wall, when we were looking at that in chapter 6, chapter 5, chapter 4, they were having to fight, I mean, be ready to fight the whole time they're building because they were under the threat of imminent attack the entire time. But God's not done any miracles like that for them and God's not going to do any miracles like that for them. It's not God's plan and purpose to do that.

You see, God's ways are not our ways. As we go through the Old Testament, there is a movement from the miraculous and the glorious to the quiet and unassuming, yet the very real and powerful work of God being done in ordinary ways. They rebuild that wall in 52 days. It's supernatural. It just doesn't look like the parting of the Red Sea and the question is will they be content with that? That's exactly how the New Testament comes. Jesus comes and he does so many miracles and the apostles do miracles for a while to continue to authenticate the message as it goes out across the Greco-Roman world, particularly to demonstrate to the Jews this Jesus is the Messiah, but then God causes those miracles to stop and he's no longer about that because he's always been trying to teach us that, "It's not by might nor by power but by My Spirit," and his Spirit works through the word. The spoken word is what changes people. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." It's not what you see, it's what you hear from the word of God. That's what changes people. And the real miracles are not outward physical miracles where someone is healed from... I mean, it's a miracle when someone's healed miraculously and God can do that, of course, but it's not his normal way and it's not as impressive as what he does when the word of God goes into a person who is spiritually dead, bound for hell, hating God, and you, by God's grace, speak the word of God to that person and the Lord, through you sharing about Jesus, says to that soul that is in the darkness, in despair, "Let there be light," and they're born again. And someone who hated God becomes a lover of God, that is a miracle. And that is always the miracle that God

has been working toward because that is the only miracle that lasts. You can part the Red Sea, you can, you know, heal the physical body but if the soul is not transformed, you still end up in hell.

So God's ways are not our ways and so these circumstances, they're looking at their circumstances, their poverty, encircled by enemies, apparent insignificance of their work, how is this possibly a part of God's plan? It's hard for them to process this. It wasn't easy. The people around them don't envy them, they despise them. Can you relate to that? Is that how you feel sometimes? And you can see how easy it would be for them to lose their spiritual focus, their energy, their direction. When you're confused and perplexed by your circumstances, when they don't match what you expect, for a follower of Christ we can find ourselves growing apathetic, numb and dull. I mean, think about the ways you have expectations in your life of what God should be doing for you and how it's not coming out the way you expect. Shouldn't Christian marriage be just continual, you know, loving one another and growing deeper in love every day, and shouldn't it just be getting better and upward and onward all the way to heaven? Yes and no. There is a sense in which upward and onward but it looks like this. Like that. How about overcoming sin? Are you fatigued and just worn down from the battle of the sin which so easily besets you? How about expectations about your kids? Aren't Christian children brought up in a Christian home supposed to follow Christ? I mean, "Lord, what are You doing? Why is this not happening?"

There are so many ways we expect things to be a certain way and yet God is sovereign, God is free, God does not work according to our expectations and so often our expectations are not rooted in a real understanding of the Bible at all. I mean, we sort of get some part of it but we twist it according to our own desires. And so our circumstances can cause us great confusion and can lead to hopelessness, apathy, and even in some cases just kind of a spiritual paralysis, so upset about what's happening in my life that I can't even function for the Lord.

What we see in this passage is that repentance, when God grants repentance, when you are granted the grace and gift of repentance, what happens is a renewed sense of vision. The clouds lift and you see the mountain of God's faithfulness and you see how your present circumstances fit into the context of the larger plan of God. That is what's described in this passage. They acknowledge the reality of their circumstances. "We are in tough circumstances. We don't like what's happening, Lord. We're slaves. We're slaves in the land. We're being ruled over by people who hate You. We find ourselves in great distress." But what they do in this prayer because they are repenting and the Lord is working in their lives, they put it in context of all of God's faithfulness. That's what we see as we read this passage.

We read the first five verses, what we're going to do now is watch how they walk through, they're going to walk through the entire history of Israel. In fact, they're going to start back at creation and they're basically saying to see your circumstances rightly, you have to see them in light of all that God is doing in the world, his eternal purposes gives you perspective to understand the perplexing reality of your life. After they say, "O may

Your glorious name be blessed And exalted above all blessing and praise!" verse 5, verse 6, they remember that God is Creator.

6 "You alone are the LORD. You have made the heavens, The heaven of heavens with all their host, The earth and all that is on it, The seas and all that is in them. You give life to all of them And the heavenly host bows down before You.

They remember who God is and what he's done. He's created everything including the heavenly host. Then they're going to talk about the call of Abraham.

7 "You are the LORD God, Who chose Abram And brought him out from Ur of the Chaldees, And gave him the name Abraham. 8 You found his heart faithful before You, And made a covenant with him To give him the land of the Canaanite, Of the Hittite and the Amorite, Of the Perizzite, the Jebusite and the Girgashite To give it to his descendants. And You have fulfilled Your promise, For You are righteous."

They remember what God did. Now their circumstances they can't make sense about right now, but we know what God did. He created the world out of nothing. He rules over all. Look what he did to Abraham. Let's remember what he did to Abraham. And you see this is the pattern throughout the Scripture. Read the Psalms. The Psalmists will be perplexed and what do they do? They go back to the bigger plan of God and they try to think about how does my present circumstance fit into the bigger plan of God, and they rehearse and remind themselves of God's faithfulness in the past, and then you will often see the Psalmist who was down in the dumps ending on a note of triumph and victory as he's placed his circumstances in the context of the overarching plan of God.

So they remember Abraham. "You chose Abraham. You made a covenant to give him this land. You are righteous. You fulfilled Your promises." Then verses 9 and 10, we jump ahead to the exodus.

9 "You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, And heard their cry by the Red Sea. 10 Then You performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh, Against all his servants and all the people of his land; For You knew that they acted arrogantly toward them, And made a name for Yourself as it is this day."

"You brought them out of Egypt." Look next, "You divided the sea before them." The Red Sea, we just talked about a little bit ago.

11 "You divided the sea before them, So they passed through the midst of the sea on dry ground; And their pursuers You hurled into the depths, Like a stone into raging waters."

I mean, my circumstances may be bad and the people around them looking at all the enemies that are surrounding them and God's not doing any miracles, "But I know You can if You want to because You did it not just to the measly Ammonites, not to the measly Ashdodites, not the measly Arabs, the Syrians. No, You did it to Egypt. You took that mighty army and threw it into the depths of the sea like a man throws a rock into the ocean."

12 "And with a pillar of cloud You led them by day, And with a pillar of fire by night To light for them the way In which they were to go."

"Look what You did, Lord. You revealed Yourself in Your glory. In a visible way Your glory was before them, a cloud, a fire." Then verses 13 and 14, the giving of the law.

13 "Then You came down on Mount Sinai, And spoke with them from heaven; You gave them just ordinances and true laws, Good statutes and commandments. 14 So You made known to them Your holy sabbath, And laid down for them commandments, statutes and law, Through Your servant Moses."

So we've seen the exodus, the Red Sea crossing, the pillar of cloud and fire, now Mount Sinai, the giving of the law. Then he moves to verse 15,

15 "You provided bread from heaven for them for their hunger, You brought forth water from a rock for them for their thirst, And You told them to enter in order to possess The land which You swore to give them."

The God who we follow, the God who you follow in perplexing circumstances that you can't make sense out of, is a God who gave bread to his people on a daily basis to feed them in the wilderness. He knows your needs.

He made water come forth from a rock. Now we would like that to happen to us. I mean, I remember reading these stories many times in the past and I thought to myself, "Man, wouldn't it be nice to be like Abraham and to have God actually appear and talk to you and have a conversation where you could ask questions." I mean, you don't find Abraham just asking any random question when God shows up. God tends to dominate the conversation but, still, I thought that would be so awesome. Have you ever thought like that? You know, we think like that because we're really dumb because we have so much more than Abraham had. Abraham didn't know what Jesus was going to do fully. Abraham didn't have the fullness of the Holy Spirit. Abraham did not have one page of Scripture. Not one page. We have it way better than Abraham.

And as we think about this, though, the God who was faithful to Abraham is still our God. The God who was faithful to Moses is still our God. The God who was faithful to the nation of Israel and gave them his law and fed them with bread and water is our God. And look at his character, verse 16,

16 "But they, our fathers, acted arrogantly; They became stubborn and would not listen to Your commandments. 17 They refused to listen, And did not remember Your wondrous deeds which You had performed among them; So they became stubborn and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt."

This is kind of a summary of the persistent rebelliousness of the people after the exodus. They heard from God but they would not submit to God. They refused to listen, did not remember, were stubborn, and even wanted to go back into slavery. That's insane.

Now think about that, if you were God and your people did that to you, what would you do? I mean, how can you put up with that? Well, look what it says he did.

17 ... "But You are a God of forgiveness, Gracious and compassionate, Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness; And You did not forsake them. 18 Even when they made for themselves A calf of molten metal And said, 'This is your God Who brought you up from Egypt,'

Even when they made that calf out of metal and worshiped it and bowed down to it and said, "This is the God who brought us up out of Egypt." They weren't worshipping a different God, they were worshipping the true God, they thought, through the golden calf which is a violation of the second commandment. You shall not worship God through an idol. They just had been given those commandments. It's almost like God finished speaking and they got to work building the idol. And they committed great blasphemies. Verse 19,

19 You, in Your great compassion, Did not forsake them in the wilderness; The pillar of cloud did not leave them by day, To guide them on their way, Nor the pillar of fire by night, to light for them the way in which they were to go."

"You stayed with them, and not only that, You gave them Your good Spirit to instruct them." The Spirit of God was at work among the people of God even then.

20 "You gave Your good Spirit to instruct them, Your manna You did not withhold from their mouth, And You gave them water for their thirst. 21 Indeed, forty years You provided for them in the wilderness and they were not in want;

He's going to go on through and talk about the fact that, "After You gave them the kingdoms," he's going to talk about, "You took them into the Promised Land though they didn't want to go in, they didn't trust You. You kept them for 40 years in the wilderness. You kept blessing them though they had hardened their hearts against You. Then when You bring them into the land, You give them cities that they didn't build, You give them houses they didn't build, You give them fertile land which they had not cultivated, and they eat of the vineyards and the olive groves and the fruit trees in abundance. They have

all of these things and then they still forget You and they turn away from You, and You in Your faithfulness keep sending affliction upon them to turn their hearts back to You, and You send prophets to them to speak the word of God and what do they do? They kill the prophets and they harden their hearts. They will not listen and yet You, God, kept on loving them." And now after the period of judges, you've got Joshua, they conquer the land, now the period of judges is described, "You kept sending people to afflict them. They would cry out in their affliction. You heard them from heaven and You came down. You sent a deliverer. Again and again You did this. Then the kingdom is inaugurated with Saul and then David and then Solomon, then the divided kingdom, and You send prophets to them and they act arrogantly. They don't listen to Your commandments. Finally, You send them out of the land by the Assyrians and the Babylonians and You take them out," verse 31, "Nevertheless, in Your great compassion You did not make an end of them or forsake them. Even when You cast them out of the land, You did not make an end of them, For You are a gracious and compassionate God."

What happens when you start thinking about how God has worked in the past, is you see your circumstances rightly, you start to see your circumstances as they truly are and that God is doing what he's always done. His purpose has always been to make his glory known through his people. That's his purpose. His purpose has not been to make you and I comfortable. He's not taking orders like a short-order cook, "What would you like today? I'll do whatever you want." He's not taking orders on what your life is to be. People that love God, he has worked in very interesting ways. He's done things. He allowed them to be enslaved in Egypt so he could deliver them, so he could show his glory. He allowed them to... actually he told them to slow down on the way out. "Hey, Moses, take a right here and go over here and wait for a while." Why? He didn't tell him but it's because of the Egyptians, "I want the Egyptians to catch up to you guys." Why would we want that? I wouldn't want that, would you? Well, you see, God's purpose isn't to give us what we want, it's to give us something far better. What he was going to do was allow the Egyptians to catch up so that he could then open up the Red Sea and cause his people to pass through on dry ground. Wasn't that a lot better for them that that happened? Then he destroyed the Egyptian army. His purpose is to show his glory in the lives of his people.

So that's why we go through a lot of the things we go through, it's so that he can make his glory known, and if we can get off of our agenda and get on his agenda, and that's what repentance is doing, repentance is the wholehearted, whole-person change of thinking and affections and will in which we are being realigned to reality. And what's important here is God's glory and then, now my circumstances begin to make sense. The Lord has put me in this valley so he can show me and others that he walks with his children through the valley. He's surrounded me by enemies so that he can show me and others who are watching, in whom he is working, that he is a defense for his people. He's a shield and a bulwark. You don't need a shield and a bulwark when everything's going great.

His purpose has always been to make his glory known through his people. The second thing that we see in this passage is they don't just get to see their circumstances as they

truly are. That was our first point. Repentance, the grace of repentance results in new sight that you're able to see your circumstances as they truly are but, secondly, when you have been given the grace of repentance, you are able to see God as he truly is. This is what makes repentance so lovely. You can see God as he truly is. We tend to think of God as our natural disposition is we want to be in charge of our lives and we want God to do our bidding. That's the unbelieving mindset completely and that's the mindset we have to continue to put to death on this side of the cross when you come to know Christ. God never intended to make men so that men could tell him what they wanted done. He made human beings to be submitted to his lordship and to see his glory and to make his glory known by obeying him and loving him.

So what happens when we repent, when we are, by God's grace, our hearts are opened to, by his word, to see things as they truly are, suddenly the vision of God becomes clear and you've heard that even as we've been reading this passage that we've read so far. You hear over and over, "You are." Verse 6, "You alone are the LORD." Verse 7, "You are the LORD God, Who chose Abram." Verse 17, "You are a God of forgiveness." Who is God? You see, the attributes of God become clear when our heart is open to see our sin and we're given the grace of repentance, and we're turning away from sin back to God, suddenly the clouds lift and we begin to see God as he truly is, and what is amazing is not that God hasn't done what we wanted him to do, what is amazing is that God has put up with us at all. "You are a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness." Speaks over and over of his compassion, his great compassion, his great goodness, verse 25.

And you see all the things that God has done, not just his attributes but his actions. He's the one who made the heavens. He's the one who chose Abram. Abram wasn't looking for God, God went looking for Abram. Abram wasn't some seeker that happened to find God. No, God went and found Abram. That's how salvation happens. You in your experience may remember God awakening your heart and you thought you were seeking, but the only reason if you were really seeking, the only reason you were really seeking is because God had already found you and was seeking you. No man seeks God, Romans 3. Not in our own heart. We would never want God. We want the benefits of God but we don't want God. We would like the benefits of God without God. We would like to be God and have the benefits that God could give us because we can't give our own benefits because we're not God.

That's the wickedness of sin but when God grants repentance, we see that he is God and it's good that he alone is the Lord. And look at all of the wonderful things he does. Verse 9, "You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt." This God who is exalted in majesty beyond our wildest ability to conceive of the great power and awesome might that he possesses, infinite knowledge and wisdom, and we of dust and nothing. I mean, we are nothing and yet he cares about us. He saw the afflictions of our fathers and heard their cry, and he didn't just see and hear, he acted. "Then You performed signs and wonders." Verse 11, "You divided the sea." Verse 13, "You came down on Mount Sinai, And spoke with them from heaven." The God that we worship is a God who comes down and talks to us. That is good news that the world needs to hear. It's not a disinterested God who is a

clock-maker off doing other stuff. No, he's a God who's intimately involved in everything that's happening and he comes down and he talks to sinners and brings them to himself.

And over and over one of the verbs that's repeated, "You did not forsake them." Verse 17, after they refused to listen, did not remember Your wondrous deeds which You have performed, they became stubborn and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. Even in that moment, You did not forsake them." Verse 19 after they committed great blasphemies and made the golden calf, "You, in Your great compassion, Did not forsake them in the wilderness. But You kept giving. You gave Your good Spirit. You gave them manna and water." Verse 26, "they became disobedient and rebelled against You," this is after they're in the land, they're reveling in your great goodness, you brought them in to possess the land, verse 26, "they became disobedient and rebelled against You, And cast Your law behind their backs And killed Your prophets who had admonished them So that they might return to You." You admonished them so that they might return to you but they killed their prophets and they committed great blasphemies. "Therefore You delivered them into the hand of their oppressors who oppressed them, But when they cried to You in the time of their distress, You heard from heaven, and according to Your great compassion You gave them deliverers who delivered them from the hand of their oppressors." God gave, he gave distress to bring their hearts back to him and in their oppression and the distress they had, they call out to him and God quickly sent them deliverers. This is a loving Father loving his children.

"But as soon as they had rest," after you delivered them, "they did evil again before You." As soon as you delivered them, they immediately turn away from you, "Therefore You abandoned them to the hand of their enemies, so that they ruled over them. When they cried again to You, You heard from heaven, And many times You rescued them according to Your compassion." That's the story of Judges. Again and again the people depart, God sends affliction, they cry out, he sends a deliverer, he sends a judge. He sends Gideon, Barak, Samson, Deborah. He raises up judges to deliver them.

"And You admonished them," verse 29, "in order to turn them back to Your law. Yet they acted arrogantly and did not listen to Your commandments but sinned against Your ordinances, By which if a man observes them he shall live." Your ordinances are good. You've only been speaking, your commands are all good. If we obey your commands, we live. Every single command of God is for our life and our well-being, but people reject them and despise them and in spite of that God still shows kindness.

Now think about this. If they had not, if God had not done what he did by sending them oppressors when they cried out and he delivered them, what did they learn? God is a God who hears. God is a God who disciplines. God is a God who loves. Everything that God has done throughout the history of Israel was not just to show his glory to the world, it was to show his glory to his people. He puts you in circumstances where you are overwhelmed so that he can, then, meet your needs. This is the God of the Bible. He's a God who's interested in a relationship. Our problem is we just want things to go well. We'd like to plan our day and, yeah, we'd like a relationship but not the way the Lord wants us to have one. He wants us to have a relationship that is so intimate, it's like we're

walking with our hand in his as a little child walking with his daddy. God is working for that kind of a relationship. That's why he told Abram, "Go to the land I will show you." Not go to this land, here's the map, here's the GPS, this is the location, go. No, "You go to the land I will show you. You need to be dependent upon Me." He appeared as a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire. He didn't say, "Moses, camp for three days here and the next week I want you to move over to this side of Midian." No, he puts himself right in the middle of his people and he dwells with them, and when he moves, they move because he wants a relationship with them.

So what happens when you become a Christian and your eyes are made to see, you come to know God and you see what you never saw before, you begin now to enter into a relationship where God is trying to teach you. He wants you to walk with him every moment of every day depending upon him, loving him, and serving him, and trusting him. And how does he do that? He sends affliction and difficulty and trials. He sends suffering because he knows when we suffer, we remember that this world isn't our home. He lets us go through circumstances we would never choose so that we can find out Jesus, his grace is sufficient.

And repentance, when we are given the grace of repentance, these things start to come into view. Life begins to make sense. We see that it's not really about making life work in this world. I mean, our lives are short, they're a vapor. We're heading for eternity and the reality is God is making himself known, so if he calls me into an affliction tomorrow, he calls you into an affliction tomorrow that you did not expect, it's an opportunity to let the glory of God be made known through you and even beyond that, to let the glory of God be made known to you. That's why we can give thanks in every circumstance. That's why we can rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice. It's not that we rejoice in evil. We don't rejoice in pain and suffering. We don't rejoice in those in themselves, we rejoice in a God who walks with you through the fire.

That's so amazing that God is like that, isn't it? That he loves you and me that much that he wants to have a relationship with us, that he is working in our lives to make us know how much we need him continually. It's way better than we could have ever imagined.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Father, we thank You for who You are. We praise You. Lord, You are good. You are righteous. Your ways are not our ways. They are so much more wonderful than our ways. Your goodness is unsearchable. You are gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness, yet You will not leave the guilty unpunished. You are holy and You hate sin and You hate sin in the lives of Your people and it's good that You do because sin is the most devastating, evil, deadly thing in our lives. But we're numb to that. We forget that. So pour upon Your people grace, Lord. Grant us evermore the grace of repentance. Help us see things as they truly are, not as we imagine them to be or as the world tells us they are, but let us see them as You say they are. Lord, build up Your people. Make us content in Christ. For those that are here that don't know Jesus, help them to understand by Your grace that Christ is a sufficient offering for sin. He made a

complete end of sin on the cross for those who believe, that He paid the debt that we owed and He gives us the inheritance that belongs to Him as a gift. And Lord, be glorified in Your people. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.