

NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 13

This is the last in our series in the book of Nehemiah.

In the last couple of weeks we have been focusing upon Chapter 8 – 12 – where we read that following the rebuilding of the walls came what we could describe as a revival among God's people in Jerusalem which culminated in the making of a fresh covenant to live as the people of God - to, once again, be a distinct holy nation, committed to the one true God, trusting in His faithfulness.

I want us to start this talk in chapter 10 – page 476 - before we consider chapter 13 – the reason will become clear. In this chapter the people make a solemn undertaking to live according to God's laws and there are a number of specific resolutions to be faithful.

I want to highlight three starting at verse 30:

“We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the people around us or take their daughters for our sons”

The separation being called for was for religious not for racial reasons and the Old Testament law made it clear – having husband and wife worshipping different gods inevitably leads to a loss of faithfulness to the one Lord, and a gradual erosion of the uniqueness and distinctiveness of God's people.

The second is verse 31:

“When the neighbouring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and we will cancel all debts”

The Old Testament Law had established several vital reasons why observing the Sabbath was at the heart of their distinctiveness as a nation. As a day of rest, it went right back to the pattern of God's work and rest in creation – it was also set aside to reflect on God's goodness to them and to worship him. Keeping the Sabbath was a sign to everyone that they trusted in His covenant promises to be faithful in His care for them.

The third is in verses 32 – 39 and we have not the time to read all that now. To sum it up, it is a statement of the people's commitment to the upkeep of the temple – they promise to give money, grain, wood for the altar, first fruits of their crops and tithes to support the priests and the Levites. They conclude with this promise at the end of chapter 10: “We will not neglect the house of our God”.

Keep these promises in mind as we move forward to the last chapter - 13.

At the end of Chapter 12 Nehemiah had returned to Susa in Persia to fulfil his responsibilities for King Artaxerxes - . In Chapter 13 he comes back – we are just told it is “some time later” – and what Nehemiah discovers shocks and distresses him – for a terrible spiritual decline had set in. After the triumph of rebuilding the walls, after the subsequent revival in the city, after the solemn binding commitments made by the people – Nehemiah returns to discover an attitude of greed, self serving and spiritual apathy had taken a grip.

There are three particular areas recorded for us that exposed and highlighted the spiritual decline – and they all correspond to the promises made in chapter 10 that we have read already. Let us consider each one.

First shock for Nehemiah was on visiting the temple

(Read Nehemiah 13: 6 – 13)

The shock was that the Temple – the focal point for sacrifice, worship and learning – had been neglected to the point where all the communal services there had stopped. This was because the people had ceased to tithe which meant the Levites – who depended upon this for their income – had nothing to live on and were forced to go back to work in the fields. With no one to run the services – corporate worship had stopped. To make it worse the storehouse that was meant for the tithes – was now occupied by Tobiah.

This is the same Tobiah who opposed the rebuilding of the walls from the outset and was constantly undermining Nehemiah when he was governor of Judah. Somehow he had managed to worm his way into the heart of the Temple. It was but a symptom of how things had – over time – been neglected and gone into decline.

We read that Nehemiah acted decisively – he threw all of Tobiah's household goods out the room – there are echoes here of when Jesus made a whip and drove out the money lenders from the temple. Nehemiah – always practical - then appointed trustworthy men to be in charge of the store rooms.

The second shock for Nehemiah was the flagrant neglect of the commandment concerning the Sabbath (read verses 15 – 22.)

Just as the people had become indifferent to God's house – they had neglected God's special day and had turned it into a money making day. When the gentile traders arrived in Jerusalem they found nothing distinctive about the people at all – they wanted to make as much money like everyone else and that took prominence above honouring the God they should have been representing.

How did Nehemiah deal with this?

He rebuked the leaders for desecrating the Sabbath and he warned them of the potentially disastrous consequences if they continued to do so. He went further – again taking the practical step of locking the city gates every evening before the Sabbath until the day was over to keep the traders out. They still congregated outside – so he went outside and confronted them. His passion and zeal was burning as strong as ever.

Which brings us onto the third shock for Nehemiah – that of mixed marriages

(Read verses 23 – 27)

Nehemiah knew what had happened in the past – this kind of intermarriage in the Old Testament always led to the loss of faithfulness to the one Lord and then to the worshipping of other gods – the most striking example being King Solomon who started so well but then finished so badly.

Nehemiah acted very vigorously. He confronted and contended with the prime offenders – he made the parents swear not negotiate mixed marriages for their children and gave them what can only be described as a thorough verbal drubbing.

I accept that you may well struggle with Nehemiah's style here – but put it in a cultural context. We can still be challenged by his courage, his firmness, his determination to face issues and do something about them.

Nehemiah retained the same zeal that motivated and mobilised the people to rebuild the walls and from the first to the last chapter Nehemiah's priorities were God's priorities – and he pursued these whether they might be popular or unpopular, and whether they would be to his personal advantage or not.

That is chapter 13 – a very sobering way to finish the last book – chronologically speaking – in the Old Testament. Not a great ending is it?

Maybe would have been better to end at chapter 12 – we all like good endings! But this is an important chapter - not least because it is realistic! It is so important that when we meet on a Sunday – or at any other time – it is not to escape from reality but to equip ourselves – by God's grace – to face reality!

So what are the lessons for us – what can we take that will help us in OUR call to live as God's people now – and as New Testament believers.

There are two things I have taken from this chapter that I wanted to share with you.

1. "We must not try and live off "Mountain top moments" in our own lives or the life of the Church.

General William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, once said to a group of new officers:

"I want you young men and woman always to bear in mind that it is the nature of a fire to go out; so you must keep it stirred and fed and the ashes removed".

In Chapter 13 Nehemiah discovered that the fires of devotion had gone out in Jerusalem. Remember in Chapters 8 – 12 there was a revival and that period was momentous in Old Testament history. But the reality - recorded for us by Nehemiah - was that it was not sustained.

Should we be surprised?

In the New Testament there is a significant moment in the gospels when Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a mountain where they saw – in a unique and amazing way – His glory. It was called the transfiguration and it was both literally, and spiritually, a mountain top experience. The reaction of the disciples is interesting – something we can surely relate to. They wanted to stay up there and build a shelter and just enjoy the glory for as long as possible.

But Jesus made it clear that they couldn't stay up there and brought them back down to the real world.

I hope that you can look back on your Christian life and recall a "mountain top experience" when God spoke and moved powerfully in your life. It is wonderful and significant when that does happen – something we should praise God for.

But both Scripture – and experience - tells us that our expectation must not be to live permanently on the mountain top.

Would it be good for us to constantly live at that level?

Would we grow in grace if we did?

Would we mature, gain wisdom, develop an inner toughness?

I doubt it.

Let us be realistic and say that we cannot – and should not try to – live for long periods off of a "mountain top" experience. The reality is that life continues to be unpredictable – troubles and trials come in all shapes and sizes. There will always be challenges – things will always be changing – and - as we have learnt in this series – if we are standing up for God's honour and seeking to do his will - there will always be opposition.

Satan's constant attacks on the Church are a reality – but so too is God's refusal to give up on us – which means there will be recurring disappointments alongside the encouragements. Within the struggles and tensions it is easy to get drawn to "quick fix solutions" to try and deliver growth and renewal.

The book of Nehemiah reminds us that there are no instant, easy solutions that deliver long term.

What we are called to – both individually and corporately – is what someone has called "a long obedience in the same direction". The contrast between chapters 10 and 13 reminds us of one of the most important gifts of the spirit – which is the gift of perseverance.

I take that to mean a firm and disciplined commitment to trust God's word - in our weakness and vulnerability to depend on His Spirit - and to bear with one another with Love and grace. If there is not this – then no matter what we may have experienced in the past – we are in danger of drifting towards spiritual compromise and decay.

This brings me on to the second lesson from Nehemiah for us now - which is:

2. "The constant danger of conforming to the world's values."

When Nehemiah returned in Chapter 13 he discovered the people of God had become just like everyone around them – they had lost their distinctiveness.

That remains a snare for us now – certainly the New Testament Church is constantly warned not to conform to the world – not to be squeezed into its mould. It is right there at the end of the Old Testament – and it remains a constant pressure and pull in the present.

Think of the church as a ship. Now a ship is meant for the sea – and the church is meant to be in the world to express God's heart and to bring the light of Christ.

But it is not good if the sea gets into the ship – it is desperate if it gets swamped and sinks.

So beware of compromise with the world – beware that its seductive appeal comes in many forms. Remember we are to challenge its standards - not conform to them.

Francis Shaffer said this: "We are called to live consistently and faithfully with the word God has given – while living in the world God has made"

Chapter 13 is important then as a warning to us not to be conformed and squeezed to all around us – and the reality is to live with Godly values is a huge challenge and a tough calling.

Is it too difficult? Are we not destined to go the same way as those in Nehemiah's day - for who are we to think we are more righteous than the people then?

No – that cannot be the conclusion from this book – certainly not the place where I want to finish our series!

I rather want to finish on an encouraging and inspiring example - and that is Nehemiah himself.

In what way can he encourage and inspire us?

Here how he encourages and inspires me.

His driving passion – from the first to the last chapter - was for the glory of God and the good of the people.

I have been struck by the way he refused to give up and be overwhelmed by the opposition he faced – including that

of disappointment and discouragement. Try to imagine his sense of triumph at the completion of Jerusalem's walls – and the delight at the subsequent spiritual revival that followed. Now consider the despair he felt when he returned to discover that had been replaced by spiritual apathy and a resultant decline and conformity to all around.

Imagine how he felt at that point.

He must have been tempted to think:

“Has it all been worth it – what was all that for?”

What I find both inspiring and challenging is that it didn't crush his faith – it didn't destroy his hope and vision. Chapter 13 records his passion remained undiminished and his Godliness remained radical. His faith was able to survive deep disappointment – his resolve to honour God remained the same throughout the highs and lows.

Have we a resonance here with anyone in the New Testament?

I was struck with the similarity between Nehemiah and the apostle Paul.

Both had a passion for God's honour and the building up of God's people.

Both had to endure opposition in all its various forms.

Both experienced great highs and deep lows in their ministries.

Highs never puffed either of them up to become proud - and the lows never led them to give up hope and abandon the faith.

There is another striking similarity.

They both finished their lives on what seems a disappointing note.

Nehemiah we have looked at – and for Paul it was the same.

When he became a Christian he became a master evangelist and, as the book of Acts records for us, a prolific church planter.

But then read on in the New Testament.

At the end of his life we find him writing letters to Titus and Timothy and he is talking about how sin, unfaithfulness, false teaching, immoral conduct and hard heartedness had crept into the church. In his very last letter he talked about how he had been abandoned by everyone when he stood trial and how he was cold and lonely while he awaited execution in a Roman prison.

This is the last we hear of him.

So in light of that I want to finish with a provocative question.

Would it be accurate to say that Nehemiah and Paul had “successful” ministries?

If the answer is “Yes of course” – why are the people of God they had served seemingly so weak and ineffective at the end of their ministries?

It is a provocative question because it makes us ask what success in Christian ministry actually means.

And surely no one would say that Nehemiah and Paul were failures – have to say certainly not me. Both are great examples in many ways to us.

So, as this is the last talk on Nehemiah what can we take from him to help us keep going and growing and persevering as Christian believers?

One thing that is striking about the book is that it opens in prayer and it closes with a prayer – and no where do we perceive Nehemiah's heart more clearly than his prayers. There are a number of briefer prayers – they are not long and poetic – more like crude, pain soaked cries and – like a number of Psalms – Nehemiah does express how he feels.

I want to finish Nehemiah with one of these prayers in verse 14 of chapter 13:

“Remember me for this, my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services”

This highlights something that made Nehemiah both a great leader and a great example to us – it is that he had a passion to be faithful. He is as zealous and running the race as hard in the final laps as he had in the opening ones – the same faith and obedience at the end as at the beginning.

We have the same with Paul. One of the very last things he wrote from his prison cell was this:

“I have fought the good fight – I have finished the race – I have kept the faith”

He didn't say "I reckon I have had a successful ministry" – because in the end only God can define that term. But Nehemiah and Paul had both been faithful – both held fast to God's truth and righteousness - even when others had let go and given up. Both have inspired countless Christians through the years because of their endurance, perseverance and how they survived the pressure of disappointment – and not only survived but came out of the other end deeper and wiser.

They show us that you cannot separate faithfulness and fruitfulness. They show us that the real measure of spiritual maturity – the place God wants to get us all to – is to be able to keep on keeping on – whether we are discouraged or encouraged - and with a trust and humility that is the same at the top of the mountain as when we find ourselves walking through the valley.

Verse 14:

"Remember me for this, my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services"

Verse 22:

"Remember me my God and show mercy according to your great love".

Nehemiah was determined that he would be remembered for his faithfulness – that is, surely, in the end what counts. We can also be like that – because of God's great mercy and love to us – so let us keep our focus right and guard our hearts.