"Obedience Through Prayer"

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[0:00] Let me invite you to open your Bible with me to Nehemiah chapter 9.

! They feel broken.
They feel contrite over their sin and the sins of their forefathers. But in chapter 8, they are told and discover as the law is read to them that the time of year they are in is not a season for mourning. It's a season for joy. It's a season for celebration. And so, in response to nothing more than the revealed Word of God, they are told not merely to change their action, but to actually change their attitude.
That their heart and their emotion is to reflect obedience to the Word. It reminds us of the psalmist who said, Why so downcast, O my soul?
[1:22] Put your hope in God. Let everything about who you are be focused on the Lord. So much so, that even in their contrition over their sin, they respond with obedience to what the Word has said in the time of celebration.

When you come to chapter 9, it's the outflow and the overflow of chapter 8. And what we read here is going to be fascinating.
In chapter 7, we saw the recounting of the names of people who had returned. Chapter 8, the law of the Lord is read.
But we're told some specific things about the dates. It would be tempting as we read through this to think that the dates are nothing more than maybe a time stamp to just orient us to the season of the year it is.
But it's actually more than that. And the dates we are given are very specific. We're told on the first day of the seventh month.
[2:30] Well, that's the Feast of Trumpets. That's the time of celebration. We're told about the tenth day of the seventh month, which is the Day of Atonement. We're told about the fifteenth day of the seventh month.

And on day 15 to day 22 is when they would celebrate the Feast of Booths. And on the eighth day of the Feast of Booths, the 23rd day of the month, that's a day of holy convocation.
When you come to Nehemiah 9, it's the 24th day of the seventh month. You see that in verse 1. Now on the 24th day of this month, the people of Israel were assembled.
If we can pause just a moment to put the dates in our mind, what that tells us is that at the time they were gathered, at the time they were hearing the law read, at the time they were responding in their weeping, rightly so over their sin and the sins of their forefathers, they are told and reminded, this time of year is a time of celebration.
So they do that. They celebrate the faithfulness of God, celebrate the deliverance that God gave the people. And after doing that and celebrating the Day of Atonement, they then celebrate the Feast of Booths, that week-long time where they would make their temporary dwellings to remind themselves of how their forefathers did it.
[4:00] After the eighth day of that, on the eighth day they have this day of consecration, and now it's day 24. So just think with me about this for a minute.

When they heard the law read, they began to grieve over their sin. But we're told, this is not the season in God's Word for grieving, it's a time for rejoicing.
They did that. They've now completed what the law told them they were to do in a time of celebration. celebration. Now on the 24th day, we're going to find out where their heart really is.
And the first thing I want you to notice here in chapter 9, verses 1 to 4, is that we see a reverence for God's Word. This is quite interesting. Verse 1, Now on the 24th day of this month, the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth and with earth on their heads.

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What's going on? They're returning to their conviction and their brokenness over their sin that started on the day that the Word was first read to them.
[5:29] What we see here is the response that God's people should have. That we are to do what the Word calls us to do, and there's always this back and forth between being broken over our sin and celebrating the forgiveness and the mercy of God.

It's very similar to what we learned today as we studied about the Lord's Supper. There is a brokenness over our sin as we come to the Lord's table that's appropriate.
But it would be inappropriate if we left the Lord's table still feeling the weight of our sin as if it were not forgiven. There is this juxtaposition in the believer's life where we are to be taken low over our sin and yet lifted high by God's grace as we enjoy the freedom He's given us.
And in Nehemiah 9, the people had their hearts broken, but they were told it's a time to celebrate, and they did. Now on the 24th day, it's time to go back and deal with their own sinfulness.
This is their reverence that you see being played out here. It's been 24 days since they first fell under conviction of the reading of the law. It's two days after the completion of the Feast of Tabernacles, and now they've got to continue to deal with their sinfulness.
[6:57] Verse 2, the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. They stood up in their place and read from the book of the law of the Lord their God for a quarter of the day.

You notice how much of their worship and their response is in response to the reading of the Word. That's what we saw a couple of weeks ago. It was just the reading of the Word that broke their heart.
And now as they continue to love the Lord and His Word, they just fill their day with the reading of God's Word.
This is long, uninterrupted seasons of just yielding to the Word. They read from the book of the law of the Lord their God for a quarter of the day.
For another quarter of it, they made confession and worshipped the Lord their God. On the stairs of the Levites stood Jeshua, Benai, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunai, Sherebiah, Benai, and Kenanai.
[8:13] And they cried with a loud voice to the Lord their God. This is reverence for God's Word. They read the Word for hours and they confess their sin for hours.

They cry out to the Lord for His mercy. And then what follows for the rest of chapter 9 is a picture of how we are to respond in prayer based on what God has revealed to us.
What we see here in chapter 8 and 9 is something that we need to catch. That we read the Word, we believe the Word, we respond appropriately to it, and we continue to build our life around the revelation of God's Word, and we mingle and marry together the reading of the Word and our prayers to God.
That's how God's people worship. Time in the Word and time in prayer. And you just can't rush those things.
Now I understand that in real life you don't have hours and hours and hours every day to do this. You've got to go to school and you've got to go to work and you've got to take care of kids.
[9:36] You've got responsibilities. I understand that. But in our lives, we need to make room for uninterrupted times in the Word and uninterrupted times in prayer.

And that may mean being up early or that may mean using your lunch hour. That may mean in the evenings. That may mean carving out certain blocks of time throughout the month, however your schedule allows it.
Certainly it includes that we would set aside time for us on the Lord's Day to come and to sit under the reading and the instruction of God's Word and let that control who we are and how we live.
So the people that are obeying the Word, the Word's just being read to them, they're responding in belief and in obedience, and now they're going to respond in prayer, which is the natural thing for God's people to do as they've taken in the Word to then respond to God in prayer.
So the second thing we see in verses 5 and 6 is they are rejoicing in the Lord. They're rejoicing in the Lord. And there's three specific things you're going to see mentioned that they rejoice in.
[10:51] First is in God's eternality. Verse 5, Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabaneah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah, and Pathahiah said, Stand up and bless the Lord your God from everlasting to everlasting.

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Blessed be your glorious name which is exalted above all blessing and praise. Their time of prayer begins by saying, Let's give thanks to God.
Let's bless His name for He is from everlasting to everlasting. Their prayer begins with a declaration of the character of God. By no means is it ever wrong or unbiblical for us to lift up our request to the Lord.
We're absolutely told in Scripture to do that. But I think there's something helpful here to understand that the most effective way to pray is to begin being focused on who God is.
When Jesus taught His disciples to pray in the model prayer, He said, Pray then like this, our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Your name.
[12:08] There's just something that is calming, reassuring, and helpful for us to remind ourselves of the absolute privilege it is to pray when we begin by rehearsing the character of God.

I think it's also instructive that their prayer starts on the character of God, not on themselves. We don't need any help thinking about ourselves.
That comes easily. We don't need any encouragement to think about our own needs. That comes naturally. What we must train our hearts and minds to do is to dwell on the character of God.
They not only give praise for His eternality but also His exclusivity. You see it in verse 6. You are the Lord. You alone. There's only one God.
And they remind themselves that He is the one true God. And then, I'm going to walk you through this chapter. I want you just to notice how they respond in prayer.
[13:21] You see them, thirdly, God's eternality, His exclusivity, and then you see Him mentioning His power. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their hosts, the earth, and all that is on it, the seas, and all that is in them, and you preserve all of them, and the host of heaven worships you.

Again, it's always okay to lift up God-honoring requests that you have to ask Him for help with your needs.
I don't want to in any way get you to not do that. That's a biblical thing. But do be instructed here of when they pray of how much their focus is first on God.
The eternal, only, powerful God. Now, just make a note of what's going to happen here.
They start here in their prayer with the character of God, and then they're going to walk through how God has been faithful to His people. And you see it starting here in creation.
[14:33] You have made heaven. You've made the earth. You've made the seas. You've made everything there is. So they begin in Genesis 1.

As they think about the character of God and the power of God and how He has revealed Himself to His people, they start in their prayer, in their heart, back to Genesis 1.
She moved to verse 7. We see a third thing they do. They remember the faithfulness of God. They remember the faithfulness of God.
Watch how they do this. They've mentioned creation. Now verse 7. You are the Lord, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans.
That's what? That's Genesis 11 and 12. So we start with their prayer remembering the faithfulness of God in Genesis 1. Then they go to Genesis 11 and 12.
[15:35] And you gave Him the name Abraham, Genesis 17. You found His heart faithful before you, and you made with Him the covenant to give to His offspring the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite.

And you have kept your promise for you are righteous. So we go from the character of God to the creation of God to the calling of Abraham.
Verse 9. And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea. So we went from Genesis now, what book are we in now?
In Exodus. You see what they're doing? They've heard the law read to them and now they are just praying back to God based on His faithfulness that He has given His people.
Verse 10. And you performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all His servants and all the people of His land for you knew that they acted arrogantly against our fathers and you made a name for yourself as it is to light for them the way in which they should go.
[17:08] So we've gone from God's character to His creation to the calling of Abraham from Genesis to Exodus now verse 13. You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them right rules and true laws good statutes and commandments that's Exodus

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20 and you made known to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses your servant.

Now we've got the giving the Ten Commandments including the Sabbath day which was to be a blessing to them. Verse 15 You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger and brought water for them out of the rock for their thirst and you told them to go and to possess the land that you had sworn to give them.
These people 24 days ago had begged their leaders just bring the book. And they built a wooden platform and the leaders stood up and they unrolled the scroll and they brought the book.
They read for hours and they sent out their trained leaders among the people. We covered this several weeks ago and they broke them into smaller segments to make sure that they understood what they were reading.
The text there, the language says they gave the sense of what had been read. They made sure they were understanding. And as they read the word they were broken over their sin, the sinfulness of their fathers, but the very word they were reading said this is a time of celebration.
[18:44] So the people obeyed, the people did what the word said and they celebrated. But once the celebration has ended they still recognize their sinfulness. They gather back together on the 24th day and in response to the word that had pierced their heart, they begin to cry out to the Lord and they just start at literally the beginning and start to recall the faithfulness of their God.

If you were to sit your children down tonight and say we're going to have family devotion, we're going to talk about a lot of things and your child says okay, where are we going to start? And you say let's start in the beginning.
God created they're going to think oh my goodness, this may take a while. And Nehemiah 9 takes a while. But they've been reading the Bible for hours.
They've been listening for hours to the word. And when you take in the word of God, it becomes for the believer the most natural thing to do to respond in prayer to the Lord.
And because they've taken in so much Bible, their prayer does not start with themselves. If you and I were to just quickly and hurriedly pray, almost assuredly, our prayers will be not saying sinful or wrong, but we'll be focused on earthly things.
[20:25] But after hearing for hours about who God is and all that He's done, their prayers are just focused on Him.

Start at the character of God, move to creation, move to the calling of Abraham, goes through Genesis, goes through Moses. That brings us to verse 16.
We see a fourth part of this chapter, and that's the reflection on their sin. A reflection on their sin. Verse 16, But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments.
Now we stop for just a minute here, and we think that sounds familiar. here. Well, that sounds a lot like the charge that had been made against the Egyptians in verse 10.
The people of God recognize, as the word has been read to them, that they themselves have been guilty of the same things the pagan nations did.
[21:45] The pagan nations who worshiped false gods. the pagan nations who rebelled against the one true God. As they've heard the word read to them, they recognize in their life and in their forefather's life, they're guilty of the very same thing.

verse 17, they refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them, but they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt.
But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them. Even when they made for themselves a golden calf and said, this is your God who brought you out of Egypt and had committed great blasphemies.
You and your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness. The pillar of cloud to lead them in the way did not depart from them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night to light for them the way in which they should go.
Verse 20, you gave your good spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst. Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness and they lacked nothing.
[23:02] Their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell. Now we've moved to the border of entering the promised land.

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And they're just recalling the faithfulness and the mercy and the kindness of God generation after generation. Verse 22, you gave them kingdoms and peoples and allotted to them every corner. So they took possession of the land of Sihon, king of Heshbon, and the land of Og, king of Bashan. Now we're in the book of Joshua. You multiplied their children as the stars of heaven and you brought them into the land that you had told their fathers to enter and possess.
So the descendants went in and possessed the land and you subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and gave them into their hand and with their kings and the peoples of the land that they might do with them as they would.
Verse 25, and they captured fortified cities and a rich land and took possession of houses full of good things, cisterns already hewn, vineyards, olive orchids and fruit trees in abundance.
[24:20] So they ate and were filled and became fat and delighted themselves in your great goodness. Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets who had warned them in order to turn them back to you and they committed great blasphemies.

Verse 27, therefore you gave them into the hand of their enemies who made them suffer. In the time of their suffering they cried out to you when you heard them from heaven and according to your great mercies you gave them saviors who saved them from the hand of their enemies.
What book of the Bible are we in there? Judges. We've gone from creation to Genesis to Exodus to the edge of the promised land to entering into the promised land.
Verse 28, but after they had rest, they did evil again before you and you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies so that they had dominion over them.
Yet when they had turned and cried to you, you heard from heaven and many times you delivered them according to your mercies. It's as if the people who are thinking back to all that had been read to them, they're just stuck on the mercy of God.
[25:49] They can't believe how wicked the people were and yet how merciful God has been. Isn't that our story too? They can't get over how merciful God has been.

I pray that's true for us forever. I hope you never get over God's mercy. Hope it never becomes routine to think of all that we have done and yet how good God has been to us.
When you read through the Old Testament, you know what it's like. January 1, you start reading the Old Testament, and by about February 15, you think, I've read this before.
God was merciful, the people followed, the people disobeyed, the people were judged, God gave them mercy. Haven't we read this before? And they've set through for hours hours of the law being read, and they are saying, we've heard this before.
This is who we are. We're weak, wayward people, and yet sustained by a God who is merciful.
[27:05] Verse 29, you warned them in order to turn them back to your law, yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your rules, which if a person does them, he shall live by them, and they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey.

Many years you bore with them and warned 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 mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.
They're walking us through the time of the kings and the exile. Another clear emphasis on the mercy of God. A repeated emphasis of how impacted they have been by hearing the story of the mercy of God.
Can I suggest to you tonight that our homes and our churches ought to be a place where we are often recounting the mercies of God among us.
Where we're just stunned and amazed that God would be so good to us, so patient with us.
[28:38] This is the longest prayer recorded in the Bible, Nehemiah 9. time. We don't ask for anything yet. They're too stunned by the compassion and faithfulness of God.

Let me say again, it's never wrong to present your request to God. We've got biblical warrant to do that. But don't be too quick to rush to your request and in so doing, neglecting, reminding yourself of the faithfulness of God.
They can't get past it. Now, when you get to verse 32, we see a fifth thing. And here they are going to request the help of God.

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They're going to request the help of God. Verse 32, Now therefore our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love, let not all the hardship seem little to you that has come upon us, upon our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and all your people since the time of the kings of Assyria until this day.
They're saying, God, we've got real problems. And while we may be small in number in a small piece of the land geographically, these problems are real to us and they are big to us.
[30:14] Please don't let our problems seem small to you. For the God who created the heavens and the earth and the God who holds all things together is so kind that He would be acquainted with your specific needs.

Remind yourself of that. That when you pray to God for your needs, you are praying to the God so powerful, He's the God who created all things. And they say, God, we know how great You are. We've just in our prayer rehearsed Your faithfulness. Please don't take our needs as small. They're big to us.
Verse 33, Yet You have been righteous in all that has come upon us for You have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly. Our kings, our princes, our priests, and our fathers have not kept Your law or paid attention to Your commandments and Your warnings that You gave them.
Even in their own kingdom and amid Your great goodness that You gave them in the large and rich land that You set before them, they did not serve You or turn from their wicked works.
[31:28] Behold, we are slaves this day in the land that You gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts. Behold, we are slaves. They're back in the land, but not fully free.

Still living under Persian rule. Verse 37, And its rich yield goes to the kings whom You have set over us because of our sins.
They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please and we are in great distress. Now I want to draw your attention to a very specific pronoun here in verse 37.
Look at it again with me. And its rich yield goes to the kings whom You have set over us because of... What's your pronoun? Our sin.
Don't miss that. They've been rehearsing the wickedness of their forefathers. The wickedness of God's people in Genesis and Exodus.
[32:42] The wickedness of God's people in Deuteronomy. The wickedness of God's people as they rejected the prophets and rejected the very word and revelation of God.

And yet, as they have read what their forefathers have done, it's as if they are reading it in front of a mirror and saying, what our forefathers have done looks exactly like what we have done.
And they say to God, would You be merciful because of our sins?
It is always so tempting, isn't it, to blame somebody else for your sin? It's so tempting to say, yes, I lost my temper at my spouse, but it's just because they wouldn't listen.
Yes, I disrespected my parents, but it's just because they don't understand. Yes, I was rude to my boss, but it's just because he's impossible. Yes, I broke the law, but it's just because the government makes silly laws.
[33:52] Yes, and we can go on and on and on and on. We'll find no shortage of people to blame for our sinfulness. And yet, what's happening in Nehemiah 9 is as the word of God has been read to them and now they are praying it back to God, what they recognize is that the cycle of continuation they saw in their forefathers of following God, rebelling against God, God bringing judgment, God giving grace and mercy.

That cycle, it happens over and over and over and over and over again. The people of God in Nehemiah 9 say, yes, that's what our forefathers did, but that's also what we do.
We're sinful. We're in need of mercy. We stand in need of grace. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us.
This is how Jesus taught His disciples to pray in Matthew 6. When you are to forgive somebody else, be reminded that God had to forgive you.
We're guilty too. That leads us to one last thing, number six, there's a responsibility to obey. This comes in verse 38.
[35:21] It actually moves to the public commitment they make in chapter 10. Probably would fit better in chapter 10, but we'll include it here as it's chapter 9, verse 38.

Because of all this, we make a firm covenant in writing on the sealed documents are the names of our princes, our Levites, and our priests. What are they doing?

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They are making a public ceremony. We'll see it next week in chapter 10. A public commitment to holiness and to obedience. This isn't just remorse, which is an emotion and a feeling.
This is repentance, which is an action and turning away. They understand as they have read the Word and prayed the Word, they understand their responsibility to now live differently.
In the days of Jonah, when he goes to Nineveh and he preaches five words in the Hebrew text, yet 40 days, Nineveh overthrown.
[36:24] That's the five-word sermon. He may have preached it for five seconds. He may have repeated a thousand times. His sermon was five words. Yet 40 days, Nineveh overthrown.

And amazingly, the people responded with repentance in Jonah. The least surprised person that the wicked Ninevites repented is who?
In Jonah. Who's the least surprised? Jonah. He says, I knew you were going to do this. This is why I didn't want to go to them.
I knew that you were a God of mercy. Jonah has preached, revival has come, and the evangelist goes home angry. He didn't want revival coming to the Ninevites.
Don't be too quick to judge him. If you knew everything the Ninevites did, you'd probably struggle with it too. But Jonah's not surprised because he knows God's a God of mercy.
[37:32] And revival and repentance breaks out from the king down to the least of the people. And yet, about a century later, we know because of the book of Nahum that the revival didn't last.

Somewhere in those hundred years, the people returned and rallied to their sin. what we see in Nehemiah 9, Nehemiah 10, is a wonderful thing.
There's lots of good example for us here, but sadly, it won't last here either. But as we find ourselves at the end of Nehemiah 9, as they have heard the Word, prayed the Word, and respond in obedience, their response is focused on this simple truth.
The people have been sinful. God has been faithful. faithful. The people have been sinful. God has been faithful.
That's the story of humanity. That's the character of our God. Let me give you a few things as we close this evening for implications for us.
[38:51] Number one, we too are sinful and must deal with our sin. We too are sinful and must deal with our sin. You ever read in the New Testament with the disciples and as you read what the disciples did, you just shake your head and think, these foolish guys, what's wrong with them?

It's one way to read it. Another way is to say, those guys remind me way too much of myself. Easily distracted.
Easily frustrated. when you read the Scripture, it would be good for you to let the Scripture drive you to repentance. To expose sin in your life.
To use that exposure of sin to drive you to a place of confessing your sin and turning from your sin. And when you read through, particularly in the time of the judges, and you just see this repetitive cycle over and over and over again, rather than reading that with a critical spirit, read that and say, God, how many times has this been my story?
How many times have I confessed the same sin over and over and over? And yet, God, you have been gracious and merciful. That's our second implication, that God is merciful to His people despite our disobedience.
[40:23] God is merciful to His people despite our disobedience. When we think about our sinfulness, confess that, take that to the Lord, and be reminded that the good news of the Gospel is not that God empowered you to go do something about it, it's that God sent His Son when you could not do anything else for yourself.

That's the Gospel. The Gospel doesn't give you strength to go and earn. The Gospel gives you a live heart that used to be dead, gives you the gift of faith to respond in love to what Christ alone has done.
And then third and finally, God desires His people to come to Him in confession and praise. God desires His people to come to Him in confession and praise.
There are some parts yet to come in Nehemiah that aren't as good, aren't as encouraging, but for today, this is how they're supposed to respond.
it's going to get rough. There's a verse, we're going to get to it very soon, Lord willing, just a couple of weeks, where Nehemiah comes back and sees their disobedience and he starts to pull people's hair out.

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[42:06] And if you're looking for some Hebrew idiom of what that means, here's what it means. He pulled their hair out. Nehemiah was serious about sin.

We'll save for another day why he did that and what we should think about how he did that, but let it suffice for this day that our repentance may never be perfect because as soon as we repent, our sinful hearts are still there.

If you were with us this morning, I trust that you sincerely worshipped and sincerely had time to confess your sin before we took the Lord's Supper, and that it was with great honesty and sincerity that we receive the mercy and the grace that the Lord offers us.

But I feel quite confident when we gather here next week, Lord willing, we'll have new sin to confess. This has to be the continual pattern of our life that we read the Word, we're broken by it, we repent, and we respond in obedience.

Your salvation biblically is a one-time thing. You're justified, made right with God once for all. That's true. But in the book of Romans, it describes a renewed nature still encased in unredeemed flesh.

[43:45] And that unredeemed flesh goes to war against us. And we've got to keep reading and keep confessing and keep praying and keep responding in faith.

And for those who do that, they never get tired of the stories of the faithfulness of God.

God. I hope you don't. I hope you never get tired of telling someone how God saved you, of how God's been faithful and gracious to you, of how though you have fallen over and over and over again, there's been one constant, the presence, the nearness, and the goodness of your God.

Don't let that ever become so familiar that you cease to be stunned by the reality of a God who is good and gracious to His people.

Lord, we thank You for Your Word tonight and pray that it would encourage us, strengthen us, that we would, having read it, see a clearer glimpse of how faithful You are to Your people and be strengthened by it, we pray in Christ's name.

[45:22] Amen. Amen.

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