



Message Transcript

God-Centeredness

Jeff Schwarzentraub

Pastor Jeff:

Father in heaven, we give you all the glory, honor and praise for who you are. And Lord, we ask in these moments that we have together, that you would do a work among you, Lord, you would do a work among your people. Lord, we believe in you. And Lord, we are so thankful for your living and active Word because Lord, we as a people believe that every time your Word is faithfully and accurately proclaimed that you are speaking. So our prayer this morning is speak Lord, for we are listening to you. And so now for all those who have gathered here who desire to hear the Lord Jesus Christ speak directly to you, who will believe what He says and who will by faith put into practice what He shows you, will you agree with me very loudly this morning by saying the word, "Amen".

Amen. Faithful proclamation always results in a renewed focus on the Lord. When the Word of God is faithfully proclaimed, everything begins to go more towards Jesus. Everything begins to go towards our Trinity God. Whatever we're thinking about in the moment, when the Word is being proclaimed changes our focus and changes our perspective, and we begin to look in a new direction, we begin to look upward at all that God wants to accomplish and all that God wants to do. And as we've been studying in the Book of Nehemiah, as the wall is built, as the community comes together, as they deal with all the tensions inside and outside and they come together to worship the Lord, they call Ezra the scribe, the faithful priest to proclaim the Word.

And last week when we left off, they had heard the Word of the Lord. They had

renewed the Feast of the Tabernacles or the Feast of the Booths and they were talking about and experiencing during that week for that seven-day period, how faithful their God has been. And when the Word of God gets proclaimed, that's what happens. People respond to God because God is the one speaking when the Word is faithfully and accurately proclaimed. And this is such a needed corrective in our culture because so often we don't proclaim God, we don't proclaim His Word, we proclaim our ideas. And we live in a culture that is so consumed with self that we need to realign our attention and reorient our attention towards God.

We live in a self-centered world, don't we? We use words like this, self-reliant, self-esteem, self-confident, self-assured, I'm self-made, self-focused, self-aware, self-defense, self-determined, self-preservation. And that is not an exhaustive list. And if you want some others, you can go to the bookstore under self-help and you can learn even more about yourself because the whole world we live in is consumed with us in ourselves. So even when we come to a place like a church, we expect it to be about us.

We begin to think, "Am I going to like the songs? Am I going to like the preaching? Is this going to be relevant to me? How does this apply to my life?" That's how we think. And I want to talk today to you about is being God-centered. What does it look like to have a God-centeredness in your life? What does it look like to have a focus on the Lord that from the time you wake and throughout the day until you go to bed, that you're consumed with God? That's what we want to talk about. And make no mistake about it, that's exactly what this book, the Word of God is all about. From

creation to the end it's all about the excellencies of God. Before He even created the universe, before He even created us in His image, God is excellent and awesome, and at the end when He comes back, He's excellent and awesome.

And everything in between has been about how excellent and how awesome our God is. And yet even when we read the Word sometimes we're reading it to see how awesome we are and what can God do for us? And so today, I want to talk to you about how can we be God-centered? How can we become more God-centered? How can we become more God-centered as an individual? How can we become more God-centered as a church and as a people of God? And if you want to know how to do that, I want to invite you to open your Bibles up this morning to Nehemiah chapter nine, to Nehemiah chapter nine. And in Nehemiah chapter nine, we're going to hear about how we can develop God-centeredness in our life. How can we become more God-centered in who we are and in what we do?

And if you remember, as we finished up the Feast of the Booths, it was a festival they held on the seventh month from the 15th to the 22nd. So for those seven days, that's what they did. Then they took a day off on the 23rd, and here they are on the 24th. And here's what happens. Listen to the Word of the Lord. It says, "Now on the 24th day of this month, the sons of Israel assembled with fasting and sackcloth and with dirt upon them. The descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. While they stood in their place, they read from the Book of the Law of the Lord their God for a fourth of the day, and for another fourth, they confessed and worshiped the Lord

their God. Now on the Levites platform stood Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani and Chenani," and notice what they did, "they cried out with a loud voice to the Lord their God." We'll talk more about that later.

"Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah and Pethahiah said, 'Arise, bless the Lord your God, forever and ever. Oh, may your glorious name be blessed and exalted above all blessings and praise.'" And here in those first five verses, we learned the first way that we can become more God-centered. And we learned that God-centeredness results from praising God for His authoritative commands, praising God for His authoritative commands. You want to grow in God's centeredness, start praising God. Praising God for what? For who He is and the commands that He puts out there.

Notice what happens. It says on this 24th day, how do they gather? The sons of Israel assembled with fasting in sackcloth and with dirt upon them. You remember at the beginning of this festival, they were weeping, they were lamenting because when they heard the Word of the Lord, they learned all their sins. And yet the elders and the leaders got together and said, "No, no, no, no. This is a holy day. This is a feasting day. This week is to be reminded of how good God is. So eat and celebrate. We'll have plenty of time to mourn."

Now they've come back and they can't get away from the fact that for generations they haven't been walking in the fullness of God. And what's it causing them to do? It's causing them to come back with what? With fasting and with

confession of sin and even the garments that they're wearing, that sackcloth, that itchy garment that's totally uncomfortable and they put dust or dirt on their heads, symbolic of the fact that, "We're dependent and we're coming in humility. And Lord, we desperately need to hear from you because Lord, we've been the ones who have drifted away from everything that you've done." And so they come in humility. And when you truly hear the Word of the Lord and you truly hear His standards and you truly hear how great God is and the focus is on God, from time to time God is going to speak to your heart about you and how here's who He is and you're not living in alignment with Him.

If you go to a church that faithfully preaches the Word, I promise you, you will not walk out every week and pat yourself on the back and say, "I'm living it." You will hear things in His Word that show you you're off. You need a course correction. You're wayward or you've actually turned your entire back on Him. And here's the good news of the Word of God. When you hear that and you're convicted and you have contrition in your heart, that's a good thing because that realigns and refocuses your relationship with Christ.

Early on in my journey with Christ, I didn't know this. I was told to start reading my Bible after I got saved. And so I started reading my Bible after I got saved, but I would be so convicted as to what I was reading I didn't like reading the Bible anymore because I was wondering, "Am I really saved? Because I feel horrible every time I read the Bible because God's correcting everything in my life." And there'd be times I'd just shut it like, "I'm done with this book," because nobody was explaining to me that

that was God's goodness in my life and His grace in my life and that was going to be part of what reading the Bible looked like for the rest of my life.

I falsely believed when I went to seminary, I was just going to go learn all 66 books of the Bible so I could teach it. And from day one that I got to seminary, what I learned was God was just using another opportunity to show me about me and all the ways that He wanted to grow me. And nothing has changed. It's still the way that I read the Bible. I still haven't arrived yet. And so God is still chiseling off parts of my life and showing me things in my life that need to change.

So how is Israel responding when they hear God's Word, when they hear, "This is God's standard and it's always been my standard and this is who I am." How are they coming? They're not mad and they're not absent. You know what they are? They're present and they're humble and they're dependent and they're desperate. Fasting is not just setting aside a meal just because it's the right thing to do, "Okay, I'm not hearing God, I guess I'll fast and then I'll hear God." No. Fasting is, "I am so desperate for spiritual food I'm going to give up physical food because God, I need a word from you so desperately in this situation and I'm the one who's drifted and I'm the one who needs you. Lord, please, please, please speak to me." And that's how they postured themselves. And when you begin praising God for His Word, that's how He's going to lead you.

And here's how it works. Confession always comes with contrition. Notice they confess their sins. They confess their sins in verse two, "And the iniquities of their fathers." Let's talk about what it means to confess. Confess means that I'm agreeing

that I am sinful. Proverbs 28:13 says, "He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion." The confession of sin is important, and we learn that confession is very similar to repentance. It's a turning from that sin and turning to God. 2 Corinthians 7:10 says, "For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death." If you have worldly sorrow, like, "I got caught. I probably shouldn't be doing this. I bet God's upset with me. Oh shucks, it's okay, I'll get better". If that's your view, you'll never change. It leads to death.

But if your view is, "God's holy and I want to live like God and I want to be like God and I'm coming up short and God, I'm desperate for you, so I'm going to confess my sin to you." Confess means I'm going to say the same thing that you say it is not just a general, "I struggle, everybody struggles. I sin, everybody sins. I'm going to be specific and name exactly what the sin is according to the Word of God." So I've going to give you four truths if you're going to confess your sin, if you're going to be repentant.

Number one, it needs to be intentional. Confession doesn't automatically happen, "Well, God knows I feel bad. God knows, I'm sorry. I believe He died on the cross. He knows. He knows." No. There's a willingness to want to name the sin. It's intentional.

Number two, it's specific. You call the sin, sin the way that Jesus would call the sin. Sometimes we think like this, "Yeah, I struggle a little bit with some stuff. I got a bit

of an issue with that." What specifically do you have an issue with? What sin is it? What are you actually confessing? And we're very, very lame in the church of naming sin. We don't want to name it, but if you ask God, "God, what do you call that," and you're in the Word, He will show you what it is? He will tell you, "This is specifically what it is and it's offline with what I say it is. It's not just immorality. Name the specific immorality that you have." "Well, what is it?" "Well, I don't even know." How are you going to be asked to be forgiven from what you don't even know that you've done? You ever had kids where you ask your kids, "You need to say you're sorry." "I'm sorry." "What are you sorry for?" "I don't know. You just told me to say it." You ever had that before? That's what we're talking about here.

If you've done something wrong, name what you've done. When you confess it with your mouth, that's when we receive the fullness of Christ's grace. If we say we have no sins, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us, but if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Confession is important, okay? It needs to be something that's willful, intentional, specific. This one, ongoing, it needs to be ongoing. Why? "Well, I trusted Jesus. He forgave all my sin. You told me He forgave all." He does. But by show of hands, just help me out a little bit this morning, brothers and sisters, how many since trusting Christ have still sinned? See what I'm saying? That's why confession is ongoing, confession is ongoing, and here is the lie in the church. The more you grow in holiness, the less you're going to sin.

What I believe is in the last 35 years, I've grown more in holiness now than I ever

have before. And I'm more aware of sins in my life at a depth I didn't even know they existed. We don't rise above sin on this side of heaven. Certainly God can heal us and deliver us from certain sins. We can grow out of certain sins, but we don't grow out of a sin nature. It's still part of us. And yes, we are born again and yes, we are new. And yes, we are saints. And yes, God declares that we're holy, but that part of our sin nature is not delivered until we meet Jesus Christ, face to face. That's why you won't meet sinless people on this side of heaven ever.

So why do we confess? Because we're still sinners. And even though I'm a saint, and even though I'm called holy, and even though I'm called righteous, and even though I'm called good, my life sometimes and my attitudes, behaviors and belief does not line up with that. And so what do I do? I confess. I willingly confess. I'm specific about what I confess. It's ongoing about what I confess. And for new believers, let me tell you this, notice what they did. They not only confess their sins, they confess the iniquities of their fathers. What's that mean? It means in your family there are certain generational sins or proclivities or intentionalities in your family and from your family that cause you to sin in certain ways greater than other ways. And you need to renounce those things. Like for some of you, you grew up in an immoral home, for some of you grew up in a divorced home, for some of you grew up in an alcoholic home, for some of you grew up in a non-Christian home.

There's all sorts of ways. Some of you grew up in a cultish home. There were all sorts of things that were against who God was and here's the beauty of the gospel and the beauty of the cross... It can stop with you. "Well, everybody in my family, my

mom was divorced, my grandma was divorced, her grandma was divorced. Divorce is just part of our life." "It has been part of your life, but now you can reverse the curse because Christ is in you." "Everybody in our family, they're an alcoholic. They all drink themselves. They all drink." "No longer with you. You can break that curse." You can't break it, but with Christ in you, He can break it for you. Amen. And that's why we confess. Without confession what we are saying is, "I have the power without Christ to make change in my life".

Confession is, "I don't have the power to change, but Christ in me can change everything." And that's the beauty of the gospel. And it doesn't mean if you're a new believer, "I need to look back at my family history and I need to study all that." You don't, but you pray and you allow the Holy Spirit to potentially show you some areas that maybe you need to renounce. Maybe your family was into a cult like Freemasonry or something like this. Maybe there was immorality that went on. I promise you, any sin that pops up in your life is not unique to you and your family tree. It's been there for a long time from somebody else and you can renounce it. And when you get to a place where it's not just confession of sin, it comes with contrition. There's a big difference, isn't it?

Because I find that we're pretty cavalier in the church because we live our life for us and we're self-centered, not God-centered. So when it comes to our sin, like, "Yeah, I sinned and everybody sins and look at our church, everybody raised their hands so it's not a big deal. So I'll confess, yeah, I did this wrong. Yeah, I did this." That's not what it's talking about. But if you're God-centered and God has a standard,

it means, "I expect you to uphold the standard. It's disappointing to me when you don't, I created you to enjoy me. I created you and to enjoy my glory and you're not doing it." And when you hear the glory of God and what He wants you to be, it should break your heart that you're not experiencing it to the full. And so it comes with contrition.

Remember when David sinned with Bathsheba? Covered it up by murdering her husband, Uriah. Kept it secret, he's going to press it down. Nobody's going to find out. Here's what you can be sure of, your sin will find you out. God sends a prophet to him, calls him on his sin, and David begins to confess his sin, but he does it with contrition. He says in Psalm 32, "How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered? How blessed is the man to whom the Lord is not impute, iniquity and in whom spirit there is no deceit?" Here's what he said it was like when he didn't confess, "When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long, for day and night your hand was heavy upon me. My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer. I acknowledge my sin to you and my iniquity I did not hide. I said, 'I will confess my transgression to the Lord and you forgave the guilt of my sin.'"

There are too many Christians that are carrying around too much sin saying words like this, "I'll just take that one to my grave. Nobody ever needs to know about that." God already knows about it and the more you try to suppress it, the less freedom you're going to experience. So you may as well confess it to the Lord and the Lord may have you confess it to somebody else. Now, confession, the Bible says,

"Confess your sins one unto another that you may be healed." The reason the Bible tells us that is the Bible says, "Well, you're all sinners so you might as well confess it to each other, too, and you might as well pray for one another too," and that's what genuine accountability looks like. Accountability partners that don't work is when you flip a coin like, "Will you be my accountability partner? I'll be your accountability partner," and then all we do is get back together, "How much did you sin this week? Did you sin more or less than last week? How much did you sin? More or? Okay, good, let's go pray." That's not accountability.

Accountability is when you have a brother or sister in Christ and you say, "I want to be more like Christ and I want to be able to grow in a relationship with you where I can be completely authentic with you and you can be completely authentic with me and I want to challenge you and I want to help you grow and you want to challenge me and help me grow and we're willing to be vulnerable and accountable with one another so that we can experience more of Christ." That works. Why are we so afraid to confess our sins in church? The one place we know where everybody sitting next to us has something to confess.

Why? Because we have this false idea because we've turned church into religion and we've made it all about, "Well, you should know that by now. You should have known better by now. You're a Christian. How come you acted like that? How come you talk like that? How come you did this this week? How come you thought that?" Because you still have a sin nature in you. That's why, and that's why God invites you to confess. And if you're not confessing, what you're saying is, "Yeah, Jesus died on

the cross and I guess I needed some of that, but I'll work the other out myself." When you confess, you're saying, "God, I need you for everything. I can't even become the man or woman or boy or girl I need to be apart from your grace."

Do you praise God for His authoritative standards? Do you praise God for His authoritative commands? I mean, if we had time this morning, we could go through the 10 Commandments. You should have no other gods before me. You shall not make an idol or image to another God. You should not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Honor your father and mother. We could just stop there in the first five and spend all morning on one and realize we've all broken all of them. Should not murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness. Don't get in factions. Don't gossip about anybody, don't talk about anybody behind their back. Make sure every conversation you have, everybody could be there listening to it and that's fine. Just on that one alone. Don't covet. Don't look at... I mean just those commands alone we are going to realize we all come up woefully short.

And what's going on in the heart of the nation of Israel at this time, not only did it coming up woefully short like, "Aw shucks, we didn't get it," it's breaking them because they realize they're not experiencing the full power and purity of the Lord in their midst and they want it, and so they're confessing and they're fasting and they're praying and they're seeking, believing that God can change their circumstances. Amen.

You want to have more God centeredness in your life, praise God for his authoritative commands. If his Word says it, "Lord, I praise you for this. I praise you for this. Our culture doesn't, but I do. I praise you for every part of your Word. Our

culture doesn't celebrate that you created everything out of nothing, but I praise you for it. Our culture doesn't celebrate gender the way you designed it, but I praise you for it. Our culture doesn't celebrate marriage the way you designed it, but I praise you for it. Our culture doesn't celebrate children the way you do, but I praise you for it. Our culture doesn't celebrate church the way you celebrate it, but I praise you for it."

You see, when you start praising God for who he is and say, "God, align me with what you are wanting me to be aligned with," He changes things. Praise God for that.

Secondly, if you want to grow in God-centeredness, it results from honoring God for His consistent faithfulness, His consistent faithfulness. Our God is faithful. Our God is so faithful. Lamentations chapter three, after they're in a period of restoration and they're lamenting because they've done everything wrong in Lamentations three, he writes, "This I recall to mind, and therefore I have hope. The Lord's mercies are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness." Our God's faithful. Amen. He has a track record of perfect faithfulness and I just want to read this and I want to remind you of a couple of things.

Number one, we're in the Old Testament here where most people say, "Well, that's the Old Testament God, he's really mean, but the New Testament God's really, really nice," and those are people that have never read the Bible because God is just as gracious in the Old Testament as He is in the New and He is just as wrathful in the New as He is in the Old. But I want you to hear this and I want you to hear how many times you hear the Word you or your spoken. I believe I count more than about 25, but

notice what he says is they... We're talking about God's faithfulness, "Oh, may your glorious name be blessed and exalted above all blessing and praise." In other words, "God, we want to praise your name. We want to bless your name. We want to kneel before you and let you get all the honor." Why? Verse six, "You alone are the Lord. You have made the heavens, the heaven of heavens with all their hosts, the earth and all that is in it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to all of them, and the heavenly host bows down before you."

How did we get here? God. Who created everything? God. Who made you an image bearer? God. Who created the earth? God. Who created the seas? God. Who created the land? God. Who created the animals? God. Who created the universe. God. You God, Lord, I'm praising you for you because you are the one who's so faithful. Verse eight or verse seven, "You are the Lord God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham. You found his heart to be faithful before you and made a covenant with him to give him the land of the Canaanite, of the Hittite, of the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite to give it to his descendants and you have fulfilled your promise for you are righteous.

You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry by the Red Sea. Then you performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh against all his servants and against all the people of the land. For you knew that they acted arrogantly toward them and made a name for it yourself as it is to this day. You divided the sea before them, so they pass through in the midst of the sea on the dry ground and their pursuers, you

hurled into the depths like a stone of the raging sea. And with a pillar of cloud, you led them by day and with a pillar of fire by night to light for which the light for which way to go in which they were to go.

Then you came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven. You gave them the ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments. So you made known to them your holy Sabbath and laid down for them commandments, statutes, and laws through your servant Moses. You provided bread from heaven for them, for their hunger. You brought forth water from a rock for their thirst and you told them to enter in order to possess the land which you swore to give them."

Who's the subject of this text? You. God. He is. Nobody in the Bible is faithful other than God. That's the whole point. He's the one who's faithful. When it comes to the creation story, it's all about Him. When it comes to the creation of the nation of Israel and all the nations of the world, it's all about Him. When it comes to deliverance of his people, it's all about Him. When it comes to the promised land, it's all about Him. When it comes to salvation, it's all about Him. And why do we need to hear this? Because how quickly we forget it's all about Him. Right?

Has God ever brought you through a trial of some sort, a health trial, a financial trial, relational, interpersonal, sin trial only to forget it was Him that did it, not you? The Bible is not a book about man's faithfulness to God, but rather it's God's faithfulness to man. Everything in this book is about God and His glory. There are people that think this, "I'll be for God as long as He's for me. I'll focus on Him because I just realized He's all focused on me." He's not all focused on you. Do you know what He's focused

on first and foremost? His glory. Do you know who He thinks about most all the time? Himself. Do you know why? Because He's all that. That's who God focuses on. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit, what are they focusing on? Each other and their glory. That's first and foremost. And the reason we have such a small view of God is we think that God's up in heaven just looking at us.

Now, the Bible makes clear that His thoughts for you outnumber the grains of sand. The Bible makes clear if God is for you, who can be against you, the Bible makes clear that He's called you His friend. The Bible makes clear that God wants to be in relationship with you, but understand this before the world or you or me or anybody existed, God was still all that without any of us. He's so glorious that His goal is not to get you to think He's thinking about you. His goal is to get you to think about focusing on Him because if you could focus on Him, it will change everything about you.

Let me explain it a different way. Some of you come in here with problems today. Most of you come in here with problems today, and if you don't keep breathing you'll have them. And what we think is, "I want the pastor to preach to my problem." But here's what God wants you to do. He wants you to look to Him because regardless of what problem you're dealing with and regardless of what season you're in, if you look to Him and all of His glory and how majestic and awesome and incredible He is, even if your circumstance doesn't change now or in the future, your view of your circumstance right now presently can change instantaneously. And you can have joy in a moment because God is still on His throne and God is still glorious and God is all that and He's

allowing you to see how incredibly awesome He is.

We have a hard time with this. I mean some of you're nodding, but you're trying to process it a little bit. I get it. But the gospel is about Him. Even the gospel is about Him. Most of us have a wrong view of the gospel. We have a view that, "Well, God was coming to look for me and I was coming to look for Him and we met in the middle and it's this beautiful relationship." That's not the gospel, y'all. The gospel is this, because of your sin, you were spiritually dead. Dead people don't go looking for a relationship. You're blind. You don't realize that you're under the wrath of God and there's nothing that you can do about it. And God in His mercy came looking for you. So here's the beauty of the gospel. The beauty of the gospel is He designed it, He initiated it, He acts on it, He selects, He saves, He sanctifies, He glorifies, and you had nothing to do with it. Praise God. Amen. God does it all.

Let me tell you something, Praise God that He used vessels in your life to preach or share the gospel with you or a faithful mom or a faithful dad or a faithful teacher or a faithful coach or a faithful employee or a faithful neighbor, praise God. But when you get to heaven, I promise you, you're not going to be looking for faithful people. You're going to be looking to the faithful God who saved you. It's not about us. The Bible is not about us. The Bible is not stories about faithful people. The Bible is a story about a faithful God. That's what you need to understand. Can I give you some examples please? Three of you want to hear them, okay, I'll give you some.

The story of Noah is not about a story about a faithful preacher. That's not the story. He was a preacher of righteousness, for sure. You know what that story is

about? That story is about a faithful God who used an unfaithful man who he could have preached for 120 years because God is so faithful and so merciful He wanted the whole world to turn to Him. And even though God was only able to save a remnant of eight, it showed His faithfulness to that and his faithfulness to His name that He sent His wrath on the earth and flooded the entire earth. Why? Because God is so faithful to His Word. That's why the story is so good. "Well, I thought Noah was a good guy." "Well, have you read the Bible?" I mean after Noah's great 120 years preaching, he spent a year on the ark, comes out and gets drunk and lays around naked. There's nothing about Noah that when you get to heaven, "Oh no, I can't wait to meet you." I want to meet the God behind Noah.

Or the story of Moses, it's not about a faithful leader, it's about a faithful God who used a murderer, who called him, who didn't want to go do what God wanted him to do. And God is the one who redirected his thoughts and his actions in his life. God's the one who brought the plagues. God's the one who spoke to him. God's the one who delivered Israel. God's the one who parted the sea. God's the one who destroyed the nation, the army of Egypt. God's the one that had him rejoice on the sea. God's the one that provided water when they didn't have it. God's the one that provided food. God's the one that provided his law. God's the one that led them all the way to the Promised Land because the story is about our faithful God. It's not about faithful men. Amen.

Or how about this one, the story of David. Don't you want to become more like David? I don't. He's an adulterer and a murderer. I don't want to be anything like him.

Story's not about David being faithful against Goliath. The story is about a faithful God that can choose a nobody out of nowhere that's bringing bread and cheese to the front line of an army and say, "If I can find somebody that actually believes my Word, I can use them and I can use the littlest one that can't even fit into armor and I can use them with a slingshot and five stones and they'll only need one because I'm God. And if I get this little one to go at my enemy in the name of the Lord, I'll do all the work and I can destroy the enemy because I'm God and I'm awesome and I'm faithful. So look to me, don't look to David." Do you see this?

It's through out the whole Bible. I mean the prophets in the Old Testament are not stories about faithful proclaimers, but about a faithful God that used unfaithful proclaimers. I mean, remember the story of Jonah? God's like, "Jonah, I'm going to use you for the biggest revival in Old Testament history." And Jonah's like, "You picked the wrong guy." God said, "You're going to Nineveh." Jonah said, "I'm going to Tarshish." God said, "You ain't going to make it. I'm sending a flood. I'm sending a storm. I'm sending a fish. They're going to throw you overboard. You're going to stay in the belly of that fish for three days until you're humble enough to repent. Then I'm going to burp you out. You're going to Nineveh and when you preach, I'm going to save 120,000 Ninevites and when we're done, you're still going to be mad that I got all the glory because the Bible's not about you, it's about me and how awesome that I am." Amen.

What about all the New Testament Apostles? "I can't wait to meet Paul. Can't

wait to meet Peter." "Yeah, you can. They're just ordinary guys." It's not about faithful missionaries in the first century. It's about a faithful God who could use people that had gone against Him. There's nothing redeeming about Paul until the Holy Spirit gets a hold of his life. There's nothing redeeming about Peter until the Holy Spirit gets a hold of his life. It's not about faithful men and faithful women that went out proclaiming. It's about the faithful God that indwelt those men and women that were broken just like me and you that did faithful things about himself. The return of Jesus Christ is not about a faithful church getting it together so that Jesus can come back. It's in spite of that, that God can work through those who are broken and use His church to usher in His kingdom.

And the story about Jesus is not about a faithful genealogy and a faithful mom and dad, although Joseph was a righteous man and so was Mary. It's about a faithful God who is willing to leave His glory as the second person of the Trinity and humble himself and come to earth as the God man for all eternity and fulfill the law and establish righteousness and justice on the earth and to die in our place for all our sins. Not because man is faithful, but because man rejected every part of Him and He's still faithful and He died and rose from the dead. That's what the Bible's all about. Quit trying to become like biblical people. You're already like them.

God wants you to become more like Christ. He wants you to honor Him. He wants you to look to Him. He wants you to quit looking to other examples. It's good that there's people in the church that are a little ahead of you. Follow their example as they follow Christ because you want to be like Christ. You don't want to be like them.

Honor God for His consistent faithfulness. He's so faithful. Now, we would think that because God is so faithful and He's so faithful, we'll just follow Him. We read through the Old Testament and sometimes people ask questions like this, "What was wrong with Israel? God was so faithful to them time after time after time, and they never did the right thing. What is wrong with people like that?" The same thing that's wrong with you, we're just like them. Our God is so faithful to us. Our God is so loving to us. Our God is so kind to us.

Let me give you a third way that you can grow in God-centeredness. Once you spent time praising God and honoring God, spend time doing this. Spend time thanking God for His extraordinary mercy, His extraordinary mercy. Now before we get into this, understand this, grace is giving you what you don't deserve. I mean God gives us grace. He lavishes us with grace all the time. We don't deserve it. We get it. Mercy is when God doesn't give you what you do deserve. You deserve to be punished, but I'm not going to punish you. You deserve death. I'm not going to kill you. I'm going to give you mercy. Now listen to this. We'll just read through this and see how merciful and gracious our God is because not only does He have a track record of faithfulness, He's got a track record of extraordinary over, above and beyond mercy.

Because after God did all these things for the nation, notice what happens in verse 16, "But they, our fathers, acted arrogantly. They're prideful. They became stubborn and would not listen to your commandments. They refused to listen and did not remember your wondrous deeds which you performed among them. So they became stubborn and appointed a leader to return to slavery in Egypt." Check it out,

400 years they were crying out to be freed from slavery. God delivers them miraculously. Three days after they're on the other side of the bank of the river, after they've watched the entire Egyptian army get smoked, what do they do? "Well, we want to go back. It was way better in Egypt." Even when they get to the Promised Land where they're ready to cross, they send 12 spies in and 10 come back, they're like, "We can't do it." "Yeah, you can't. But the God in you could have, had you been obedient to Him." I mean they always wanted to go back.

Why is it when we get saved we always want to go back? Because you're just like them. But notice what it says, "But God, you are a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in loving kindness and you did not forsake them." This is Old Testament God, who by the way is the same God of the New Testament because there's only one God. God's always been merciful and God's always been gracious and don't believe the lie when people say, "Oh, the God of the Old Testament is just mean." He's gracious. He's loved these people for generations and they still don't want anything to do with Him. And after that, he showed grace to them.

Notice what happened then, "Even when they made for themselves a calf of molten metal and said, 'This is your God who brought you out of Egypt,' and committed great blasphemies, you and your great compassion did not forsake them in the wilderness. The pillar of cloud did not leave them by day to guide their way nor the pillar of fire by night to light for them the way in which they were to go. You gave them your good Spirit to instruct them. Your manna did not withhold from their mouth and

you gave them water for their thirst. Indeed, 40 years you provided for them in the wilderness and they were not in want. Their clothes did not wear out, nor did their feet swell." I mean, do you see what's going on here? God delivers them and what do they do?

"All right, all right. All right. Moses is gone. We'll build a calf out of golden jewelry and we'll say, 'This is your God. He's the one that delivered you. Let's have a party and celebrate that golden calf.'" Say, "Well, why would people do that?" Because you do the same thing. You make idols. You care more about your pension plan. You care more about your money. You care more about your car. You care more about your house. You care more about your vacation. You care more about your marriage. You care more about your relationships. You care more about your life. You care more about your happiness. You care more about the vacation that you're taking. You care more about what you get to do today than you ever think about God. They were the same way.

And yet what does God do? What does God do? Does God kill him? No, "I'll still give you the pillar of cloud by day. I'll still give you the pillar of fire by night. Oh, by the way, you need water? I'll provide all that. You need food? You got it. On me. Free of charge. What else do you need? Oh, you need clothing that doesn't wear out? I got you. You need feet so they don't swell? You need shoes? I got you. Nothing's going to wear out for 40 years because I am an awesome God. And even when you treat me bad, I will show you mercy and compassion."

Legalists, hear me on this. Yes, God has a standard. Yes, God wants us to grow in holiness. Yes, God wants us to be conformed to the image of Christ. Here's the reality. None of you will be completely on this side of heaven so quit making a standard for other people they can never attain. Here's what you need to show people. You're going after it. You're never going to attain it until you meet Jesus face to face. But here's the truth, where you come up short, there's mercy and there's grace. When you come up short, by the way, even when you're sitting here with your back turned in your spirit and you're totally rebellious, His mercy and grace is still abundant for you.

The greater your sin, the greater His grace. Does that mean we should go on sinning so that we experience more of his grace? Paul says, "May it never be. You got it all wrong." But the truth is no matter how grievous you sin, God's grace is greater. You need to hear that today. That may have been the only reason you came to church is to hear that because so many people sit in church and be like, "Not anymore. I should have known better. I could have done better." And the lie of the enemy gets louder and louder, and here's what God wants you to know, "I saw you came up short too, but my mercy and grace is great enough if you'll just come back, return to me." Isn't that good news? And that's what we see here. That's what we see God doing to Israel.

We see His compassion, His mercy, His grace. He gives him everything. Verse 22, "You gave them the kingdoms and peoples and allotted them to them as a boundary. You took possession of the land of Sihon, king of Heshbon and the land of Og, king of Bashan. You made their sons numerous as the stars of heaven, and you

brought them into the land which you told their fathers to enter and possess." What did God say? "I'm going to drive out all your enemies for you. I will give you the land I promised you. You know why? Because I'm faithful to my Word and I'm God. And even though you're not faithful, I'll still do what I said I'm going to do." That's good news. "And I told you I was going to give you descendants as many as the sands on the shore or the stars in the sky.

I'm doing that. My command was to be fruitful and multiply. I'm going to make sure that you have babies."

"So their sons entered and possessed the land and you subdued before them, the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and you gave them into their hand with their kings and all the peoples of the land to do with them as you desired. They captured fortified cities and a fertile land. They took possession of a house of houses full of every good thing, hewn cisterns, which means they already had a water system, vineyards, olive groves, fruit, trees, in abundance." So they ate, were filled and grew fat, one of my favorite scriptures in the Bible. "And reveled in your great goodness." What we saying? "I gave you everything and you didn't deserve it. You didn't earn it. You did everything wrong. But guess what? I'm faithful.

And so part of who I am is merciful and gracious. So even though you did all the wrong, I'm still doing everything right." That's our God. And you would think by now, "Okay, we get it. We get it." But notice verse 26, "But they became disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their backs and killed your prophets who

had admonished them so that they might return to you and they committed great blasphemy." So even when God said, "No, no, no, you're missing it. I'll send you a prophet. I'll send somebody that heralds my Word," you got mad that somebody was telling you who God was and so you got rid of them. But did God stop? No, he didn't stop. "Therefore, you delivered them into the hand of their oppressors who oppressed them." Why? Because God's faithful in His discipline, isn't He?

"This is what you want? You want to do it your way, okay, go do it your way. They'll be disciplined." But notice what happened then, "But when they cried to you in the time of their distress, you heard from heaven and according to your great compassion, you gave them deliverers who delivered them from the hand of their oppressors." "Lord, we are here. I'm in a bad space." Anybody here ever prayed that prayer, "Lord, if you just get me through this, I promise from now on I will never..." And you make a promise. Anybody ever prayed a prayer like that?

You guys aren't going to be honest with me today. Anybody ever pray a prayer like that? Thank you for more prayer. Everybody who's a Christian's prayed a prayer like that. "Lord, you get me through this test, I promise from now on... Lord, you get me out of this relationship, I promise from now on... Lord, get me through this night of hungoverness, I promise from now on..." Whatever it is that you prayed and your commitment doesn't last very long, does it? And that's what was going on here. That's what was taking place here. But notice this, when they cried out to the Lord from a place of desperation, He heard them and He's like, "Okay, I'll send you deliverers even though you've done everything wrong, I'm still going to be with you because I still love

you." And so they would have a period of rest.

But notice verse 28, "But as soon as they had rest, they did evil again before you. Therefore, you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies again so that they ruled over them. But notice this, when they cried again to you, you heard from heaven and many times you rescued them according to your compassion." How many times can people sin and still call out to God and God will be there? As many times as you sin, as long as you're still alive. That's how gracious our God is. And you say, "Well, that's scandalous because I come to church every week and I'm trying to do it right. Why are they getting all the breaks?" Because God is so merciful and good, and they're not getting a break. They're not experiencing the freedom and fullness of Christ, and yet God still is begging and pleading with you, 'Come back to me.'"

That's who our God is. Not just our New Testament God, not just our Old Testament God, but God. Amen.

"And they cried to you again. You heard from heaven and many times you rescued them and you admonished them in order to turn them back to your law. Yet they acted arrogantly and did not listen to your commandments, but sinned against your ordinances by which if a man observes them, he shall live, and they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffen their neck and would not listen." Every single time God shows mercy and grace and every single time He's showing them how gracious He is, and every single time He's like, "We're right now, let's do this," they turn their back on Him.

Verse 30, "However you bore with them for many years and admonished them by your Spirit through your prophets, yet they would not give ear. Therefore, you gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. Nevertheless, in your great compassion, you did not make an end of them or forsake them. Why? For you are a gracious and compassionate God." So this is a long section of scripture. Yeah, because Israel has a really long history of being completely rebellious every time God's trying to show them something good. And that's good news for every single one of us here, you have an extremely long track record of not doing everything God wants you to do too. And he doesn't get rid of you. He didn't smote Israel. He didn't kill Israel. He's still faithful to Israel because He's always faithful to His Word. Isn't that good news this morning? It means no matter how far you've gone, He's still with you. He still loves you. He hasn't changed who He is and oh, how we need to hear that in the church.

We read Psalms like Psalm 103, "Bless the Lord, oh my soul and all that is within me. Bless his holy name, and bless him." Thank him. When was the last time you thanked God? I mean, we're so selfish. We don't thank God for the little things. Do you have a mother? Do you have a father? Do you have siblings? Do you have a school? You have coaches? Do you have intellect, friendships, joys, fun, talents, abilities, a spouse, children, employment, vacations, income, resources? I mean anything you have, every good and perfect gift comes from God. Do you thank Him for it or do you expect it?

And this is what we need. Anything you have is a result of God's goodness in

your life. That's why 1 Thessalonians 5:18 says, "In everything, give thanks for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." If you can breathe, that's God's grace in your life, you can see that's God's grace. If you can hear, it's God's grace. If you could walk in here today, that's God's grace, everything in your life is the grace of God.

Remember the story Jesus told in Luke chapter 18 of the two people that went up to pray, one a Pharisee, one a tax collector. One person attended Brave. He said, "God, I thank you that I'm not like all the other church people out there. I go to a real church like Brave, and I tithe and I'm in a cadre and I share the gospel and I'm out with people and I'm doing everything you want. I pursue my spouse and I love my kids, and I am doing it all your way. And Lord, I'm a good one and you're lucky to have me on your team."

But then there was a sinner that stood off in the distance and just beat his chest. And he said, "Lord, I'm so unworthy. I'm just the sinner. Can't even come into your presence." And what did Jesus say? "I tell you the truth. That sinner went home justified before the Lord." What's it mean? It means as you grow in holiness, you're still the same dependent upon the Lord. You're not better than anybody else. Don't ever forget that. If you've grown in grace, it's God's goodness in your life, you're not better than anybody else. And your holiness should be attractive and invitational to those who aren't walking in the fullness of it because they want to grow in Christ like you. It should never be a put down. And sometimes I watch people in Christian circles that grow in holiness, and then they turn around and be like, "I remember when I used to be like you

and play cards and get drunk and do this and do that, and oh, glad I'm not..."

That's not holiness. Because I find that the closer I get to the holiness of God and the more I grow in it, the more I see how thoroughly depraved I am on the inside and all that Jesus Christ saved me from. And yes, I'm a new creation, and yes, I am redeemed, and yes, I know I'm in God's hand, but as I continue to grow, I agree with the Apostle Paul, here's a statement, a trustworthy statement that deserves your full respect, "That Christ came into the world and died for sinners of whom I'm the worst." I don't think Paul's like, "Oh, I'm the worst." I don't think he's making platitudes. I think he's the most familiar with himself. And if you grow in holiness, you'll be the most familiar with you. That's why I'm never bothered or my mouth doesn't drop if somebody tells me their sin, I'm like, "Dude, you don't even know me. I'm way worse than that."

Thank God for His extraordinary mercy in your life. Cry out to the Lord. We don't have time this morning, but I encourage you to go back this week and read Psalm 142. It's seven verses, seven verses. It highlights everything I'm talking about. Psalm 142, crying out to the Lord. You can't do it in religious circles because people will think you're weird. You're supposed to be proper. We're in church. Don't cry out to the Lord. But Christians, you need to cry out. I read a book called *The Power of Crying Out* a number of years ago, and I don't recommend it as a formula. I don't think there's a formula to get God's attention, but I recommend it as a way to position yourself before the Lord. Because if you're really going through it, you're going to call out to the Lord.

If you're really in a place at work, you don't know what to do. If you're really at a place in your marriage, you don't know what to do or with your kids you don't know

what to do, or your job, you don't know what to do or your health, you start calling out. Sometimes you need to go out on a hike so you're by yourself or get alone in your house. So you're by yourself and really, really cry out like, "Lord, I can't do this by myself and I don't even know what you're doing and I'm stuck here. And if you don't show up, this is horrible. Lord, help!" That's crying out. Now if we do that in church, "That person's really weird. They're really dependent, right?" But that's when you see God move.

I mean, think about all the times you walk through the Bible and they cried out because it was a ghost. They thought Jesus walking on water was... I mean, real people cry out about real things. Religious people don't. They go through crisis, "I should probably pray about that. Lord, if you want to get me out of this crisis, get me out." But they're saying, "I'm going to work on it all myself," and it does not work. God doesn't show up that way. Cry out to the Lord. Don't be afraid to do that. God knows who you are. He knows where you're doing. He knows where you've been. Thank Him for His extraordinary mercy.

Now, yesterday we were cleaning up my garage, my son and I, and if you want to come help, you're welcome. And one of the things that he was going through one of my boxes, and he discovered these four journals from about 25 or 30 years ago, and all I heard was, "Dad, I can't wait to go through this and learn who you really are." And I'm like, "Well, I can wait. So give those to me." And I started reading through some of them from 1996 and from 2000 and from 2002. And I was cringing as I was reading it, because I see how far the Lord has brought me. And I'm looking at what I'm writing,

I'm like, "You're such an idiot. So son, you can read them when I'm dead."

But one truth about that is, as I was thinking about that is what I'm journaling now is probably how I feel about myself 15 years from now. And isn't it true how quickly we forget where God's brought us from and who we were and what He's redeeming and how He's growing and all those different things? Just thank Him for how He's grown you. Because if you've been a Christian now for about five days, you're different than you were five days ago. You're different than you were a year ago. You're different than you were a decade ago. Just thank Him for the incremental growth that He's given in your life and praise Him for that.

And let me give you a final one. Once you thank God, you've praised God, you've honored God, then here's what I want you to do. If you're going to be God-centered, you need to be loving God for His righteous discipline in your life, loving God for His righteous discipline. Notice what happens in verse 32 and following. It says, "Now, therefore our God, the great and mighty, the awesome God who keeps covenant and loving kindness," that means His love never fails and He's always true to what He promises. "Do not let all the hardships seem insignificant before you, which has come upon us, our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and all your people from the days of the kings of Assyria to this day, however you are just in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully, but we have acted wickedly." What is he saying? "Lord, pay attention to where we are right now. It's a hard time. I mean, everything in our nation is difficult right now."

It's hard. I mean, see what's going on here. But we want to tell you, we understand why it's hard, because you are gracious and good, and we're the ones that have acted wickedly. Our nation's in shambles because of us. Our lives are in shambles because of us. You didn't do anything wrong. God, we want you to know that the discipline you gave us taking us to Assyria, we deserve that. You told us it was coming, it was on us, but it's not insignificant. It's really, really hard being here right now. Lord, pay attention. For our kings, our leaders, our priests and our fathers have not kept your law or paid attention to your commandments and your admonitions with which you have admonished them, but they in their own kingdom with your great goodness, which you gave them with the broad and rich land which you had set before them, did not serve you or turn from their evil deeds.

You did everything right Lord, and they turned away from you. Behold, we are slaves today. And as to this land which you gave to our fathers to eat of its fruit and its bounty. Behold we are slaves in it. Its abundant produce it's for the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our cattle as they please so we are in great distress." What's he saying? That, "Lord, the lands you gave us and the things you gave us and all the good things you gave us, they're owned by other people now. And we're not complaining. We realize it was on us. We weren't living for you. But pay attention, Lord, because we don't want to stay slaves anymore. We want to live free. We want to change. That's why we posture ourselves in fasting and sackcloth and dirt and ash.

And now because of all this, we are making an agreement in writing. And on the

sealed document are the names of our leaders, our Levites and our priests." And in chapter 10, we'll talk about next week, Lord willing, all of them signed this covenant. But here's the problem with this covenant that they're going to sign. It doesn't change two things. It still leaves two questions in mind. How can God restore the glory that they robbed? How does that covenant do anything? It's just commitment on a piece of paper. How can His image bearers then walk in the truth? Because they can't. They've already demonstrated they can't.

What happens? I mean, just because you write down, "God from now on, I promise I will..." I mean, how long is that going to last really? God doesn't need your commitment, but I got good news. The story doesn't end here. The story continues until God Himself comes. The second person of the Trinity who comes in incarnate flesh, Jesus Christ, the righteous one, and answers those two questions. How can God restore His glory that was robbed? By His own Son coming and taking the punishment of the wrath of God on the cross and dying for all the sin of the world to restore glory back to the Father.

And how can His image bearers walk in the truth? Through everyone who would repent and believe that He's the Christ, He will deposit his Holy Spirit in their life so that he can walk, she can walk in the fullness of who God wants them to be. It's the new covenant promised in Ezekiel 36 that God will give us a new heart and a new spirit so that we could walk with him. The cool thing is you don't have to commit to God to become what He wants you to become. It's God's covenant that was sealed in Jesus

Christ' shed blood on Calvary that makes you everything God wants you to be.

Do you love him for His discipline in your life? I mean, sometimes when we go through hard times, sometimes we go through hard times. It's not God being mean to us. It's you chose and you did something that went against God and now you're dealing with the consequences. You choose to sin, you choose to suffer. You just don't get to choose the consequences. You jump off a building, gravity will take over. You can't choose the consequences, but gravity will have its way. You sin and it doesn't go well. But here's the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's not about you hearing a message like this and saying, "Oh, I need to be God-centered, and here's five ways, God, this week, I promise you I'm going to be more God-centered this week." You won't even make it to your car in the parking lot.

You need the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ to say, "Lord, you've convicted me of sin, righteousness, and judgment. Lord, I am not living the way you want me to live in this area of my life. And I see it and I want to change, but I need your help to change it. God, I want to give you more glory, but I know that I'm just going to give you lip service. Lord, you change me." When we take this supper together, we're reminded of the fact that this is central to how God changes everything. You don't change for God. You position yourself rightly before God so that what? So that He can change you. Amen. And that's how we become more God-centered, praise God from whom all blessings flow. Amen. Praise God.

As you hear this song sung over you today, you can prepare your heart for communion any way you want. Kneeling, standing, sitting, just getting your heart right.

Sometimes in church we sing testimonial songs. The first one's a testimony about what the blood of Jesus does for us. Sometimes we sing songs just about God's attribute. The final song we're going to close with about it being holy forever is all about Him. Both are important. So as you prepare your heart for this supper, I encourage you to prepare your heart with contrition and be ready to take it together, knowing God will meet you right where you are at. Amen. Would you pray with me?

Father in heaven meet us here now in a special way. Lord, we've gone a little long today, but I'm cool with that because God, you're worth going long for. God, just move mightily in our hearts. Show us the nature of who we are, that you love us unconditionally, in spite of the ways we rebelled against you. And Lord, remind us that through the blood of Jesus today, that we get to start afresh with you. We give you all the glory, we give you all the honor, and we give you all the praise. And as we prepare our hearts for you, and get ready to take these elements together after the singing of the song, it's in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.