

## THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

July 1, 2012

The Power of the Pulpit

No. 3626

Rev. Carl Haak

Dear radio friends,

Today we come to Nehemiah 8 in our series on the life of Nehemiah. We have seen that Nehemiah has worked diligently under God's blessing and that the walls of Jerusalem are now built and things are put in order. In chapter 8 we are going to see the blessing of God.

Nehemiah, as we saw last week, set things in order within the city of Jerusalem, established clear priorities, and God, now, blesses these things.

Chapter 8 in the book of Nehemiah is really the high-water mark of spirituality in the book of Nehemiah. It is a great revival and a great awakening of God's people. It is, in many ways, unique in the Old Testament, for there were few times of such spirituality, such God-awareness, such thirst for the Word of God. Not since the reformation during the time of king Josiah (the last God-fearing king of Judah), when a great Passover feast was celebrated, had such spirituality been evidenced among God's people as the spirituality that we will see in Nehemiah 8. The next great spiritual revival for the church will really be the day of Pentecost that was 400 years ahead.

We read, "And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate (a broad, spacious place); and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses." This is the first time in the book of Nehemiah that the people take the initiative, that they do something voluntarily. That happened because God was working among them. By His Holy Spirit and through the Scriptures they come forth and they say, "We want the Scriptures to be opened to us. We want to gather together. We want fellowship around the Word of God."

Nehemiah had labored. He had come into Jerusalem resolved to put things back in their place, to labor for the well-being of the people of God. He had labored faithfully, but it is God who now blesses, by stirring up the hearts of His people under all of these things.

But what is it that He worked in them? And, we should ask, through what does He do this work? What is the instrument that He uses? What He does is create a great spiritual awakening in their hearts and souls. What was the instrument? In today's terms, what was the technique? What was behind it? What was the power of this spiritual awakening? We read that it was a pulpit of wood behind which a man stood and opened the Scriptures.

Let us pay attention to the narrative of chapter 8 for a few moments.

We read that the people gathered together on the first day of the new year, which was a very important day in which they celebrated their deliverance from captivity. They gathered themselves together, with no prompting. But the Spirit of God worked among them as they contemplated all that the Lord had done for them. The walls are up, things are in order, God has richly blessed and shown His power through much trial and many obstacles. Now they will gather to seek His blessing for the days that are to come.

We read that there were trumpets calling the people together. Scripture associates the trumpet with victory and being summoned to the final victory at Christ's return. When Christ shall come, the trumpets shall sound. We read that they came together then on the first day of the seventh month (or what was for them the most important time). They came together as one man in the unity of the body of Christ. The work of God had united them. The determined leadership of Nehemiah had inspired them. The trials and the opposition from their enemies had forged them into one mind. They do not gather out of self-interest. They do not come to this service asking, "What is in this for me? Who is there for me? What will I, first of all, get out of this?" But they came in the unity of the Spirit and in the bond of Christ, for the work had swallowed up petty self-interest and self-seeking.

That is always the case, you know. Our human nature is so self-seeking, so individualistic. But when Christ works in us, He works in us to see one great thing: the church, the gospel of Christ, the truth of Christ crucified. And then, when you see that, you set other things aside. You lay down things that are in comparison unimportant. You forget your own self-importance in the light of the work of the church of Jesus Christ.

Paul says in Philippians 1:27, "Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel."

And they spake, we read, to Ezra the scribe to bring out the book. Ezra the scribe had been ministering among them for at least 13 years. Before Nehemiah came back he had faithfully brought the Word of God through much discouragement and was confronted by many sins and weaknesses among the people. After 13 years, he begins to see the fruit of his ministry. They say, "Ezra, bring out the Word of God. We have seen all that has happened now under the leadership of Nehemiah. We are gathered together at this occasion with one mind and one heart. Ezra, bring the Word."

So we read in verse 4 that a pulpit of wood was made for the purpose. It was elevated on a platform with six fellow Levites on his right hand and seven on his left hand and Ezra standing behind the pulpit. He opens the book. And the people, we read, arise. They stand up, we read, (now note these words), from morning till mid-day. For 3-4 hours the people stand attentively. Children with parents. And from behind a pulpit they hear the Word of God.

Verses 7 and 8 furnish us with more details. There was evidently another group of Levites among the people, who caused the people to understand the law. That is, after Ezra had read, they went among them and said, "Do you understand that? Do you know what that means?" And there was an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit blessed and sanctified the Word in their hearts.

The Spirit moved among them to tremble and to thrill under the living Word of God, till at last they all fell down in worship. I call that a reformation. I call that a spiritual awakening. I see there the power of the Holy Spirit through His Word to convict, to produce true worship of God, all through the power of the pulpit, all through the Word of God being opened by one sent from God.

Do you understand the significance? Do you understand the significance for us in our day of supposed liturgical renewal when we, supposedly, as the church, know better than the church in the past how to make real Christians? ... when we read of “catch the fire,” and “contemporary vs. traditional worship”? Listen. This is God. God says, “This is the way that I will build spiritual faith—through the power of a pulpit, through a pulpit that expounds, preaches, declares, testifies of the Word of God in Jesus Christ.”

In I Corinthians 2 Paul says that when he came among them he did not use excellency of speech, but he preached Christ crucified. “Christ sent me to preach. The preaching of the cross is the power of God unto salvation.” “Preach the word,” says Paul to Timothy (II Tim. 4:2); for the Word of God “is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword” (Heb. 4:12).

There are two things that stand out here. First of all, the people’s attitude. That was crucial. There was not simply good, faithful preaching. The attitude was very important. And that is very important for us to hear. The people were thirsting and hungering for the Word of God. They said to Ezra, “Bring the book. You brought the book, didn’t you? You didn’t bring *Time* magazine to reflect on social trends, or the *Wall Street Journal*. You didn’t bring a book on the lives of the rich and famous to give us a homily, to lift us up out of the gloom, did you? No, you brought the book, didn’t you? The pure milk of the Word of God? That more sure and living, that abiding Word? That Word that is able to sink down into the soul and to tell us our inmost thoughts? You brought the book, the Word?” They hungered for the Word, from morning to mid-day. They had a great appetite. The Spirit had created in them a thirst for the Word of God.

Is that true of you? Do you look on Sunday morning to see to it that the pastor has his Bible? And do you see that as he preaches he has the Bible all marked up? He has his “text,” but then he brings out other Scriptures. He brings you to the Scriptures and he lays forth to you the truths of God for your soul. When you go to church, you are not looking for a basket of Easter eggs, are you? You are not looking for a choir, are you? You are not looking for some external dazzle, are you? You are looking centrally for the Word, are you not? That Word, which is above all other words the joy and the rejoicing of our hearts?

But to have that type of appreciation for the preaching of the Word of God, you will have to be in the Word of God for six days a week. If all that you read is repair manuals and J.C. Penny catalogs and sport pages, I doubt that you should have any strong desire to hear the Word of God on Sunday. Children, did you know that if you starve yourself long enough you lose hunger pains? You do not want to eat after a while, if you do not eat. You do not want to hear the Word of God preached, if you do not read it yourself.

They revered the Word and they heard that Word with reverence. There was a holy reverence that fell upon them. It was not the “made-up, forced” type of spiritual joy. It was not happy-clappy hour. It was not slap on the back. It was not turn and say “Howdy” to your

neighbor time. But it was a reverence of the heart for the Word of God. Everyone was filled with thoughts of God, of the way of life, of the Word of the King, of the eternal truth. There was no whispering, no fooling around under the Word of God. But with their posture and their appearance, they said, “Truly God is in this place in His most holy Word.”

And the ears of all the people, we read, were attentive unto the book of the law. The need was so great. It brought such attention. There was an alertness. There was a hunger, a thirst, for the Word.

The second thing that stands out, next to the people’s attitude, is the style of the pulpit or the style of the preaching. It was, first of all, expository preaching. Ezra opened up the meaning of the Word of God in all sincerity and truth. It was not dull preaching. It was not mere fact preaching. It was not math class. But as that Word touched the soul of the pastor, and he was weary, he could no longer hold it in. So, we read, they read in the book of the law distinctly and gave the sense and caused them to understand the reading.

Preaching blessed of the Holy Spirit is always, “Thus saith the Lord. Jehovah has spoken. Will ye not hearken?” Preaching is always Acts 17:3, reasoning from the Scriptures: Is not this the Christ? The pastor must study the Word. He must seek to understand the Word. The duty of your pastor is to study the Word to prepare good, sound sermons from it. He must not come to you with new philosophies. He must not come with something for itching ears, something that he thinks is going to be palatable to man. He must not shun to declare the full counsel of the living Word of God. He may have many gifts of oratory, or he may lack gifts of oratory. But the question is this: Does he bring the Word? If he does, then you are blessed.

But the preaching was not only expository. It was direct. It was convicting. We read that Ezra caused the people to understand the law. He read it distinctly. He caused them to understand the reading. The Levites, further, were circulating, as we saw, among the people, seeking to make clear to the people what God was saying to them. This is what that means for you now and for me in our lives before God. The preaching was distinctive. It was not this way and then that way, but it was the truth. It was convicting. It was brought at the level of understanding, the understanding of the people. The preacher was not in a quandary as to what the Scriptures meant. He taught them what it meant. And he directed it to their understanding, not first to their feelings. Blessed by the Spirit, this Word of God convicted them in their souls.

And then, the preaching was God-glorifying. Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. And all the people said, “Amen,” we read in verse 6. The overarching thought, the dominant chord, the impression that was left is “God is great, holy and reverend in His name. Who would not fear Thee, O King of nations?” There was an impression of God and His majesty, God and His glory, God and His immensity. The impression of the service, the impression of the preaching, was not *man*, not even man in his need, not first, “How do we feel today, guys?” But the impression, that which was first, was: God. And then, seeing God, all the needs were met. Or those needs fell away as unimportant before His throne.

Now that is what happened. That is how revival was worked by the Holy Spirit among them—through a pulpit and one who stood behind a pulpit and preached.

The result of that preaching was a conviction of personal sin. That first—not *only*, but *first*. There was a conviction of sin. We read in verse 9, “For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law.” There was a deep, profound conviction that could not be dodged, the arrow of the Holy Spirit that could not be blunted—a sorrow expressive. As they came under the evidences of God’s grace and faithfulness, they saw their own sin. In the light of God’s Word and God’s law, they came to an understanding of their own sin, an understanding that nothing else could ever give to them of their sin. The pulpit had proclaimed the majesty of God. The pulpit had been a window through which the glory of God shown into their heart. And the first result was that they cried out, “Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips,” as did Isaiah in chapter 6 of Isaiah.

Now gauge the state of your heart. Does the Word of God function? Does it perform its first and important function? Does it show you yourself and your need and your sin? In Nehemiah’s day the people had been guilty of marrying heathen wives, against which they had been warned repeatedly. The claws of lust had sunk deeply into their souls. They were guilty of being disconnected from their brothers. They were filled with apathy and indifference toward the needs of one another. They were guilty of a hopelessness over God’s cause. Before Nehemiah had come, they could not get themselves to do anything. Now they are broken in heart.

Does the Word of God do that to you? Do you come to church and, under the Word of God, see yourself? Not other men and women, but yourself? Do you say “I am that sinner. I am in need of the washing of Christ’s blood”?

The second effect of the preaching was consolation, or comfort in God. That also must and always will follow. Nehemiah led the way. He gave spiritual counsel among the people as they came under the conviction of sin. He did not say, “Well, you should not worry so much about your sin.” No, he brought the Word of God. He told them that God had convicted them of their sin, not so that they would be faced toward darkness and despair, but to point them, by faith, to Him, God’s Son, who was given for them that they might have life. Nehemiah said among the people, “Yes, you have looked into the mirror and you have seen a filthy thing within you. But now we must look on, by faith through grace, unto the cross of Jesus Christ.” The Word of God was brought to console them.

Nehemiah put it beautifully (v. 10): “Then he said unto them, . . .neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the LORD is your strength.” There I see a glimpse into what made Nehemiah the man that he was. I see him counseling others along the line that he would counsel himself. The joy of the Lord is your strength. What made him so strong? The joy of his God. This is your strength, this is your safe place, this is your confidence—the joy of the Lord. It means the knowledge that the Lord takes joy in you, that ye are God’s joy and treasure, that the Lord takes pleasure in His people. That knowledge is our strength. Knowing God makes us joyful, yes. But knowing that God’s joy is His church—that the Lord takes pleasure in His people and will beautify the meek with salvation. When it is declared to us that the Lord has loved us with an everlasting love, oh, that is our strength—that the Lord takes joy in us in Jesus Christ.

Then the preaching enlivened hope. It brought a living hope. The people gathered the next day to hear more of the Word of God. They were given an abiding hope.

The Word of God must be preached in all of its truth. Then the people of God are changed. They are revived. They know their sin. They know the grace of God. They are comforted. They are given hope.

What do you want? What do you think life is? What does your life center in? Does it center in the church? Does it center in the Word of God, the sure Word? Long for that Word. Long that that Word might ever remain among us, that it might be heard by hungry and thirsty hearts, and that through the Word of God we might be brought to this strength: that the Lord takes joy in us in Jesus Christ.

Let us pray.

Father, we again thank Thee for the Word today. And we pray that Thou wilt keep us faithful to Thee. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

July 8, 2012 Worshiping God in the Light of His Goodness

No. 3627

Rev. Carl Haak

Dear radio friends,

In our study of the book of Nehemiah, we saw last week that upon the completion of the walls of Jerusalem, Nehemiah led the people in a great revival, a spiritual awakening. This revival was sparked and inspired by the preaching of the Word of God. Today we come to chapter 9 of Nehemiah, which tells us of the further worship services that were held at that time.

The question that is confronting us today in the Word of God is this: What is the most spiritually significant activity that you perform on the earth? What is the most desired of God from you? What is the most crucial for your spiritual life? Think about that.

Is it what you do in your home? Is it, perhaps, what you do in your society or in your workplace? Is it, perhaps, your own private time of prayer?

The answer of God is this: congregational worship. The worship of the church is the most significant activity performed by the child of God on earth. That makes sense, Reformed sense, biblical sense. The great work of God in time is the gathering of the church in Jesus Christ that shall eternally worship and praise Him. The most significant activity on earth, therefore, is when the church, though it be in principle, worships God. The body of Jesus Christ is God's church. And this is the work of Christ: to gather that church. God, in a special way, delights in the gathering of His people to praise and worship Him.

What is most pleasing to God? Handel's Messiah—a beautiful choral piece? Mountain splendor? No. The Lord loves the praises of His people.

As I said, the people of God, under Nehemiah's leadership, are now gathered in the worship of the living God in our text, Nehemiah 9:1-31. They have come under the Word of God as it has been sounded from a pulpit of wood. They have come humbled and burdened under their sin. They have desired to separate themselves from a world of sin. We read, "They separated themselves from all strangers," that is, they would not join the world in what they were doing—for we cannot worship God if our heart is joined and our life is compromised with the sin worshiped in this world.

We learn in chapter 9 what took place in their worship, namely, that God's goodness was proclaimed to them. In the light of that goodness, they saw what they were as sinners. And, finally, they were renewed in that conviction of their need of the mercy of God. Reading Nehemiah 9:1-31, we are taught that in worship God's goodness must be shown in order to show

our sin, so that we might be directed to His mercy and renewed to praise and serve Him all our days.

The sermon that day in Nehemiah's time centered in declaring the goodness of God. The people who came were deeply troubled over their sins. They had spent a week struggling. Further, they lived in poverty. They had stress on the job. They suffered under sins committed against them and opposition directed toward them, and temptations were many to be discouraged. And the message that they heard? What was it that they needed to hear? We read in verses 5 and 6 of Nehemiah 9: "Stand up and bless the LORD your God for ever and ever: and blessed be thy glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise. Thou, even thou, art LORD alone."

Now, we need to stop in our thoughts. Their minds might have been running with their problems and their needs and their difficulties and their hard situation. And the very first word was: Stop! God is God. He is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him!

You see, in true worship, we must first be confronted with God. We read, "Enter into his presence. Come ye before him." When you go to church, do you think about everything and everyone and all types of things except God? Do you think only of yourself? Worship is coming into His presence. God is good in Himself.

We read again in verse 5: "Blessed be thy glorious name." This was the first thing they heard in church, that God's name was exalted above all blessing and praise. So good, so glorious, is God, so filled with things to praise, that He is above praise. That is, He is even more glorious than we can think or say. You praise someone for pulling you out of a burning car, or helping you study for an exam. You try to express your thanks and the person says, "Enough, enough! You flatter me. You go beyond." But not so in praising God. The reality of how good and glorious God is is exalted above praise. You may take the song of Miriam and Aaron at the Red Sea, you may add David's leaping with joy when he takes the ark to Jerusalem, then you may combine the glorious chorus of heaven right now before the throne of God: Hallelujah, the Lord God omnipotent reigneth—you may take it all together, and the reality of how glorious God is is above it. It is above all that. You would have to say, after listening to heaven's worship: "It's been understated. The glory of God is understated." The who you worship in church is *God*. Thou art God alone.

In the Belgic Confession (one of the Reformed, biblical creeds of the church), we confess in Article 1 that we believe with the heart and confess with the mouth that there is only one simple spiritual being called God. And He is eternal, incomprehensible, and glorious. Are you aware of that when you worship? Worship can be a dangerous place for you and me. Imagine being in the presence of that person who pulled you out of the burning car and acting slovenly, indifferent, apathetic, and thinking only about yourself and your schedule and where you need to be and thinking of tomorrow and your plans. Imagine doing that to a human being! God is, in the worship of His church, to be greatly praised. He is to be had in reverence among all the assembly of the saints.

He is good. He is not only good in Himself, but He is good in His works. We read in verse 6, “Thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein, and thou preservest them all; and the host of heaven worshippeth thee.” Now the point here is not for me to expound on the beautiful truths of creation and providence, except for me to add that if you deny those truths of creation in six twenty-four hour days and of providence—that God upholds all things by His hand—then you cannot worship God in His works. But the point is not to go into that right now, but the remembrance of these things is utterly necessary for proper worship, to put us in awe, to place us before God as He is.

What are the first words of a minister when he starts the service? Historically, in the Dutch Reformed churches, it is this (taken from Psalm 124), and it is intentional: “Beloved in the Lord Jesus Christ, our help standeth in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” The contemplation of God’s mighty work in creation and His ongoing providence places us in the proper state of awe before God. “Come before his presence with singing; know ye that the Lord he is God. It is he that hath made us and not we ourselves” (Ps. 100). You and I, in worship, are in the presence of Him who has made and holds us right now in His hand and who in Christ has revealed to us His love. Bow down in worship!

The entire sermon that day dealt with the goodness of God as it is shown toward His church and people.

Now we can only glance a little bit at what is said. I cannot bring out the details. But it is the cumulative weight of all that God did that is the point of this passage. Read it for yourself today (Neh. 9). We could look at each incident that is mentioned of what Jehovah has done and say, “Oh, how good He is.” But the intended effect comes from a look at their combined testimony. When you add them all up, then you see who He is and what He did. How good God is to His people. How indisputably and immeasurably good! We are not very good, you know, at spiritual arithmetic—in adding things up. We can count dollars into the millions, but we cannot count past five or ten in listing what God has done. But the sermon there gave a list of some of the good works of God.

Look at it just briefly.

There was, first of all, God’s goodness in the call of Abraham, out of an eternal election, to inherit the land of Canaan. God established a covenant with him.

There was the deliverance of Israel out of the bondage of Egypt because God heard their cry, dividing the Red Sea and throwing the Egyptians down as a stone in the water. It was the leading of Israel forty years through the dry wilderness by the pillar of fire and cloud.

There was the giving to Israel of the law at Sinai to teach them how to show love and gratitude. There was manna and water from a rock repeatedly. There were forty years of sustaining them in the wilderness and their clothes did not wear out. There was the giving to them of the land on the east side of the Jordan and then the multiplying of them. There was,

further, the giving to them of the entire land of Canaan, casting down the walls of their enemies, defeating the giants, and giving them the wealth of the land.

Then followed judges and saviors to help them and prophets to bring them the Word of God.

Now let me put that all in the language of fulfillment. Here is the skimming of the top, a superficial account of God's goodness to you, His child. He elected you eternally and called you out of the world of sin to which you belonged, thus deserving its judgments. He established unconditionally a covenant with you and said, "I will be your friend, I will delight in you. I will show you glorious things." He ransomed you from the bondage and guilt of sin by making a sea of blood in His own Son. He has led you ten, twenty, thirty-five, forty-one, forty-nine, seventy years. There has never been one day or one night when He took His eye from you. He gave you angels' food and water that quenches thirst – the Lord Jesus Christ and faith in Him that does not wear out. He laid up for you Canaan. And you will go over the Jordan of death to be with Him. He cast down your giants, your troubles, and all that oppressed you. And He leads you with spiritual care. He gives you the church, He gives you His Word, He gives you His faithfulness.

Now, as you are met in the place of worship on the Lord's day, this is the God in whose presence you stand. You have come through a week, all right. You have come through a week of many trials and many troubles. But now you stand in the church of God. What is the first word that you must hear? "Behold your God! Behold how good, how glorious, how worthy of praise, how perfect in trust, how glorious."

And seeing the truth of the goodness of God, the people were led to see the truth about themselves.

The sermon on the goodness of God that day produced an effect. As the light of heaven shone down around them and the glory of the Lord filtered upon mortal men and women as they stood in the light of God, they saw themselves. They saw things they would never have seen in the darkness of their pride.

So to us. We journey to God's house on this spiritual day. There is darkness all around us and there is darkness within. There are secret sins and self-delusions within us. The Word of God is opened. The Holy Spirit brings the countenance of God glorious and shining before our spiritual eyes. And I look at myself. I learn about myself. The result of true worship is the right understanding of yourself as a sinner in need of covering.

Have you ever worshiped God? I am not asking if you have ever gone to church—and then come home and you could tell me what everybody is wearing and who has a gripe with whom. I am asking you, Have you ever worshiped God? In the worship have you ever seen yourself?

Ask the prophet Isaiah. Ask the publican of whom Jesus spoke. Talk with them as they exit the worship service. Ask them: "Isaiah, publican, how was church today? We hear that you had a vision of the throne of God, God in His perfection and glory. Tell us about it. What was the result? How do you feel?" Isaiah responds: "I am undone. I am a man of unclean lips." And you turn to the publican, and he is smiting his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me." For

when they worshiped, they stood before God in His goodness and glory. And that goodness and glory shone down upon them. The light of His goodness exposed the working of their hearts to them in a way that they would otherwise not have known.

That is worship. Worship is to stand before God.

Children, the Word of God, because it proclaims the glory of the Lord, is like an X-ray. You cannot see what is inside of me. You cannot see my bones and that I have an artificial hip and maybe a lump of cancer. But before an X-ray, the inside is shown. Now, God's glory is the X-ray. And it will show you the truth about yourself.

We read that, in the light of God's goodness, they saw the inexcusable sins that Israel had committed in the wilderness. They confessed further the repeated provocations that Israel had made even after they had been put in possession of the land of Canaan. They confessed that even though Israel had stood before the good things of God, they had turned to their own lusts and had not been faithful stewards, they had sinned against knowledge, and they had become insensitive, hardened, detached, remote to the Word of God that called them to repentance. They put in their time, so to speak, on Sunday. But they left God and left His Word in the church.

What did they see about themselves? They saw that they were proud, arrogant, hard-hearted, rebellious, idolatrous sinners. They were resentful of the Word of God and those who brought it to them. They were insensitive toward the need of repentance. They tried to use God for their own self-serving motives. Knowing the Word of God, they politely bowed to it in the presence of others, but they went out and lived according to their own dictates.

What do you see about *your* life, not somebody else's, but about your life, in the light of the breathtaking goodness of God?

Their confession was sincere. They saw their sin.

That is the crucial element of worship. True worship is the fellowship of those who have been humbled before God's infinite goodness to them in Jesus Christ. It is more. It is of course thanks, it is praise, it is rejoicing in God for His goodness to me in Christ. But, you see, all of the activities of worship, the joy and the praise, can be like hollow clanging on a drum. Have you ever heard someone hit an empty oil barrel? Worship can be like that hollow clanking, if there is not a heart humbled in the knowledge of ourselves as sinners before God. You can make a lot of noise. You can clang, and there can be a lot of empty chatter. But when you are filled with God and with humility before yourself as a sinner, there will be deep, resonant, soothing praise of God.

We worship God through the Psalms. We sing those Psalms, and we use those Psalms in our prayers, because they proceed from an awareness of who God is and who I am before Him.

The worship service that day brought a great blessing. Oh, a wonderful blessing! It brought the wonder of God's mercy shining upon their hearts. We cannot miss that as we read through the chapter. Throughout the chapter we read of God's mercy. We read the words "but," and

“yet.” “Yet,” we read in verse 19, “thou in thy manifold mercy forsookest them not....” Verse 30, “Yet many years didst thou forbear them....” Verse 31, “Nevertheless for thy great mercies’ sake....” It is like the composition of good music, when the composer returns to the comforting victorious theme. So is worship. It always returns to this, the brilliant aspect of God’s mercy – God’s mercy, His compassion on those who are miserable and ugly, and His commitment to do them good.

Why did not God forsake Israel? Why does not God forsake us? There certainly was a just cause for Him to sever the tie. Why did not the holy God consume them as He did the heathen? He bears and He forbears, He restores them, He chastens them severely – only to bring them constantly back to Himself. These people – why did not God leave them? Why? For thy great mercy’s sake.

You see, when you stand before God and see yourself as a sinner, you hear the testimony of the cross of Jesus Christ and you are awed at the mercy of God. He has willed in Himself, from all eternity, to be gracious to His church and to save His church in the blood of His own dear Son, washing them from their sins and creating in them a new obedience, a new heart, and a right spirit, that they might live before Him and love Him. Why? For He is good and His mercies are everlasting.

Are you ready to worship God? Are you ready to be lost in wonder and praise for His mercy? Do you see His mercy?

Let me use an example. Imagine with me a great door, like a garage door. Behind that great door is a vast land filled with exquisite beauty—a land that is brilliant, breathtaking, and wondrous. There is only a little crack at the bottom of the door. And you stand next to someone who has seen that land and told you all about that land and says to you, “Can you see that land?” You say, “No.” And he says to you, “Stoop down and look. Can you see it now? There is a little crack down there on the bottom, can you see that?” And you say, “No.” And he says, “Well, get on your hands and knees. Can you see it now?” You say, “No.” And he says, “Put your face to the ground. Press your eye to the gravel. Can you see now?” And you say, “Yes! Oh, I see it dimly, but, oh, what a land, what a beauty.”

Only when in the light of God’s goodness you are humbled in the dust can you catch a glimpse of His mercy. And one glimpse is breathtaking.

God has to do that. You can bow your head on a prayer rug with your face to the ground and be pressed to the ground – and see nothing. You are still proud, still working your way, you think, to your God. No, God must humble the heart. He must address the pride. But when He humbles, it is in order that He might give a vision, a glimpse of His mercy in the face of Jesus Christ His Son. He has given His Son in order that we might bask one day in the light of His glory. He gives us to see His mercy by showing us our sinful selves.

And then we leave worship.

Shall I give you a riddle? The true worshiper leaves church empty and yet full—empty of self and filled with wonder at God's mercy.

Let us pray.

Eternal and glorious God of heaven and earth, we praise and thank Thee for Thy infinite mercy in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

July 15, 2012     Let Not Our Trouble Seem Little to Thee

No. 3628

Rev. Carl Haak

Dear radio friends,

We return again today to our series on the book of Nehemiah. We are engaged in the ninth chapter of this wonderful book. We turn our attention, today, to verses 32-38, asking for God's blessing.

Recall with me that last week we looked into the first verses of the ninth chapter and saw that the people of God in Nehemiah's day were engaged in the most important activity of life—congregational worship.

We have witnessed in this book that there was a spiritual revival among the people of God, inspired by the leadership of Nehemiah, the man who had a heart for the cause of God on earth and who had returned to build the walls of Jerusalem and to set in order the things that were wanting.

Nehemiah had encouraged the people to be busy with the things of God. The Holy Spirit then sparked renewed zeal for God and His Word in the heart of the people of God. That is very true. If you are busy with yourself all week and with this world and with your own entertainment and possessions, you will find little interest in spiritual things on Sunday. But the people of God had centered their life in the Word of God and in their calling before God. And that led them to zealous worship.

In their worship they came under the light of God's goodness to them, God's goodness in Himself, God's goodness in creation and providence, and, especially, God's goodness in His faithful work for the church. Under the X-ray light of God's goodness, they saw themselves as sinners—proud and rebellious. And this led them to see the brilliance of God's mercy—His mercy in Christ revealed to those humbled by their sins.

And all of these things we sought to apply to ourselves as we considered that word last week.

Now, in verse 32 of Nehemiah 9, we come to a significant transition, from the reflection of the past to a contemplation of the present. The scene changes as the people of God who are met in worship no longer focus on the degrading past, but the distressing present. They have turned from the heartaches of years gone by to the hardship of their own time. They speak to God now, in worship, of the troubles that have come upon them. They say to Him that they are in great distress. They have changed from the reciting of woe and sin of the past to the reality of their

own situation: “We, O Lord, are met before Thee. We are Thy church. We need Thy mercy and Thy grace for our present difficulties and trials.”

Verse 32 in Nehemiah 9 is the only petition to be found in the whole prayer that they bring to God. The only thing that they ask of God is: “Let not all the trouble that has come upon us seem little before Thee.” There was one thing that lived in their heart: They wanted to be assured that God pitied, that God saw them, that God took thought of them, that God did not despise them, that God had compassion on them.

I think of what we read in Psalm 40:17: “But I am poor and needy; yet the Lord thinketh on me. Thou art my help and my deliverer; make no tarrying, O my God.” Is this your prayer today? Is this your prayer as you come together to worship the Lord on this day? Is your one great need this: “That the Lord would assure me that He thinks on me, that He sees me in the compassion of His dear Son. If I know that, then all is well.” Is that true for you?

It seems that the prayer is a bit strange. They pray to God now, “Let not all the trouble that has come upon us seem little before Thee. Upon our kings and upon our princes, and upon our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and upon all thy people—let it not seem little to Thee. Lord, don’t let our trouble and problems seem insignificant, to appear of no real account to Thee, to be trivial, really, in the broader scope of things. Don’t let it appear to be a small item on the agenda compared to some of the things that are before Thee, O Lord.”

Now that is strange, I say, because the Bible says that God loves us, loves the church, and that the church is the apple of His eye. He says to them, “You only have I loved.” Is it not true that we confess that God’s whole eternal counsel is centered in His glory, the glory that He will reveal in the church of Jesus Christ? Is not God’s heart always filled with the needs, the concerns, of His children, even as a father towards his children? Is He not the perfect Father?

Yes, that is true; that is absolutely true. But the prayer that they are making is nevertheless understandable from our perspective. When you are brought low, when you groan under the sense of your sin and your littleness and your weakness, and especially when you have been under the load of trial for a long time and God has so humbled you, you are tempted to ask, “Does God really care? My troubles, my woes of heart, are they important to Him?” Especially when the shame of it comes upon you, you say concerning your sins, “Surely it is so bad, it is so shameful, that God does not want to take an interest in me anymore.”

When you have been humbled, when you have been brought to see the shame of your own condition, and when you have been subjected to a long period of trial, then you are tempted to believe that your situation and your burdens are, perhaps, not of great concern to God.

The people in Nehemiah’s day *were* in trouble. They were weighed down and in great distress. They were in grief, grief that sapped all joy and gave them sighing hearts. Now note that. The ones who are praying are the ones who have been busy in the work of the Lord—in the building of the walls. They have felt the power of grace to gather them together under the Word of God to worship. They are the ones who are in the church.

We ask, what was the trouble, then? Were not things going so much better under Nehemiah than before? Why do they feel so burdened about trouble when things look so upbeat now?

A number of things. First of all, they saw their troubles were many. They felt that they were being overwhelmed by troubles. It seemed to them that one trouble came after another. “Let not all the trouble seem little to Thee,” they say.

Secondly, these troubles that they complain of before God have been of long standing. They say, this has been the situation since the time of the kings of Assyria until this day – 250 years! They say, thirdly, that these troubles are affecting all of them—all classes, all places of service—our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, all Thy people. The people of God are one. We are knit together in the love of God. And all these problems come upon us collectively, as a body.

And they say, finally, to God, “These troubles have affected our daily life.” It is something they had to deal with every waking moment. It was upon their heart. It was taxing them. They say to God, “It yieldeth much increase unto the kings whom thou hast set over us. They have dominion over us. We are under their dominion.”

All of these things can be traced back to one thing: their sin. They are telling God about their trouble, which we must do, too. But not in a way in which they are clueless as to why the trouble has come upon them. They know and confess that the root and the source of their trouble was their sin (v. 33: but we have done wickedly; v. 37: because of our sins).

The spiritual ability had been given to these people. They did not stand around facing their troubles, scratching their head, wondering what went wrong. They did not go out the back door and scream into the night against all the woe and trouble and kick at the first object in their path. They knew the source of their problem was personal sin.

I do not know the exact woe of your heart today, whether you are feeling overwhelmed, whether the difficulties before you are long-standing, affecting your relationships, your marriage, your family, your daily life. You may well have submitted to God under His chastenings. But you must not separate the woe of your heart very far from your own sin. And then you must go to the cross for the wonderful cleansing and the power of God’s grace.

There were two realities about the sins that they had committed that were so grievous now to them. The passage shows, first of all, that the sin that they had committed had made itself their master. The sin to which we would consent and give ourselves enslave—the sin with which we want to negotiate, the sin that we wish to take into our life only on certain terms and at certain times. We would say that sin has the power to enslave. They say, “We are the servants of another.” What had happened was this. The freedom of an independent life as a nation had been removed from them and now they were paying taxes, and all the cream of the crop was going to the king of Persia. The servitude was galling, it was hard to accept, it was over their own bodies. “They have dominion over our bodies,” they say (v. 37).

Now let God's Word warn us this day. Young man, young girl, all of us! Let it jar you awake. Sin of lust, sin of envy, sin of vanity, sin of drunkenness, sin of sexual uncleanness, sin of cursing, sin of swearing—all these sins enslave. We call it addiction. Addiction is spiritual law in action. The reality of sin that is consented to has the power to hold. There is slavery today.

We read of young girls and boys in the Far East (and in our country as well) being enslaved and used for unspeakable perversions. Slave-traders in lust. All sin is that way – lust, drugs, drink, envy, gossip, jealousy, swearing, pornography. They are the sins that have dominion over the body. And, oh, the distress that comes upon our life. There is freedom for our bodies under the King Jesus Christ, but nowhere else.

And, secondly, they saw that their sin resulted in giving their substance to another. They saw that they were only laboring for the increase of the king of Persia over them. They say, "The land thou gavest unto our fathers to eat the fruit thereof and the good thereof, it yieldeth much increase unto the kings that thou has set over us."

When we yield our life to a way of sin, we can work and work and work and we will have nothing to show for it. It is gone. Where is it? Did it go to the church? No. Did it go for the support of the family? No. Did it go for charities? No. Where did it go? It is spent for the lords of pleasure. It is spent on gambling, or on drugs.

Where does your money go? Whom are you serving? You see, when you serve sin, your money goes. Where does it go? More CDs? You have a college loan that you must pay back. You cannot pay it back—why? Are you spending your money for the kings of the earth, for fashion, Friday-night drinks? Do you give your substance to another—not just money now, but your substance —your energy, your talents, your time? Are you serving *the* King, the Lord Jesus, who replenishes and blesses, or do you serve the slave-masters of sin?

It was under this, as they were brought to see these things in their own lives, and it was as they were struggling with the effects of all of these things in their lives that they cry out as repentant people of God: "Let not all the trouble that has come upon us seem little to Thee." That was a heartfelt cry. "Lord, though shame and guilt cover our face, and though, truly, we have no right to say anything before Thee, yet, O Lord, be mindful of us. Assure us that Thy eye is turned to us in pity and compassion as we are brought humbled and low before Thee." It is not a prayer in which they are standing aloof and saying, "Lord, you had better help that guy over there...that gal over there. They need a lot of help, Lord. All's OK here, Lord. But you had better help them over there." No, it is a prayer that majors in directing our thoughts toward ourselves —a heartfelt prayer. The prayer of the prodigal son, "I will arise and go to my father and say, 'I have sinned and I am not worthy to be called thy son. Make me as a hired servant.'"

The urgent plea was this: "We ask God to have a regard to our troubles, to take note of them, and to assure us that He is fully aware in His mercy, that His heart of mercy is turned and is ever upon His children who are brought low and know the sorrows brought by their own sins." It is not a prayer rooted in impenitence. It is not a prayer saying, "Lord, take these troubles away. Lord, why should this have to happen to us? After all, can't you just fix the problems we have.

We're sorry. Just fix it now." No, it was an acknowledgment that they were in the trouble under the just judgment of God. They understood that. They are not finding fault with God's ways. But they are asking, as repentant children of God, "Lord, in the midst of these troubles, we need something. What we need is to be assured that Thou dost look upon us in Thy mercy. Let not our trouble seem little to Thee."

They are asking for God's compassion. "Lord, understand how this feels to us. Lord, we are casting ourselves upon Thy marvelous compassion, the understanding of Thy perfect heart." Though the Lord be high, yet hath He respect unto the lowly. "In all of our affliction, O Lord, be afflicted with us. Let the angel of Thy presence save us. In Thy love and pity redeem us and bear us and carry us under these difficulties." That is their prayer.

The troubles of God's children are not little to the Lord. That is the Word of God today. And what a wonderful Word of God that is. That is true concerning every trouble and every difficulty that the Lord in His will and way sends into your life.

The death of your 13-month old child. The death of your loved teenager. The life and the spark of your heart. These troubles do not seem little to the Lord. God knows what our troubles are. God feels. God understands. It is not little to Him. He knows what is behind those tears. He knows what is going on in your heart that words cannot express. He knows the trouble and the woe that would drive you from the company of men and women to sob it out before the Lord. Your woe is not little to Him.

Children, your Mom and Dad might not understand anymore how it feels to be a teenager and the difficulties you are facing. But the Lord knows. Young adult, you may say, "I don't think there are many in the church that can really understand where we are at." The Lord does. You say, as a child of God, "But my way and my experience is different from anybody else's. I'd tell you, but you would not really be able to understand my heart-life." But God does. The great heart of God bears it all. All our trouble and all our woe—it is not little to Him.

The prayer is: "O Lord, as we stand as repentant sinners before Thee, let us be assured that we are viewed in Thy compassion. Let us be assured that, in the midst of our troubles, Thou art a God of mercy and compassion, not forgetting us, but working Thy good and sovereign way." That is the prayer.

Here is the reason why we know that God does view us in His compassion at all times. It is given in verse 32: "Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the terrible [that is, the awe-inspiring] God, who keepest covenant and mercy." God keeps covenant and mercy. God keeps covenant. God's covenant is His will that He will be bound to His people in love, that He will show them great things about Himself, that He will draw them close to Himself, and that He will use everything as a means subservient to His purposes to glorify Himself in us and to make us His friends and servants. God's mercy is His compassion for the miserable and His desire to do unto them good, to give the best for the worst, to raise the lowest to the highest, to enrich beggars. God keeps covenant and mercy.

And that means so much more than we can ever understand. It is not simply that God sticks it out, that He hangs in there because He has said He would. Yes, He is faithful. But that God keeps covenant means that His heart never changes, His love never grows old, His feelings never flag, His compassions never fail. Because He is the covenant-keeping God, the troubles of our heart shall all be before Him, and He will dispatch immediately mercy and grace in time of need. Because He keeps covenant, He will never despise our grief, He will never despise our struggles and our woes. Always, always, always He loves us.

You want proof? Look to the cross on Golgotha. He keeps covenant and mercy by healing all of our diseases, by bearing all of our sorrows, by obtaining for us the forgiveness of sins in the way of the giving of His own Son that we might live forever.

Are our troubles little to God? Are yours? Are they insignificant to Him? Does it matter to Him? Oh, yes!

When you come to worship and when you come in prayer to tell God your troubles – He already knew about them before you came. He is sovereign. And now they are all before Him in Jesus Christ. He has granted you something for those troubles. Grace and mercy that never fail. Compassion that is unending. And this word from God: “My son, my daughter, it must needs be so now. I will bear you through this unto a day of perfect glory.”

Let us pray.

Father, we again thank Thee for the Word, and pray for its blessing upon our hearts in this day, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

July 22, 2012

Covenant Renewal

No. 3629

Rev. Carl Haak

Dear radio friends,

Renewed zeal for God's covenant follows on the heels of spiritual revival.

Zeal for God's covenant—what is that? Zeal for the covenant is when it pulsates in the hearts of Christians that they are made the friends and servants of God by grace, through the blood of Jesus Christ. And they stand in awe of His Word: "I will be thy God, and ye shall be My people."

We fall, as Christians, as God's people, into the sin of spiritual stupor, of becoming complacent, indifferent, detached, resentful, and apathetic. Covenant renewal is when we are, by the Spirit, made alert, thankful, committed, devoted to live in a bond of fellowship with our God—a bond of fellowship that will be seen in faithful marriages, Sabbath-keeping, deeds of mercy, and devotion to God's house.

Renewed zeal for the covenant follows upon the heels of spiritual revival. In chapters 8 and 9 of Nehemiah, we are told of a spiritual revival among God's people that brought them back to the Word, back to worshiping God, back to humility and confession of sin. How did that revival happen? Was there some principle of church growth at work here? No. It was sparked by a man who arrived in Jerusalem, a man named Nehemiah, who was not a preacher. But he was a man who sought the welfare of God's people. Under his determined and godly leadership, the core of which was an unshakable trust in God to do what God had called him to do, the walls of Jerusalem were built and things were put in order. Then, under Nehemiah's direction, a pulpit of wood was erected and the Word of God was preached faithfully to the people. And the people of God began to worship in the light of God's goodness. They confessed their sin and sought God's mercy.

"And because of all of this," we read (Neh. 9:38), "we make a sure covenant, and write it." Then we read further, in chapter 10:29, "We will cleave to our brethren and will enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God's law." Because of this spiritual revival they were brought back to a renewed zeal for godly covenant living, for living as children of God, as friends of God, through grace in Jesus Christ. They would be zealous for this covenant specifically by maintaining godly, faithful marriages, by observing the Sabbath day, by doing deeds of mercy, and by being devoted to God's house.

Let us look at that. I speak to you today on "Covenant Renewal."

The people of God, under Nehemiah's leadership, now recognize the horrible indifference to the covenant that had characterized them since returning from captivity in Babylon. (The covenant, you remember, is the bond of living fellowship and love in which the people of God stand in relation to God. It is established by God's grace in Jesus Christ.) After the initial excitement of returning from Babylon seventy years before under Zerubbabel, they had begun to realize the extent of the struggles that they would have as a beleaguered people of God. A dead orthodoxy spread among them. A mere outward going through the motions, a taking for granted, a complacency began to characterize them. With it came materialism. They set their heart on the earthly and on the treasures below. And they tolerated prevailing sin.

God sent prophets, Haggai and Malachi, to prod them into repentance. And now God's people, at the time of Nehemiah, see their sins in the light of God's goodness, as we have pointed out to you in the last two messages in that beautiful ninth chapter of Nehemiah. And because they have seen God's goodness and seen their sin and their need of God's mercy, they say in Nehemiah 9:38, "We make a sure covenant." Not a new covenant. Not for the first time. But a vow to be faithful *to* the covenant, the covenant that was established by God with them. For God had made a bond of love with them—the same bond that exists right now in God's bond of love for the church, for us. God's one glorious covenant.

This covenant in the Scriptures is not of human origin. That is, the bond of love and friendship with God is not a bond that arises out of the soil of the earth. It is not like a plant poking its way through the earth and then catching God's eye and then heaven responding to earth. No. This covenant comes down. "I will establish My covenant," says the heavenly One. "I will be your God, and ye shall be My people." This covenant is established with us through the cross of Jesus Christ, not as a result of men bartering with God and seeking to come to an agreement whereby the two of us can, after all, get along a little bit. But it is of God's grace that He condescends to choose us to be His friends and to work graciously in us. Jeremiah 31: "But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and they shall know the Lord." The covenant is God coming down in His grace to sinful men and women, working in them according to His mercy, and drawing them close to His own heart.

The people of God in this covenant in the days of Nehemiah want to renew that covenant. They want to affirm that covenant. "We make a sure covenant," they say. "We give a fixed resolution that we will live our life as the friends of God on earth. We write down exactly what we vow and pledge before God. And we set a seal to it (that is, we sign it)," they said. "Put my name down there; record my name." And we read that there were twenty-two priests, seventeen Levites, and forty-four princes who vowed and wrote their name.

What is the fact, then, that is revealed in the tenth chapter of Nehemiah? This fact. When spiritual revival, worked by the Spirit, moves among God's people, when their hearts are pricked, and when they are awed over the majesty of God and lost in wonder and in awe over His mercy, the result will be that they shall be resolved henceforward to live in covenant faithfulness to God. In simple language, when you know God as God and you experience pardon and compassion to you the sinner, you will be resolved, you will be determined, you will be devoted in your life to live in all the parts of your life as the friend of God in Christ.

This points out to us that, as Christians, we battle the sin of spiritual callousness, of the loss of zeal for God as our Friend. Among the great enemies of our Christian faith is the sin of complacency, especially if we have been brought up, by God's mercy, within the confines of the church and covenant of God and raised among the blessings of the gospel of grace and showered with His goodness. So readily will our flesh make this outward, and we will begin to excuse ourselves of our sins of drinking, of swearing, of dishonesty. Spiritual decline, you know, is seldom a blowout. Most often it is a slow leak. Renewal of the covenant must be brought when the gospel pricks our hearts and humbles us as sinners.

We can also grow indifferent to the covenant because of discouragements and struggles as we seek to live a faithful life. We say, "What's the use? The problems are insurmountable." Or materialism can erode our zeal for the covenant of God. How many Christian homes in the day of prosperity have parents who are teaching at home—fathers who are serious about teaching their children? With all of the materialism, with all the things, with all the greed, how often are not the lives of Christians characterized by selfishness and bickering because things, possessions, and money become the object of the heart? Oh, we need a renewal of the covenant. We need to see God as our treasure. We need to see that the only thing that matters is the relationship in which we stand to Him.

Let us take note that when there is spiritual revival, that is, when the Word of God is truly living and moving among the people of God, they will be resolved from the heart to live a God-centered, covenant life as friends of God.

Now in the days of Nehemiah, they did not leave it to generalities, but they nailed it down to some specifics. They said, first of all, that our renewal of the covenant, of being friends of God in this world, will be seen in our marriages. We read in verse 30 of chapter 10, "And that we would not give our daughters unto the people of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons." The first particular that they mention concerning how they shall live as the friend of God is that this will be seen in their marriages. Why? Because whom you marry and the spiritual life of your marriage have everything to do with your enjoying the fellowship of God. That is because of the crucial place that God has given to marriage and the experience of His covenant love. Whom you marry affects profoundly your relationship to God. God has made life's most intimate bond, marriage, a picture of a higher bond—His covenant. This truth controls marriage. This truth shapes marriage. This truth is to be applied to every dimension of marriage.

That means marry only in the Lord. That means live in marriage even as God lives with His people. Your marriage must be characterized by forgiveness and by faithfulness. You must seek someone who is loyal to God and marry that person. And you must be faithful, even unto death, to that person.

It means, young men, be men of God, be spiritual. Prepare yourself for marriage. As you date, you must show sensitivity to God and to His law. You must know how to treat her already when you are dating her. You do not take liberties. You do not drag her around like some trophy. You develop a relationship with her through prayer and through the Word of God and through reading the Word of God with her and through praying with her.

And, girls, you need to look for a leader. Not *just* a leader, someone who pulls you around. But you must look to that leader who brings to you the care and the protection of the living God. You have to look to his life as he lives before God. Is he subdued and is he a loyal servant of the Lord Jesus Christ? This is absolutely crucial for your marriage. The very first thing that will be seen when the covenant is loved among God's people and they are living in awareness of God's covenant is that they establish God-centered marriages to which they are faithful until death do them part.

The second evidence of the covenant renewal of the people under Nehemiah was seen in Sabbath-keeping. We read in verse 31: "And if the people of the land bring ware or any victuals on the sabbath day to sell, that we would not buy it of them on the sabbath, or on the holy day." That is crucial, too – how we observe the Lord's Day. Why? Because there is also an intimate and inseparable connection between Sabbath-keeping and covenant living, between how you keep Sunday and how you live as friends of God your whole life. There is an inseparable relationship between them. The Sabbath is the special day of friendship and fellowship with God. It is the day when you are released by your master (God) from your earthly obligation so that you can come home and enter into His presence and commune with Him and give the whole day to fellowship with Him. The purpose of the Sabbath is covenant, that you might enter into a special bond, a special time, of fellowship with God.

The people in Nehemiah's day were vowing something about their friendship with God. They said that this friendship with God will mean that they would not engage in commerce, would not buy wares of the people of the land on the Lord's Day. The Lord's Day is not a day for shopping at the mall, browsing through the shops and comparing prices and styles and clipping out coupons. It is the market day for the *soul*. You may, on the Lord's Day, buy, peruse, clip out, and store up all the wares, all the good things, all the valuables of Jesus Christ. It is the day that you are to come home, enter into Father's house, where mercy waits and He will talk with you.

The Sabbath is also a wonderful witnessing opportunity for the covenant of God. The Christian shop owner closes up his shop once a week. Your neighbors see you on the way to church. You haul the kids into the van and the neighbors watch you leave for church. You witness to them. You leave them in no doubt that you have an allegiance to God, an allegiance that is first. You say, "My allegiance to God transcends business interest. It transcends and is greater than domestic concerns. It is more to me than social obligations. It is more to me than a beautiful day at the beach." You say, "My God counts. My God is best!" Twice a Sunday. You leave a witness.

But when you allow more and more of the world to enter into your life and you come to Sunday either totally exhausted because you have given everything to the things of this life, or you allow the actions of this world to affect your Sunday, then, on Monday morning, you have to talk to your neighbor (or co-worker) and say, "You know, my God is wonderful." You have to say that—because it is not apparent to them that your God is wonderful. It is not apparent to the world that God is wonderful if Christians despise the Lord's Day, make the Lord's Day as any other day. Then the witness that the Christian is leaving with the world is not that God is wonderful, but that God really does not matter.

The third thing that showed the Jews' renewal to the covenant was this, that they were going to express their spirituality in selfless deeds of mercy. We read in verse 31 of chapter 10 (I am paraphrasing now), "And this we will do. We will show mercy to those who are indebted to us." And that mercy that they would show (we will not go into the details) was, of course, the reflection of His love. When you are resolved to live a covenant, faithful life, then you will have mercy toward one another in the Lord Jesus Christ. A good barometer of the reality of a heart toward God is how one stands toward his brothers and sisters and whether he is sensitive to their needs. Do you say, "Well, I got mine, let him get his." Or: "He hurt me, I'll get him back." Or: "I'll just withdraw from the whole business." If you bear a grudge, if you view them all as sinners because of what they did to you, if you are ruled by jealousy and are judgmental, that is sin.

No, when we stand in the covenant of God, then we say, "I will forgive. I will put the best construction on the actions of others. I will want them to prosper." And we will go out of our way to show mercy and kindness.

And, fourthly, covenant renewal in that day of Nehemiah was seen in renewed devotion to the church. We take that from many verses in chapter 10 in which they say, "And we will not forsake the house of our God." They will be devoted to the house of God. Devotion to the church is intimately tied to living as God's friend in the covenant. Why? Because, above all other things—above marriage, above Sabbath-keeping, above deeds of mercy—above them all, it is in the church that God draws near to us in worship. There is where He comes down. Children, where is the spot on earth closest to heaven? On this side of the grave, what is the spot closest to heaven? It is the worship of the church. That means that if you are to live as the friend of God in this world, you must support the church, you must be involved in the church.

And the people of God in Nehemiah's day became very specific at this point. They said, "We will bring in offering, we will bring in wood, we will bring in bread, we will bring in the firstfruits." They recognized their responsibility to give, to contribute. They supported the church.

The people of God in Nehemiah's day are again renewed to covenant faithfulness in their life. "We make a sure covenant," they said. "We write our names and we seal unto it (we sign it) as an expression of our personal resolve, by the grace of God. We seal it, we are vowing."

This was the result of God's grace among them. The result of God's grace among you is that you make a commitment that you shall live as the friend of God—in your marriage, on the Sabbath, by showing mercy, by being devoted to the church and to the house of God. You will sign it. You will say, "Put my name down. Count me in."

This is the commitment that comes when the Holy Spirit sparks true, godly revival in our hearts. Because He has forgiven us and has had compassion upon us and has become our God, we pledge to live as His friends in marriage, Sabbath-keeping, deeds of mercy, and devotion to the church.

This is blessing. For to live as the covenant friend of God in love and fellowship with God is a life of hope and joy and peace. It is the beginning of eternal life.

Let us pray.

Father, we thank Thee for Thy Word and we pray that this same renewal of living as the friend of God may so characterize our lives. May it come down to the specifics of our lives that we live in marriage faithfully, that we keep the Lord's Day joyfully, that we perform deeds of mercy humbly, and that we are committed to Thy church on earth enthusiastically and with our all. Grant us this grace, in Jesus' name, Amen.

## THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

July 29, 2012 Jerusalem Filled with Boys and Girls Playing

No. 3630

Rev. Carl Haak

Dear radio friends,

Chief among the graces that are found in Jesus Christ is love for the church. When God saves us by Jesus Christ, He works in us at that same time devotion to the church. There are many examples of this in the Bible. The apostle Paul loved the church. He endured so much from the hands of those outside of the church and, sadly, very often from those who were within the church. He says in I Corinthians 4, for example, that he endured hunger and thirst; he had no certain dwelling place; he was persecuted; he was defamed; and he was made to be the filth and the offscouring of the world. Why? He answers: “For you, for the church, I endure these things.”

The Old Testament saints loved the church as it was represented in Jerusalem, the holy city of God. We read of that love, for instance, in Psalm 137: “If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; may my right hand forget her cunning if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.”

And what need have we for further example, if we look to Jesus Christ Himself, who loved the church? We read in Ephesians 5 that Christ loved the church—and He gave Himself for her.

Love for the church must also be seen in us. Love for the church will always be seen in self-sacrifice. In fact, it can come in no other way than in the way of self-emptying. We are, by nature, always concerned about ourselves, our own importance. But if we are to love the church and live in the body of Christ, that has to go. It has constantly to go. If we are to live in the church and love the church of Jesus Christ, we must be characterized by the grace of humility. The apostle Paul puts it this way in Philippians 2: “Let each esteem the other better than himself.”

That love for the church will be seen not only in humility, but in other things as well. It will be seen in involvement in, and willingness to use my gifts for the good of, the whole body of Christ. It will mean that I want my life to center in the church. It will mean that I will be concerned about healthy evangelism—a desire that others may be added to the church if God so will, and if not, that the seed of the truth may be planted for God to bear fruit in His good time and according to His good will. We will speak to our children of the privilege of belonging to the church. And we will speak well of the members of the church before our children.

Why? Why do we love the church? And why did this man Nehemiah (whom we have been following for the last few messages) devote himself to the church, to the cause of God on earth?

The answer is this: Because the church is the glory of God in the world. That was true for Jerusalem in Nehemiah's day. It represented God's word and promise in the world. For this reason Nehemiah gave his all for her well-being. He came to seek the well-being of God's people.

Today we are going to learn that Nehemiah labored mightily to see that Jerusalem would be reinhabited. Having completed the walls, having set things in order within Jerusalem, and having seen a great spiritual revival and a renewal of the covenant among the people of God, now Nehemiah sees to it that Jerusalem herself is filled.

This act had been foretold by Zechariah the prophet. Zechariah, who predated Nehemiah some fifty or sixty years, in the eighth chapter of his prophecy foretold of the day (v. 5) that the city of Jerusalem would be full of boys and girls playing in the streets thereof. In today's message we witness Nehemiah's great work given to us in Nehemiah 11-12:27, his work of seeing to it that Jerusalem was repopulated.

It was a major problem, of course, for Nehemiah to have God's people actually live in Jerusalem. Jerusalem had been laid waste by Nebuchadnezzar a hundred and fifty years before. Nebuchadnezzar's soldiers had done a thorough job. They had left ruinous heaps and piles of rubble. Jerusalem had been famous as a beautiful city (Psalm 48:2—Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is Mount Zion"). In the days of David and Solomon it stood out in all of its glory. But it had been thoroughly broken down because of sin. The walls were broken and the city was a place of rubble. Now, even though Nehemiah has rebuilt the walls and hung the gates and has sorted through much of the rubble, yet Jerusalem was a place that was poor, decayed, and dirty. It was extremely discouraging for the remnant who had returned, especially for those who remembered it in all of its glory. They looked on it with sorrow. They saw it so low. They saw it devastated. It was a picture of the church brought low under the chastening hand of God, suffering under the effects of apostasy and worldliness, under strife and division.

There were, especially, two reasons why it required a sacrificial love if Jerusalem was actually to be populated. First of all, from the earthly, physical point of view, it was very hard to make a living within the walls of Jerusalem. It would require financial sacrifice. Although it was generally a period of economic depression for the Jews, yet families living outside of the city had better possibilities to obtain the necessities of daily life. They could gather crops (barley, oats, grapes, and olives) and have a few cattle and sheep. But a very meager trade and economy existed within the walls of Jerusalem. And, added to that, there was the fact that some would not want actually to live there due to contentions, divisions among the inhabitants of Jerusalem itself.

The second reason was that, from a spiritual point of view, Jerusalem as a city was despised because it was the city of God. It was hated by the heathen. It was reproached because within it was the temple of the living God. The closer you allied yourself to it, the more you would feel the reproach of this world. For this reason many in the days of Nehemiah were reluctant actually to populate the city itself.

That can also be true today. The more you love the truth, and the closer you come to that truth, the more also you can experience the opposition that always comes against that truth, especially as we enter into the last days. The truth of Jesus Christ, of salvation by grace alone through Christ alone—more and more that will become despised because of the pride of men.

Now you can see how electrifying must have been Zechariah's prophecy long ago when he said that the streets of Jerusalem would be full of boys and girls playing. That is a beautiful way of expressing that the city would be filled with peace and joy and it would be populated. Boys and girls would be playing in the streets. It would actually be populated, and there would be a vibrant, wonderful life of the people of God within the walls of Jerusalem.

God is telling us this to represent the truth of the church, the truth that it is the will of God that believers populate the true church of Jesus Christ, join the true church of Jesus Christ, and be members of that true church wherever she is found, and do so in the way of sacrifice. The only way that we can be used in the building and the establishment of God's church is by a sacrificial love. We must remember that. We read in verses 1 and 2 of the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter that the rulers of the people dwelt in Jerusalem, and the rest of the people did not. That is, they were spread out away from the city. It was necessary, then, for the people again to populate this city through the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ. There was no other way. So to speak, the mortar holding the bricks of the church of Jesus Christ together is the self-denying love of God. Use any other mortar, and the wall of the church will fall apart. If you go into the church thinking, "My way, my honor, what do I get, my will," then you will witness the church fall down all around you.

That grace of Jesus Christ that is found in Jesus Christ is that we set aside ourselves and that we are consumed instead with the great glory and the great good of God's cause on earth and that we willingly seek to give ourselves to serve for that great end. If that is not true of us, then the true church will suffer grievously.

The church is the bride of Jesus Christ. Let the great glory of God and the cause that He has given to His church captivate our hearts. Let not Babylon, let not the wealth of this world, let not our own fields and our own acres and our own careers and our own ways and our own things so captivate our hearts that we say, "No, there's too much sacrifice to be part of that church, at least to be an enthusiastic member of that church. It takes too much of me." Let the knowledge of what God has done for His church, let the knowledge of what the church is—the pillar and the ground of the truth of God—let that knowledge now dwell in our hearts and let it crush all other impulses. Let us give ourselves enthusiastically to the church and let not petty issues arise to become the focus of the church, to divert the church from her one and central calling to be a reflection of the truth of God in this world.

We see the grace of God at work in the day of Nehemiah when the city is repopulated and when Nehemiah makes the efforts that he does to have the people return and actually live within the city.

There are a number of things that we can learn from this, even if we look at that passage from a rather superficial point of view.

First of all, we see that there was a wide range of people who had come back into Jerusalem, people with various gifts and abilities. There were, first of all, the gifts of leadership. That was very important. Nehemiah saw to it that in the people who came back, there was an abundance of true spiritual leadership. We read in verse 1 of chapter 11 that the rulers dwelt there. Then, after that, we read in verse 3 that there were the chief of the province that dwelt in Jerusalem; verse 9, the second ruler; verse 11, rulers of the house of the Lord; verse 14, the mighty. That tells us that the indispensable grace to be a ruler in the church is consuming love for the church. Life directed toward the church, willingness to be uprooted from your own life for the sake of the church—that is the indispensable grace for anyone who will serve in the church faithfully as an elder, pastor, deacon, or anyone who would seek to serve the church in some capacity. There must be the willingness to set aside one's own way for the life and well-being of the church.

Groom yourself, then, as a young man, for leadership. Groom yourself for leadership, if the Lord wills to place you in the church as an elder or a deacon or as a pastor. But how do you do that? By having a consuming love for God's church, a love that sets aside your own interests and makes your own needs at best secondary before the needs of the church.

We see also that there was not only the gift of leadership there, but there was also the gift of diversity of service. In verse 12 of chapter 11 we read of the brethren that did the work of the house; verse 16, others who had the oversight of the outward business of the house of the Lord; verse 19, porters who kept the gates; verse 22, singers who were over the business of the house of the Lord. The maintenance of God's house was a considerable work. There needed to be sacrifices, and wood, and animals, and clean-up, and candles, and watching over the various gates, all involving commitment and responsibility. There was a lot of work to be done. God's work was being undertaken by men and women who gave themselves freely to be used as the Lord had placed them in the church. They used their various gifts for the good of the church.

Then there was also the gift of covenant generations, that is, of the family and of the sons and grandsons remaining within the church. In verses 4 and 5 and many of the other verses we read that all of those who dwelt in Jerusalem were the sons of so-and-so. That is, families emphasized to their children that they must remain committed to the church of Jesus Christ, that there be boys and girls playing within the streets of Jerusalem—boys and girls within the church.

Those who were dwelling now within Jerusalem, who were heeding the call of God to come into the city and to live there, were aware of the holiness of the church. They knew that Jerusalem was the holy city. They knew that Jerusalem was holy because God put His name there and because God revealed Himself there and because God had fellowship with them there. Therefore, Jerusalem represented to the world what it meant to live with God. The church is a holy church—holy in Jesus Christ our Lord, redeemed in the blood of Jesus Christ, holy because of the purposes that God has for her. Therefore, we who live within the church must live in holiness, in all of our life, and with reverence and respect and care for God.

We read further that those who were within the church were those who were longing for the coming of Jesus Christ. There were those within Jerusalem who were longing for the coming,

the advent, of the Lord Jesus Christ. You see, those in the church are ever looking for the Lord of the church. And the Lord of the church is Jesus Christ.

Still more, those within the church were showing a deep appreciation for the priority of the proper worship of God. They wanted all things to be just so within Jerusalem, in order that Jerusalem might be a place of thanksgiving and of singing and of worship. They desired God to be worshiped by His people in the church.

What a beautiful picture we have, then, of the church of Jesus Christ being populated, of God calling repentant believers to enter into the church, to populate the church, God calling parents to bring up their children within the church. The will of God for us is a life within the walls of the church – a life that does not look first for our own opportunities in this world, but a life that is free in Christ to look for our life in the church, as faithful members of the church with our families.

I say again, this can only come with self-sacrificing love. This can come only at a cost. This can come only out of a way of struggle—the struggle of faith. This can come only when we are resolved, by the grace of God, to use our gifts, to use our talents, to use our all, for the church. We must say, “My life is the church, and the church is my life.” Do you know that type of sacrificial love? Are you aware of what the church is—God’s dwelling place, Christ’s bride? Are you committed to the church? Do you love the church?

Then we must have the right reason. We must have the same reason that dwelt within the heart of the people of God in Nehemiah’s day—the glory of God in His church. God is glorified in His church on earth. God’s honor, God’s name, God’s gospel, God’s truth, God’s purposes in the spreading of the word—all of these are tied up with the church of Jesus Christ on the earth. The church carries into the world, not first of all charity, not first of all political agendas, not pious influence, but God’s honor, God’s gospel, God’s purposes, God’s name, God’s glory.

Jerusalem was the typical dwelling of God. It was a type. It pointed to the true church of Jesus Christ established now by Christ in His Word. And for that church, men and women came. They entered into that church, into Jerusalem, even though it was going to cost dearly in terms of their own life and advancement. What a privilege to be a member of the church of Jesus Christ under the truth of God’s Word with faithful elders, faithful pastors and deacons. That church represents God’s honor, God’s gospel, God’s name, God’s purposes. That is why we love her and that is why it is a blessing to live our life within the church of Jesus Christ—such a blessing that swallows up everything else.

God’s fellowship, the fellowship of His people, is to be enjoyed within the church. Let me ask you a question. Is heaven important to you? Do you want to go to heaven? Why? You say, to be with God and to be with His people; to see Jesus; to glorify God. That is why I want to go to heaven—to be with Him and His people and Jesus. That is the same reason I want to be a member of the church of Jesus Christ right now, that church, faithful to His Word, zealous of His glory and honor. Why do we want to be members of that church? So that we can have fellowship with God and His people, see Jesus, and glorify God.

Let us then be encouraged by God's Word and let us press on in our calling as the church of Jesus Christ. Let us count this the highest privilege, to be a member of the church, and let us live sacrificially, in self-denying love, that we might hear the blessing of boys and girls playing, living, growing up, being nurtured in the church.

Let us pray.

Father, we thank and praise Thee for Thy Word today and pray that such a love for Thy church may dwell within our hearts, that we may not set our own way and our own prosperity and the things of this world before Thy kingdom, but that we may turn our backs upon them and devote *all* things in our lives to Thy church. In Jesus' name, Amen.