

Today I would like for us to start this series by looking at the words of Nehemiah. It is important to understand the setting. The Jewish people had been in captivity in Babylon. Their Temple and the entire city of Jerusalem had been destroyed. Now, after 70 years, they have returned and are rebuilding their city. I use the word “return” loosely, because most of these people had been born in captivity and had never seen their home. They had found the Law of Moses during their work on the temple. The Prophet Ezra read it aloud to them. They vowed to return to the law. This passage reflects Nehemiah’s efforts to reconnect the people to their heritage and turn them back to God.

Nehemiah 9:1-37 [The Message - Selections]

Then on the twenty-fourth day of this month, the People of Israel gathered for a fast, wearing burlap and faces smudged with dirt as signs of repentance. The Israelites broke off all relations with foreigners, stood up, and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their parents. While they stood there in their places, they read from the Book of The Revelation of GOD, their God, for a quarter of the day. For another quarter of the day they confessed and worshiped their GOD.

A group of Levites stood on the platform and cried out to GOD, their God, in a loud voice. The Levites said, “On your feet! Bless GOD, your God, for ever and ever!”

“Blessed be your glorious name, exalted above all blessing and praise! You’re the one, GOD, you alone; you made the heavens, the heavens of heavens, and all angels; the earth and everything on it, the seas and everything in them; you keep them all alive; heaven’s angels worship you!

You’re the one, GOD, the God who chose Abram and brought him from Ur of the Chaldees and changed his name to Abraham. You found his heart to be steady and true to you and signed a covenant with him, A covenant to give him and his descendants the promised land. And you kept your word because you are righteous.

You saw the anguish of our parents in Egypt. You heard their cries at the Red Sea. You split the sea before them; they crossed through and never got their feet wet; you pitched their pursuers into the deep; they sank like a rock in the storm-tossed sea. By day you led them with a Pillar of Cloud and by night with a Pillar of Fire to show them the way they were to travel.

You came down on Mount Sinai, you spoke to them out of heaven; You gave them instructions on how to live well, true teaching, sound rules and commands; You introduced them to your Holy Sabbath; through your servant Moses you decreed commands, rules, and instruction. You gave bread from heaven for their hunger; you sent water from the rock for their thirst. You told them to enter and take the land, which you promised to give them.

But they, our ancestors, were arrogant; bullheaded, they wouldn't obey your commands. They turned a deaf ear, they refused to remember the miracles you had done for them; they turned stubborn, got it into their heads to return to their Egyptian slavery. And you, a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, incredibly patient, with tons of love - you didn't dump them. Yes, even when they cast a sculpted calf and said, "This is your god who brought you out of Egypt," and continued from bad to worse, you in your amazing compassion didn't walk off and leave them in the desert. The Pillar of Cloud didn't leave them; daily it continued to show them their route; The Pillar of Fire did the same by night, showed them the right way to go.

You gave them your good Spirit to teach them to live wisely. You supported them forty years in that desert; they had everything they needed; their clothes didn't wear out and their feet never blistered

Well, they entered all right; they took it and settled in. The Canaanites who lived there you brought to their knees before them. They took strong cities and fertile fields; they took over well-furnished houses, cisterns vineyards, olive groves, and lush extensive orchards. And they ate, grew fat on the fat of the land; they reveled in your bountiful goodness.

But then they mutinied, rebelled against you, threw out your laws and killed your prophets, the very prophets who tried to get them back on your side - and then things went from bad to worse. . But when they called out for help in their troubles you listened from heaven; and in keeping with your bottomless compassion you gave them saviors. But as soon as they had it easy again they were right back at it - more evil. So you turned away and left them again to their fate, to the enemies who came right back. They cried out to you again; in your great compassion you heard and helped them again. This went on over and over and over. . Still, because of your great compassion, you didn't make a total end to them. You didn't walk out and leave them for good; yes, you are a God of grace and compassion.

And now, our GOD, the great God, God majestic and terrible, loyal in covenant and love, don't treat lightly the trouble that has come to us, to all your people from the time of the Assyrian kings right down to today. You are not to blame for all that has come down on us; you did everything right, we did everything wrong.

The chosen people of God had a rough time staying on track didn't they? Are we as Americans so different? We've heard the history of the Israelites, now lets look at a little of our American History. But first let me show you that we as Christians are also God's chosen people. Peter calls us in **1 Peter 1:1-3**, *God's elect, strangers in this world and scattered through out the world, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood.* Jesus himself tells us in **John 15:16**, *"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit - fruit that will last."*

I am not sharing this message today because we worship our country - we don't. America is not always in the right. We do not have a special relationship with God because we are Americans. Still, as Americans, we have a history and a heritage that deserves our attention.

I want to take some time to consider the role that Christianity played in the shaping our nation. As we do that, we need to begin with some disclaimers. Just as America is not a perfect country, our founders were not perfect people. Our history includes a legacy of slavery and racial prejudice. It includes the mistreatment of native peoples. It includes gender bias and other prejudices.

The background of this country won't be found in your children's textbooks. Most of it has been omitted in the name of political correctness. Much time was consumed searching on the internet to find the words of our founding fathers. Was it their intent to establish a nation built on the fundamentals of Christian faith or to establish a country that was spiritually neutral?

All of our founders came from a culture that was deeply influenced by Christianity, but they were not all Christians. We will refer to people like Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin who were Deists. Still, Christianity played a major role in shaping our national character and values as we will see later in quotes from their speeches.

Most of us will recall from Thanksgiving plays that the pilgrims came to this country to escape the Church of England and to practice their own faith. It is not surprising that the Mayflower Compact of 1620, **the earliest of the great American documents, is a religious document.** It begins *“In the name of God, Amen”* and says that their purpose was *“for the Glory of God, and Advancement of the Christian Faith, and the Honour of our King and Country, a voyage to plant the first colony.”*

People find the situation at Jamestown a bit more surprising. Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement, was a commercial venture, not a religious one. Still, the largest building at the very center of the settlement was the church. Services were held twice everyday, morning and evening. On Sunday, services lasted five hours. Attendance at the services was mandatory. Absence from service meant no food ration that day and repeated absence was punishable by a public whipping. Now that is what I call a shepherding program. What do you think? Should we start

that here? :)

Much of the discussion that lead up to our Independence centered around, not just religious freedom, but freedom in general as a gift from God. What would later be called “*inalienable rights*” given by the Creator. For example, Samuel Adams, the organizer of the Boston Tea Party, said this in 1772. *“The right to freedom being the gift of the Almighty...The rights of the colonists as Christians...may be best understood by reading and carefully studying the institutions of The Great Law Giver and Head of the Christian Church, which are to be found clearly written and promulgated in the New Testament.”*

We remember the words of Patrick Henry - *“Give me liberty or give me death.”* That comes from a speech that he delivered on **March 23, 1775** during the debate on the Declaration of Independence. Here is a bit more of that speech.

“If we wish to be free, we must fight! I repeat it sir, we must fight! An appeal to arms and to the God of Host is all that is left us. They tell us sir that we are weak; unable to cope with so formidable an adversary. But when shall we be stronger? Sir, we are not weak if we make a proper use of those means which the God of nature hath placed in our power. The millions of people, armed in the holy cause of liberty, and in such a country as that which we possess, are invincible by any force which our enemy can send against us. Besides, sir, we shall not fight our battles alone. There is a just God who presides over the destinies of nations, and who will raise up friends to fight our battles for us. The battle, sir, is not to the strong alone; it is to the vigilant, the active, the brave. There is no retreat but in submission and slavery! Our chains are forged! Their clanking may be heard on the plains of Boston! The war is inevitable--and let it come! I repeat it, sir, let it come.

Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!”

The following year, **1776**, he wrote this: *"It cannot be emphasized too strongly or too often that **this great Nation was founded not by religionists, but by Christians; not on religions, but on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For that reason alone, people of other faiths have been afforded freedom of worship here.**"*

As we mentioned earlier, Ben Franklin was not a Christian, but he did have a **faith in God and in the power of prayer**. The debate over the Constitution was difficult and contentious. It lasted for four long months. In the midst of that debate, on **June 28, 1787**, it was Franklin who asked that each session of the Constitutional Convention begin with prayer. Here are Franklin's words:

*"In this situation of this Assembly groping as it were in the dark to find political truth, and scarce able to distinguish it when to us, how has it happened, Sir, that **we have not hitherto once thought of humbly applying to the Father of lights to illuminate our understandings?** In the beginning of the contest with Great Britain, when we were sensible of danger we had **daily prayer in this room for the Divine Protection. Our prayers, Sir, were heard, and they were graciously answered. All of us who were engaged in the struggle must have observed frequent instances of a superintending providence in our favor. To that kind providence we owe this happy opportunity of consulting in peace on the means of establishing our future national felicity. And have we now forgotten that powerful friend? Or do we imagine that we no longer need His assistance.***

*"I have lived, Sir, a long time and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—that **God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid?***

*"I therefore beg leave to move—that henceforth **prayers imploring the assistance of Heaven, and its blessings on our deliberations, be held in this Assembly every morning before we proceed to business.**"*

The first amendment to the constitution has specific guarantees. It **does not call for the separation of church and state, as many assume**. Here are the exact words. *“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”* Notice that it is a specific restriction on the actions of the federal government. At the time, eight states and the city of New York had government established and supported churches. Some states like Maryland and Delaware required church membership for all public officials. The fear was that the federal government might supersede the states by establishing a national church. The first amendment was designed to ensure religious pluralism, not religious prohibition.

Even today, **almost every state constitution has references to God in it**. Consider these words from the preamble to our own New Jersey Constitution. *“We, the people of the State of New Jersey, grateful to Almighty God for the civil and religious liberty which He hath so long permitted us to enjoy, and looking to Him for a blessing upon our endeavors to secure and transmit the same unimpaired to succeeding generations, do ordain and establish this Constitution.”*

The entire notion of the bold American experiment with a democratic form of government presumes that most people are people of good will who can work together for the common good.

James Madison put it this way in **1785**. *“We have staked the whole future of American civilization, not upon the power of government, far from it. We have staked the future of all of our political institutions upon the capacity of mankind for self-government; upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves, to control ourselves, to sustain ourselves according to the Ten Commandments of God.”*

George Washington, in his first Inaugural address in **1789** called on the nation to remember their reliance on God. He said, *“the propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right which Heaven itself has ordained”*

John Adams The second President wrote to Thomas Jefferson on **June 28, 1813**:

The general principles on which the fathers achieved independence were... The general principles of Christianity... I will avow that I then believed, and now believe, that those general principles of Christianity are as eternal and immutable as the existence and attributes of God; and that those principles of liberty are as unalterable as human nature.

Adams also said, *"We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Avarice, ambition, revenge, or gallantry, would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net. Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."*

Like his father, John Quincy Adams was a man of faith. On **July 4, 1821**, he said, *"The highest glory of the American Revolution was this: "It connected in one indissoluble bond the principles of civil government with the principles of Christianity."*

Statements about the relationship of faith to the success of government can be found in the writings of many of our presidents. Consider these words from **Calvin Coolidge**, our 30th president. *"The foundations of our society and our government rest so much on the teachings of the Bible that it would be difficult to support them if faith in these teachings would cease to be practically universal in our country."*

If Coolidge was right, what does that say about the future of our increasingly secular society?

Not only was faith central to our legal system, but it gave rise to **our educational system**.

Of the first 108 universities founded in America, 106 were distinctly Christian, including the first, **Harvard University**, chartered in **1636**. Harvard, like many of these institutions, was begun primarily

as a place for **educating the clergy**. In the original Harvard Student Handbook, rule number 1 was that students seeking entrance must know Latin and Greek so that they could study the Scriptures: *"Let every student be plainly instructed and earnestly pressed to consider well, the main end of his life and studies is to know God and Jesus Christ, which is eternal life, John 17:3; and therefore to lay Jesus Christ as the only foundation for our children to follow the moral principles of the Ten Commandments."*

Christianity's influence was not limited to institutions of higher learning. You recall that little prayer "Now I lay me down to sleep"? That prayer comes from the New England Primer which was the basic text for educating primary school students in American public schools from 1690 through 1900. Faith was involved in every aspect of learning. There was a rhyme to learn the ABCs. It started like this: "In Adam's fall / We sinned all. / Heaven to find / The Bible mind / Christ crucified / For sinners died." They don't write textbooks like that any more.

William Holmes McGuffey is the author of the McGuffey Reader which was used for over 100 years in our public schools, with over 125 million copies sold, until it was stopped in **1963**. President Lincoln called him the "Schoolmaster of the Nation." Listen to these words of Mr. McGuffey: *"The Christian religion is the religion of our country. From it are derived our nation, on the character of God, on the great moral Governor of the universe. On its doctrines are founded the peculiarities of our free Institutions. From no source has the author drawn more conspicuously than from the sacred Scriptures. For all these extracts from the Bible, I make no apology."*

Our schools did not just use texts drawn from the Bible, **they used the Bible itself.**

In **1782**, the United States Congress voted this resolution: *"The Congress of the United States recommends and approves the Holy Bible for use in all schools."*

Thomas Jefferson was Superintendent of the Washington DC school

system at the same time as he was President of the United States. This man, who is credited with coining the phrase “**separation of church and state**” authored a requirement that the Bible be taught at all grades in all classroom in the Washington schools.

Noah Webster, often called the Father of American Education, said: *“Education is useless without the Bible.” “The moral principles and precepts contained in the Scriptures ought to form the basis of all of our civil constitutions and laws....All the miseries and evils which men suffer from vice, crime, ambition, injustice, oppression, slavery and war, proceed from their despising or neglecting the precepts contained in the Bible.”*

Today, many Christians see the federal courts as hostile to religion. That has not always been the case.

In **1891** the majority opinion of the U.S. Supreme Court in *Church of the Holy Trinity v. The United States* said, *“Our laws and our institutions must necessarily be based upon and embody the teachings of the Redeemer of mankind, and it’s impossible that it should be otherwise: and in this sense and to this extent our civilization and our institutions are emphatically Christian”*

In **1930** in *McIntosh v. the US*, the Supreme Court said: *“We are a Christian people, according to our motto. The right of religious freedom, demands acknowledgment, with reverence, the duty of obedience to the will of God.”*

In *Zorach v. Clauson* in **1952**, a decision that permitted private religious instruction in public schools, the Supreme Court concluded, *“We are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being. We guarantee the freedom to worship as one chooses. We make room for as wide a variety of beliefs and creeds as the spiritual needs of man deem necessary. We sponsor an attitude on the part of government that shows no partiality to any one group and that lets each flourish according to the zeal of its adherents and the appeal of its dogma.”*

Chief Justice Earl Warren in **1954** said, *“I believe that no one can*

read the history of our country without realizing that the Good Book and the Spirit of the Savior have from the beginning been our guiding geniuses.” (Time, Feb 15, 1954).

If you look back into the recent history of this nation, when would you say was the last time this nation could, without question, be called a Christian Nation? I would say the 1950's. That was also the time of this Church's last great period. So what happened to go from a Christian Nation to the Politically Correct, try to please everybody Nation we have today. In **1962** Prayer was banned from public school. **Bible reading** was banned in **1963**. The **posting of the 10 Commandments** banned from public buildings in **1980**.

1962 in Engle v. Vitale. *“Neither the fact that the prayer may be denominationally neutral nor the fact that its observance on the part of the students is voluntary can serve to free it from the limitations of the Establishment Clause.”*

If portions of the New Testament were read without explanation, they could be and...had been psychologically harmful to the child.” (Abington v. Schempp. 374 U.S. 203. **1963**.)

“The mere posting of the copies (of the Ten Commandments), the (First Amendment) prohibits...If the posted copies of the Ten Commandments are to have any effect at all, it will be to induce the schoolchildren to read, meditate upon, perhaps to venerate and obey, the Commandments...(this) is not...a permissible...objective.” (Stone v. Gramm. 449 U.S. 39. **1980**.)

Within **seven years** there were six new appointees to the U. S. Supreme Court bench beginning in **1955** and ending in **1962**. So what happened? Did American culture change and affect the way the court voted or did the court change and affect American culture?

So how do we as Christians hold onto our faith without becoming a nation of intolerant bigots? Here are 4 things we can do to reclaim

our heritage, 4 challenges if you will for you to follow.

1) Be good citizens but don't put your hope in political solutions. Daniel Webster said *“Whatever it is that makes good Christians makes them good citizens.”* Vote regularly and wisely. Obey the law as long as it does not go against God's law. Pay your taxes honestly. **Support government officials with prayer and encouragement.** Run for office and make a difference. Pass along spiritual heritage to our children so they have a sense of patriotism and appreciation for what God has done in this land.

1 Tim 2:1-4 "I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people— 2 for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. 3 This is good, and pleases God our Savior, 4 who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."

2) Be repentant instead of blaming other people.

2 Chronicles 7:14 says *“if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”* This is addressed to the believers, not the pagan leaders.

There is a story about a man who goes to a doctor and says “You have to help me, I hurt everywhere. If I touch my arm, it hurts, if I touch my leg it hurts, if I touch my head it hurts, and if I touch my chest it hurts.” The doctor does some tests and comes back with the answer. “You have a broken finger.”

Don't blame the oval office, supreme court, or congress, the blame lies with us as Christians. This scripture tells us to *“humble ourselves”* admit we need help, *“and pray”* ask God for forgiveness of our sins, *“turn from our wicked ways”* don't cheat on your taxes, don't patronize improper movies, quit worshipping other things. *“I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”* It's up to us as believers. The ball is in our court.

3) Be courageous when you stand for the truth. Don't be ashamed of your faith.

OT - story of Daniel and king Darius.

NT - story of Peter and John.

56 men signed the Declaration of Independence. They knew they were committing treason against the crown, yet they pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor to what they believed in. 5 of those were captured and tortured and killed, 12 homes were looted and occupied, 2 lost sons in the war and 9 of them died in the war. They were very courageous and stood for their beliefs.

4) Be hopeful because God is still on His Throne.

Isaiah 9:6-7

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

7 Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

**5) Remember if you are "in Christ" your Citizenship is in Heaven
Philippians 4:20-21**

20 But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Pray**Benediction**

Psalm 33:12 *“Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people He chose for His inheritance.”*