

It is a pleasure to teach this morning as we transition from 2009 into 2010. We will enjoy the Lord's Table and it will be our focus as we close the service today. What a great way to remember 2009 and step into 2010!

Picture two women and a well . . . each has a bucket with which to draw water. One woman, looking sad and bitter, remarks, “Life is terrible. Every time I fill this bucket up, it is empty within minutes.” The other woman, who appears at peace with herself, replies, “I think life is wonderful. Every time this bucket is empty, I can simply fill it up again.” The question—Is the bucket always being empty or always being filled? We are confronted with the old question of, “Is the glass half-empty or half-full?” What about this introduction? — “An optimist stays up until midnight to see the New Year in; a pessimist stays up to make sure the old year leaves.” We have a message about the New Year and it comes from **Nehemiah 8**. Let's see if you notice the half-empty/half-full story that is presented . . .

Intro — Under Nehemiah's direction the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt, restoring physical security to the city's people. Nehemiah was the governor and leader of that community, and played a very significant role in the spiritual wellbeing of God's people also. However, Ezra was the official religious leader and was respected by the people. Ezra worked alongside Nehemiah and helped with spiritual reform and teaching of the truth of God's Word. Together God uses these two leaders to help bring spiritual and physical renewal to a discouraged, disheartened people.

Comments: (Verses 1-4) - The first day of the seventh month is New Years Day in their calendar year. It was a time of celebration and reflection. The Book of the Law of Moses is being read after years in exile. The people stood for hours attentively listening to the teaching of God's Word. (Verses 5-7) - The people came with a sense of excitement and gratitude. They were quick to worship God and hungry to understand his Words. They have been disciplined by God as they were exiles in a foreign land and they knew it. Their hearts were especially tender towards God. (Verse 9 & 10) - As the people were listening and understanding the Word they only captured half the message. They quickly grasped the reality of their failure. Their devotion and obedience to God had been completely inadequate. They recognized their sin and they knew their suffering had been because of a selfish focus. They were guilty. However, Nehemiah and Ezra helped them to understand the bigger picture. God was inviting them to reconnect. It was an invitation to move beyond judgment to celebration.

* **The first half** — The implications are clear and the people know they have fallen short. The principle could be outlined like this: ✓ humble yourself—God will lift you up. (1 Peter 5:6) ✓ confess our sins—God will forgive our sins. (1 John 1:9) ✓ weeping for a night—rejoicing comes in the morning. (Psalm 30:5) ✓ Blessed is those who mourn for they will be comforted. (Matthew 5:4) Do you understand the sequence? The people in Nehemiah's day needed to stop pretending and ignoring and that's what they did. It was like they were emptying out the hurt and shame and disappointment that they had felt. It doesn't do any good to pretend with God. Confession is really a word of agreement with God because he already knows everything. I want you to think of 2009 as a time when not everything was as it should be. You and I have not fulfilled the standards that God had in mind. We have fallen short. But when we are honest about pride, sin, hurt, shame, disappointment . . . with God, we release it so that he can renew us. This is a necessary forerunner to joy.

* **The best half**—Jesus came that “your joy may be complete.” (John 15:11) Nehemiah said it this way, “The joy of the Lord is our strength.” The biblical word “joy” is a very full word. ✓ Wellbeing — it can be thought of as a crown of beauty because it pertains to your perspective. ✓ Rejoicing — the garment of praise because it refers to celebration. After David confessed his sin he said, “Rejoice in the Lord and be glad.” (Psalm 32:11) ✓ Gladness — the oil of gladness “A cheerful heart is good medicine.” (Proverbs 17:22) “Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.” (Nehemiah 8:12)

2010 is a call to gutsy joy. It doesn't mean that we pretend life is easy or problems are non-existent. Rather, with an open and honest relationship with God, we can be renewed in a sustaining way. Gutsy joy enables us to see the steady stream of God's love and power available to us even when we walk in the midst of a spiritual drought. Gutsy joy propels us to strive after obedience, even when we realize we will still fall short of God's best intentions for us. But joy will carry us through. 2010 is dedicated to the marvel of joy that comes in the morning, in the New Year!

Reflective Questions:

1. What was your highlight in 2009? What was your lowlight, or the thing that challenged you the most? Have you told God about it?
2. What do you think God has taught you in the year 2009 about yourself; about your relationship with him?
3. How do you view 2010? What are you anticipating in the Lord for this new year?
4. Nehemiah's story — How would you define the “first half” for yourself? Why is the “best half” so important?

Reading Schedule for January 1 – 10, 2010

I hope you are as excited as I am for the 2010 reading schedule that will be utilizing the “Life Application: 365-day Reading Plan Key Selections From the Bible.” Obviously we will not read every chapter in the Bible, but we will be reading the key teaching and stories as directed by the study Bible. The first five months will be dedicated to the Old Testament, then the rest of the year will be readings from the New Testament. I hope you will commit with me to reading about a chapter a day in the Bible, that God might speak to us through this Word. Each day I encourage you to focus on a verse or two, and ask the Lord how you might apply that to your life.

- January 1: **Genesis 1:1-2:3** – “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” (verse 27) Obviously this is a familiar verse and it gives us the timeless principle of Imago Dei. We are created in God’s image. From the beginning, the Bible places both man and woman at the pinnacle of God’s creation. Neither sex is exalted and neither is depreciated. Sin would mar the image of God, but Jesus came to recreate the image, through forgiveness of sins, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the transformational power of God, when we are in relationship with him. What does it mean that you are created in God’s image? How does that affect your life? What does it mean that other people are also created in His image? How does that affect you?
- January 2: **Genesis 2:15–3:24** – “When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.” (3:6&7) I mentioned yesterday that the image of God was marred. This was the specific event described in the Bible that has affected all mankind. After Eve sinned, she involved Adam in her wrongdoing. When we do something wrong, often we try to relieve our guilt by involving someone else. Like toxic waste spilled in a river, sin swiftly spreads. It has spread through mankind. Recognize and confess your sin today to God. What would you honestly share with the Lord about your life; your sin? Why is forgiveness so important?
- January 3: **Genesis 4:1-16** – “The LORD said, ‘What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.’” (vv 10 & 11) The curse of sin is as real today as it was then. God judges all sin and punishes the sin of mankind. Jesus paid the penalty for sin. He is the only covering that can resolve your sin issue. How would you describe the curse of sin? How would you express your gratefulness for the blessing of Jesus?
- January 4: **Genesis 6:9-22** – “This is the account of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God.” (verse 9) How are you enjoying this progress through Genesis as we read the main stories and teaching of Genesis? I was drawn to Noah, who was righteous, just like Joseph from our study at Christmas time. Remember righteous means right with God?! The meaning here pertains to Noah’s wholehearted love and obedience to God. He was not sinless, but he lived for God in a world filled with evil. Noah stood alone. Are you influencing others, or being influenced by others? Noah was an influencer. How do you need to stand alone in your world?
- January 5: **Genesis 7:1-24** – “On that very day Noah and his sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth, together with his wife and the wives of his three sons, entered the ark.” (verse 13) This verse got my attention because it reminds me of how I will one day walk into a permanent home, secure from the evil of the world and the wrath of God. As Noah and his family stepped into the ark they represent the joy of stepping into the presence of the Lord and being protected forever. Heaven is something that I am anticipating and something that I will teach on as we begin the New Year. Does this remind you of heaven? What would be the correlation? I think the correlation could be it took Noah 120 years to build the ark, somewhat like a lifetime. Then he was invited to enter the protective ark of salvation, so to speak.
- January 6: **Genesis 8:1-22** – “The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: ‘Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.’” (verse 21) Countless times throughout the Bible we see God showing his love and patience towards men and women in order to save them. Although he realizes that their hearts are evil, he continues to try to reach them. The grace of God was even abundant then, and it is the heart of God to want our best. What does this story say to you about God . . . about Noah . . . about yourself?
- January 7: **Genesis 9:1-17** – “And God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth.’” (vv. 12 & 13) Don’t you just love rainbows?! Rainbows have history as a visible sign that God keeps his promises. The earth’s order and seasons are still preserved and rainbows still remind us of God’s faithfulness to his Word. Why not thank God for his faithfulness? How has God been faithful to you?
- January 8: **Genesis 11:1-9** – “So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.” (vv. 8 & 9) The Bible gives explanation to some of the very complex aspects of life, like the different ethnic groups on the face of the globe. We don’t understand it all, but this gives us a picture of how the earth was populated. The earth has its diversity and different ethnicities because of pride and selfishness. When we build relationships with people of different cultures and different skin colors, we actually, with God’s help, recreate a harmony that God intended from the beginning. The Gospel is for all people and for all times. There is nothing like it on the globe. Our faith is not ethnic or territorial. It is the message for the whole world. How does that help you to see others through the eyes of God? How might we be more of a diverse fellowship at New Harvest?
- January 9: **Genesis 12:1-9, 17:1-8** – “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” (vv. 2&3) This is where I find the statement, “Blessed to be a blessing.” Abram was blessed so that through him God could bless all people. This is a principle to live by. How has God blessed you? So how might you bless others?
- January 10: **Genesis 18:1-15** – “So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, ‘After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?’” (verse 12) That statement is a statement of doubt. Sarah doubted what God was able to do. Zechariah, in the Christmas story, doubted what God could do, and he was mute and deaf for nine months during the pregnancy of his son John. The Lord does not bless doubt. Doubt grieves God’s heart. In Hebrews it says, “Without faith it is impossible to please him.” How does that affect your thinking? How do you want to be a person of faith?

Prayers: Pray for the New Year and God’s ministry through New Harvest. Pray for the leadership as they make decisions for the new year in expanding our ministry. Pray for those that are unemployed that God would provide for them.