

**THE
BON AIR
PULPIT**

August 27, 2000

Scripture: *Nehemiah 9: 13-15; 26-28*

Sermon: *Be Careful When Things Are Going Well*

In the darkest of times. That really is the theme of Nehemiah. The people of Israel were going through their most difficult times, their country had been over run, the city of Jerusalem was nothing more than a pile of stone. Some of the people had come back to try and rebuild the city. Soon they found it was more than what they could do, so they were a very, very, discouraged group of people. The book is the story of the difference one person can make who has a dream and a plan. Nehemiah came on the scene and challenged the people and they began to believe in themselves, began to believe in each other, supremely, began to believe in God. It is a remarkable story of how that city was rebuilt again. While they were building, there broke out among them a spiritual renewal. It is one of the great revivals that took place in the Bible. It happens as the priests of God came and began to rehearse with them. How God had worked in their life and what God wanted to do with them. He began to reveal to them kind of a cycle that they had gone through and I wanted to read for you that cycle today and to notice one part of that cycle that they went through spiritually. I am reading Nehemiah 9:13. It is talking about what God had done for them in the past. "God, you came down on Mount Sinai, You spoke to the people from heaven. You gave them regulations and laws that are just and right and decrees and commands that are good. You made known to them your Holy Sabbath, you gave them commands, decrees, and laws through your servant Moses. In their hunger you gave them bread from heaven, in their thirst you brought water from the rock, You told them to go in and take possession of the land you had sworn with uplifted hand to give them."

This is all of what God had done for them. Notice down in Verse 26. "But they were disobedient, they rebelled against you, they put your law against their back, they killed your prophets, who admonished them to turn, so that they could come back to you. They committed awful blasphemies. So you handed them over to their enemies to oppress them and when they were oppressed, they cried out to you. From heaven you heard them and in your great compassion you gave them deliverers who rescued them from the hand of their enemies." Now this is the verse that jumped out to me. This is a part of the cycle. "God blessed them, they turned away, God sent people to help them and they turned back." Notice verse 28. "But as soon as they were at rest, they did again that which was evil in the sight of God."

That gave me a sermon title. It is, *Be Careful, When Everything Seems to be Going Well*. In fact some of the greatest spiritual dangers you confront is not in the time of difficulty, but in the time when everything is going well. I want us to call attention to that this morning. There is a phrase that comes out of the horror of war that says there are no atheists in fox holes. What that statement simply says is in the time of great uncertainty it is normal for us to turn our face toward God. In the prison ministry of our church I heard another phrase, it is called jail house religion. While sometimes it is used to sneer against those people who turn to God. what it simply means is that when every thing seems to fall apart, it is pretty easy to turn your face toward heaven. You see you can put anything of great consequence in that formula. You can talk about hospital religion. Have you even been there when the doctor came to you and said that your daughter may not live? It is pretty easy then to begin to think about God. What about bankruptcy court? What about divorce court? What about when they come to you and say your business is now going through a merger? What all of those say to us is that it is pretty normal for us in times of great difficulty to want to know where God is, to begin to think about Him, and want to make fresh commitments to Him. There is a strange thing that happens to all of us and that is when we go through those things and we get on the other side, sometimes it becomes easy for us to forget about God all together. When the pressure is gone, when the difficulty is past, when the tragedy is no longer remembered, then suddenly we begin to forget where God is anymore.

I ran into that experience years ago when hurricane, Audrey hit South Louisiana. It was one of the most devastating storms ever to hit the United States coast. It came in and they thought it was going to go in the middle of the night over to Texas. It turned suddenly and came into the marsh lands of South

Louisiana. If you have ever been to that part of Louisiana, the only thing that is a little above sea level, is where people have built their homes. That night the full fury of Audrey came in and several hundred people drowned that night. A friend of mine was pastor of the First Baptist Church of Cameron, Louisiana and when the police allowed people to go in, we went in to check on our friend. He told me what it was like in the middle of the night to begin to realize the storm had turned and the water was coming toward them. He and the few people who were left in town ran to the high school gym. They were in the gym on the top of an air conditioning unit not knowing if the water would come over. He said I can tell you on the top of the air conditioning unit, there was a revival that took place. People began to talk about God. People began to say, "God, if you get me through this, God I will make fresh commitments to you." He said it is amazing how God's name was used so frequently. I said to him, "I know as you rebuild your church it will be full." He smiled and said, "Oh no, the first thing they built back was the saloon." He said, "Most of those people I haven't seen in church at all." Do you understand how easy that is? How easy it is when the pressure is gone, how easy it is when the difficulty is gone, when the uncertainty is gone. We end up with everything pretty normal, things going well. The Bible says you better watch out. That is the time when you can most easily forget God. Listen to Nehemiah. You went through difficulty, you prayed to God. God sent you relief and what happened. You went through a time of rest. Then he said at the time of rest, it was then, that you turned away again from me. You need to be careful. Careful that when everything seems to be going well that you don't fall into spiritual difficulty.

Many of you at least acquainted and some of you have glanced through all of the volumes of Toynbee's, *Rise and Falls of Civilization*. He went back to the very beginning and saw how nations rose and fell. You recall that he picked up the cycle. The cycle when people were struggling, and trying to make it. Then things become a little more comfortable. As they become a little more comfortable, then they become very easy, and all the pride and glory is theirs. Then he says then you can almost chart it. It is then that the nations started going down because they went away from difficulty. They marched away from challenge. What they did was, they began to turn in on themselves and begin to enjoy what they had. They began to turn in on themselves and enjoy what they had. Toynbee's cycle is then it begins to go down. Archeologists, you recall, went through south east Asia cutting down jungle and then they began to scream and holler because they were aware that in the middle of all these vines and jungles were buildings they had never seen before. Huge temples, great palaces, and homes but nothing there but vines. One of the men on the team said, "Isn't that how it is.? The jungle is always waiting to overcome again the city." As people began to stop building and just let things normally happen, we don't get better, we seem to slide and we seem to get worse.

When Adlai Stevenson, who was one of America's great political leaders, was alive, he developed a friendship with one of our great writers, John Steinbeck. They began to write letters back and forth. One of those letters I have always remembered. When Stevenson was talking about our nation, he said, "I wish there was some way that God could make America great, without making America rich. Because he said, "No nation on earth has ever learned how to handle prosperity." When we become prosperous and when everything gets to be easier, it is then we begin to turn away from our better self. That is what Nehemiah's warning is about. It can happen as nations, it can happen as individuals. Some of you in this room recognize that you have gone through difficult times. I know that, I have walked with you through them. You were aware that God's presence and God's power was that which sustained you and that which helped you. Now you are on the other side. The warning comes. How easy it is when that time comes. You forget it was God who sustained you and helped you. I have developed for myself a little ten point formula and I would give you all ten points but how can I make sure I don't start taking God for granted. How can I make sure that I don't say I am the one who got me here? How can I be the one like the little child who was in our home last week? I gave the little child something and the little child turned to me without any prompting from mom and said "Thank you."

How can I live in a sense of always recognizing that nothing I have is of me and all of Him. I began to write down my little ten point formula. Number one, I began to realize I need to relive God's blessings. I have a friend of mine who worked up a pattern early in the morning. When he wakes up, the first thing he does is he thinks of God. He thanks God that he woke up. Then he has a pattern all the way until he goes to work, through his private devotions, reading the scripture in a formula he has worked through. He just spends time every morning thanking God. Now listen. Here you are at nearly eleven

o'clock in the morning and I wanted to ask you, "Have you spent time already realizing this day is a gift and all that you have is a gift and that God is so great and so good?" You need to spend time rehearsing God's blessings.

The second thing I began to do is to retell appreciation of others. I thank God for others that God has sent into my life, for people who work here with me or people I am in the same church with, people that are friends of mine. I try to go to them and say, "You are God's gift to me and I thank you for that. I thank you for how you are being in my life." I try to rethink of those change moments in my life. I try to remember when my life takes an upheaval, what did I learn and what was God trying to tell me. I have experienced in the last several weeks a change in my life and I understand that God was so good to give me this person for this length of time and I have tried to relive that and rethink how God has been so good to me. I try to do reappraisals. Let me tell you what I mean by that.

Like some of you I was in another church on a vacation and someone got up and prayed God bless all of our members on vacation, protect them, guide them and help them. We pray that all the time. At the close of the service, the man who got up to give the benediction said "I would like to pray in response to the prayer that was given earlier. So often we pray for people on vacation. Did you know there are a lot of people who can not go on vacation? I began to think about all the people for example who are bed ridden. Some of them haven't been on vacation in ten years. But I didn't hear anybody praying for them. What about the daughter or the son who is right there with mom and dad making sure they receive the help and care. They would love to go down to the beach. Nobody prays for them. There are a lot of folk who do not have the money to go on vacation. What I would like to pray for is for all the people who are not on vacation who would like to be there and can't go." I began then to make a list of all the people that are on the other side of people that I normally pray for. I realize how grateful I am and how we all take things for granted. Vacations sure, and I began to reappraise and to rethink about those individuals. Hear the word of Nehemiah again. If you get to the place where you are not believing all the time in breathless gratitude to God for all that you have, you are going to get in the place where you are coasting. I was behind a man the other day, it looked like we were going fine and he was in his car and I in mine. We were going well. Then I noticed that he put the blinkers on and pulled off to the side. I pulled off with him and went up to him and said "sir, are you in difficulty?" He said "yes, I am out of gas." Two minutes before, it looked like he was going well. I realized that for the last couple of blocks he was doing nothing but coasting. If you get coasting, you are going to be on the side of the road spiritually. Recognize it afresh. Spiritual decay can happen when we start taking things for granted. The second thing that he said to us is when that happens, God always moves in and He always brings consequences.

I want you to notice what He said He did. He just turned them over to their enemies. They thought their strength was in them but when they moved away from God what they understood was their enemies were stronger than they were. There is around you everyday bugs, viruses and germs that could take you out in a moment. Why don't they do it? Because your body is working well and you are strong and you are turning them off. What happens when you get run down and all of a sudden the bugs and viruses are all around you? You begin to realize your enemies have over come you. What happens when you turn away from God? You get weaker and those things that you were turning away from, then all of a sudden they are bigger and stronger than you are. That is the reason that on a national level we need to understand that the ultimate strength of our nation is not the Defense Department, it is not Wall Street, it is our relationship to God. When you turn away from Him, it doesn't make any difference how strong you are other wise, your enemies will always get bigger than you.

Inside of all of us, there are impulses and drives that are held in check by God. Take God out of the formula, what happens? Boy, you begin to realize you have been turned over to your enemies. There is a frightening picture in one of the prophets, Ezekiel. We have even made a song out of it. It is called a wheel within a wheel. The prophet looked up one day and he saw this big wheel this way and then he realized the big wheel inside of the wheel. He realized the wheel was turning and over running his country. The prophet said, "Lord, who is the wheel?" God spoke out of the wheel and said, "It is Me." Hear it afresh. Whenever you stay with God, He protects. When you turn away from God, He prosecutes. When ever we turn, make sure it always brings consequences.

Notice the third one. The people turned to God and the wonderful good news to share with you personally and the personal good news to share with you collectively is that God is there to receive us, God

is there with compassion, God is there with help, God wants to receive us back if we will but turn to Him. You see He is always the same. It is us who is always turning around. You have heard the story many times of the older couple going down the road and a young couple passed them by, the young girl sitting next to her boyfriend, arm around him. He turned to his wife of many years and she said, "Boy, isn't that lovely. I remember when you used to do that. We would go out nights and you would put your arm around me." She went on and on and when she got finished he said, "That is right dear. But I am not the one who moved." So it is. God is the same. We are the ones who moved.

In Wimberly Stadium in London, when South Africa was made a free nation, there was a huge celebration. All of the great musical artists were there, "Guns and Roses," everybody was there. For some reason, you picked up on that, didn't you. For some reason, they asked an opera singer to come and to close the evening. Many of you know the name of Jesse Norman, know she is one of the great artists of the world. That night after they listened to all the rock bands and heard everybody, Mrs. Norman, stood to the podium, and they realized there was no orchestra, no back up, she just started singing. She sang "*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me, I once was lost but now am found was blind but now I can see.*" People said they didn't understand, seventy thousand people. They said you could hear a pin drop. By the time she began to sing the last stanza, *when we have been there ten thousand years*, they said most of the seventy thousand were standing and singing along with her. They said it was a God moment, the presence of God was there. You know why most people know that song? Because it talks about grace, it talks about giving you what you don't deserve, giving you what you need. It is not mathematical formula, it doesn't work that way. It just means that God is there for you.

I wanted to tell you today, God is there for you. I didn't read the last verse in this chapter, let me read it to you now. "In view of all these things, we are making a binding agreement. We put it in writing. Our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it." This is what they said. "You are right priests, we are always a disciple, we receive, we take advantage of it, we get consequences, we cry out to God. God sends help. We turn back to God. We receive again, we turn away from Him. We are tired of that. God, we want to break the cycle. We want to put it in writing. We want our lawyers to come and fix their seal. What we say is, "Dear God, this is our commitment. We are not only going to turn to You when things are tough. God when things are good, we want You still to walk beside us. God we want to make a legal agreement with You, we will be your people in good times."

I wanted to ask you today, if you don't need to make that same agreement. Some of you, if you would look back at your spiritual life, it would be that kind of chart. It would be a circle. Good times turn away, consequences, help, then you are back again, then you return. Sometimes you are up, sometimes you are down, some times you are close, sometimes you are away. Aren't you tired of the cycle? Isn't it time to say, "Dear God, here I am. What ever it takes, I want to be close to You." I hope today you will make an agreement with God and you will sign it from the depth of your heart.