

Longing For More

Nehemiah 13

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I'm sure many of you will know this picture and event. Steven Bradbury's heroic come from behind victory in the speed skating final of the 2002 Winter Olympics. It's a story that resonates with Aussies right? A true underdog story, rising from the ashes like a phoenix, a win against all odds.

But I wonder if you've ever thought about from the perspective from those who fell? Like Apolo Anton Ohno, the rising superstar of speed skating, who had won every heat, and was leading the race until the last corner when he was tripped by a skater who was then disqualified?

Years of training and preparation, hopes and anticipation, 8 laps of dominance and overcoming all attempts to overtake him, only to falter – tripped – at the last corner. So deflating, so disheartening, hopes dashed in a moment.

I wonder if you've ever experienced something like that: from high hopes to disappointment... It's deflating, discouraging, when high hopes comes crashing down. And that's exactly the experience we have as we come to the end of Nehemiah...

Over the last few weeks we have soared to the heights of revival among God's people. Obstacle after obstacle overcome as the people completed the wall around Jerusalem under Nehemiah's leadership.

And with the wall secure, in chp 8, God's people gathered to hear God's Word. They confessed their sins in repentance (chp 9), they committed themselves to live God's way (chp 10).

They resolved to make Jerusalem a holy city (chp 11) and as we heard last week, dedicated the wall and joyfully celebrated and gave generously in worship of their God (chp 12). And that would have been such a wonderful note to finish this book on. Except it's not the end. We have chp 13.

It all comes crashing down with a dose of realism. In v.6 we are given the context that after 12 years in Jerusalem, 12 years of determined leadership, Nehemiah has led the people in rebuilding the wall, he's fortified their wills as they joyfully committed themselves to live by God's Word, but then he left.

Returned to his post in service to the Persian King Artaxerxes. And we aren't told how long he was away, but it seems several years, and after being given permission to return to Jerusalem, this chapter is sadly the catalogue of sins he finds upon returning. Revival has quickly led to regression.

A regression and discouragement that is only heightened by what seems like a promising start in vv.1-3. We are told *at that time* (v.1), that is, at the same time, the same very day they were shouting for joy (12:43) and giving generously to the temple (12:44), they also read from the Book of Moses.

And they come to Deuteronomy 23 which is referenced in v.1, *that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God*. They are to be excluded because of their response to and treatment of God's people, denying them food and water and hiring Balaam to curse them.

Now this restriction was not so much about race but about their rejection of God himself. And we know it was not absolute because we have examples like Ruth, the Moabitess, coming to faith in the God of Israel then became the great grandmother of Israel's greatest King David.

But notice what God's people do with God's Word in v.3: ³ *When they heard the law, they separated all those of mixed descent from Israel.*

They commit themselves to obey God's Word, in fact they go beyond it, separating from or excluding all those who are not from Israel, not simply Ammon or Moab. Now on the surface, this seems a positive picture of their determination to obey. In fact they go above and beyond what is called for.

Could it be the exile has taught them a lesson of the importance of obeying God's Word and purifying their worship? Yet sadly, all it does is expose them, for although they talk a big talk, they don't walk the walk. The contrast between v.3 and what follows is meant to be shocking.

It is one thing to shout for joy and make grand gestures when in a great assembly, and entirely another to be faithful and consistent daily or in private. Or we might say it's one thing to sing for joy at church on Sunday, and another to be generous, patient, forgiving, in the home and workplace.

Especially when it's hard or costly or makes you stand out from others. And so with that great commitment and resolve hanging in the background, Nehemiah tells us what he found as he walks the streets of the city that once shouted for joy and even swore an oath, put themselves under a curse in 10:29, that they would carefully follow and obey all of God's law...

And the first thing he finds is God's House, the temple, is completely neglected. In v.4 we are told that Eliashib the priest has given Tobiah a large room in the temple. A kind of warehouse used to store the people's tithes and giving has been cleared out and repurposed as Tobiah's apartment.

Now that's strange and inappropriate on the one hand, but completely ludicrous if you recall what we know about Tobiah! Firstly, he's an Ammonite (2:10), the very nation listed in the Law of Moses they read from in v.3 as they committed to exclude *all* foreigners from the assembly of God!

But secondly, Tobiah has been opposing the rebuilding of the wall from the start! He accused them of false motives (2:19); mocked the quality of their work (4:3); sought to undermine Nehemiah's leadership (6:14) and intimidate him until he stopped.

Here is the enemy of God's people living rent free in the house of God. At the heart of the people's worship of God is the rejection of God. And how did this happen? Well v.4 tells us that Tobiah is a *relative of Tobiah*, that is an idiom for related by marriage. They've become in-laws.

This is nepotism at its finest. Family has triumphed over faith. Yet there a second tragedy here that the room is empty of all the grain offerings and giving of the people to the temple. Not because of Tobiah, but because the people aren't giving anything.

¹⁰ *I also found out that because the portions for the Levites had not been given, each of the Levites and the singers performing the service had gone back to his own field.*

The Levites and singers who worked at the temple, were meant to be provided for by the giving to the temple. But empty storehouses means no food, so unsurprising they leave to return to their fields to work and thus be able to eat.

Yet this means the temple is essentially abandoned (Except for Tobiah the enemy!). It's a clear picture of how impoverished their spiritual life has become. God's temple is deserted, God's servants are mistreated, and so God's Word is not taught, revered, or obeyed. Worship is neglected.

And how could this happen? Didn't they know? Couldn't they have got together and committed themselves not to neglect the house of God? Well that's exactly what they did in 10:39!

Nehemiah rebuilt their wall, revived their commitment to obey, yet it's not enough. And with God's temple neglected and no one teaching God's Word, it's not surprising that their distinctive living as God's holy people drifted and distorted into what everyone else was doing...

We see that in v.15 as Nehemiah finds them buying, trading, selling, and treading on the Sabbath. ¹⁵*All kinds of goods were being brought to Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. So I warned them against selling food on that day.*

And how did this happen? Well the Tyrians (v.16), the people from the foreign nation Tyre, are bringing in all their exotic imported goods. And how did they get there? They live there!

Do you know what they should have done? They should have committed to getting rid of foreign influences on them that would cause them to disobey God! They should have pledged themselves to obey the Sabbath as they found it in God's Word!

But that's exactly what they did: v.3 and *10:31 When the surrounding peoples bring merchandise or any kind of grain to sell on the Sabbath day, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or a holy day.*

The Sabbath was meant to be such a clear and beautiful picture of their distinctive values as God's people. This rest was not just a sign of their beautiful freedom, that they were no longer slaves, but that they rested in God as their source of security and satisfaction.

It was not to show how relaxed they were but how content in God they were: he had saved them, set them free, made them his people. Work was not their god, income and financial security was not their god. Rest and gathering for worship on the Sabbath was such a clear picture of their difference.

But it was gone. God's house and God's day are corrupted, their worship is compromised. So it's not surprising that so is their home life in v.23. *23 In those days I also saw Jews who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. 24 Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples but could not speak Hebrew.*

Notice the issue here, as we heard in chp 10, is not racial purity but spiritual. The issue of intermarriage with people from other nations is not their race but their god. Nehemiah says that half the children didn't speak Hebrew meaning they could not understand the word of God, couldn't participate in the worship of God – but they could do all that for the gods and religion of Ashdod.

Do you know what they should have done? What would have surely avoided all this? They should have seen the danger and committed themselves not to do it... *10:30 We will not give our daughters in marriage to the surrounding peoples and will not take their daughters as wives for our sons.*

This is God's holy people. Full of joy-filled praise in one moment, making bold declarations to be faithful, yet totally compromised in their worship, in the workplace, and in the home.

And so here is a sobering reminder and warning that living as God's holy people, the Christian life, is not merely a matter of set and forget. Exuberant joy and worship today is not a guarantee of faithfulness tomorrow. Godliness is not merely a matter of good intentions and big talk.

I saw this post about exercise that captured it beautifully: "I run everyday for 20 minutes and if I miss a day, I add 20 minutes to next day. This has truly been a game changer! Tomorrow I'm supposed to run for 4 months!" And yet isn't that sometimes exactly what our holiness is like?

And perhaps what is so sobering about this story and their spiritual decay, their big talk alongside a completely compromised life is that it's kind of familiar right? Aren't we, likewise, so capable of singing joyfully, praying big prayers, saying the right thing, all while drifting into worldliness?

Raymond Brown helpfully points to what Neh 13 shows us: "Every believer needs a greater sensitivity to sin. All too easily, the ugly thing gradually becomes tolerated, even viewed as possibly a useful thing, then the permissible thing, and finally the attractive thing... "It does not happen in a moment. Standards are lowered gradually and imperceptibly. Sin becomes known by another name..."

You see it's possible to call it living for God, yet ultimately be more shaped by our materialism, greed, family, and our surrounding culture. To call it worship but ultimately be relying on something or someone else for your security and satisfaction that loses all distinctiveness from the world.

Vigilance is needed if we are going to not simply commit or declare our intent to live God's way but follow through. Yes we need more than weekly gathering or good time on Sunday.

Which is what Nehemiah brings as he comes in like a righteous wrecking ball with a whole-hearted passion to see this community follow through on their commitment and calling to be God's holy people. Reforms that urge the people to see the danger and cost of their compromise.

And he does this firstly, by consistently calling out sin for what it is. Three times he rebukes the people for the what they are doing (v.11, 17, 25). Twice he warns the people (v.15, 21). He calls them out! And why? Why does he do this?

It's not because this isn't the vision he had for them or he doesn't like it. This is not about preference or opinion for Nehemiah. This is not a matter of him imposing his own ideals on them. And it's important to clarify that because unless we understand what is happening and what sin is and what's at stake, we will never be willing to do similar.

Because can you imagine how unpopular this made him? Can you imagine the conversations about him? The way they talked about his return to Jerusalem? The pushback he would have received?

Rebuking and call out sin is never going to make you popular. It won't be fun or easy. It will be costly, awkward, uncomfortable. So why does he do it? Why would we do it as part of our life together as a community of believers committed to living as God's holy people?

Because you sin for what it is: it is wicked; an insult to a holy, loving, generous yet just God.

¹⁷ *What is this evil you are doing—profaning the Sabbath day? ²⁷ Why then should we hear about you doing all this terrible evil and acting unfaithfully against our God*

He does this, he says this, because he's shaped by God's word and God's perspective. In v.18 he says this is the same evil God punished by sending them into exile. Sin might look attractive, promise much, but it brings death. They are just rekindling God's anger.

We see the same in v.²⁶ *Didn't King Solomon of Israel sin in matters like this? There was not a king like him among many nations. He was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel, yet foreign women drew him into sin.*

He calls out sin for what it is, he rebukes, warns, teaches, and admonishes, just as we are to do as God's Word dwells richly among us (Col 3:16). There can be no living as God's holy people, no spiritual progress, unless we see in for what it is, what it does, what it deserves.

But unlike the people, Nehemiah is not merely a man of words. Secondly, he takes radical action. In v.8, he evicts Tobiah. Without much subtlety he just throws all his stuff out of the temple. Without compromise or negotiation, he removes him - a clean break with what ought not to be there. Out with old and in with the oil in v.12 as the people are stirred to actually give to the house of God.

In v.19, on the eve of the Sabbath, he shuts the gates of the newly built wall to keep out the traders. And when people camp outside the gates like a Boxing Day sale, he gets rid of them with a warning not to come back, persisting until they don't return (vv.20-21).

He implements boundaries and accountability because, thirdly, he involves the whole community. As the people return to giving to the temple, he appoints trustworthy people in v.13 to oversee its distribution. In v.19, he posts people at the gate to avoid trade on the Sabbath. In v.22 he has the Levites purify themselves then also stand guard.

He mobilises the Levites in v.30 to resume their duties as priests. He makes provisions for the temple worship to ensure they keep happening. He is putting holiness on the agenda of all the people because holiness should be the concern of all of God's people.

Zeal for God's glory through God's holy people is to be the priority of all of God's people. In the words of Hebrews 3, we are to ¹² *Watch out, brothers and sisters, so that there won't be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God*

So much of what Nehemiah implements and encourages here is helpful, needed, and wise for us as we seek to live as God's holy people (See the references). Yet at the same time, we immediately have this lingering question of will it last? Is it even worth it?

Because as Nehemiah rightly and passionately puts holiness on the agenda of all the people, things get concerning and messy. We kind of sense his desperation kicking in as he

threatens the people that he'll essentially beat them up in v.21 if they try to trade on the Sabbath.

As they people put themselves under oath, under a curse to obey God's Word - Nehemiah decides to bring that curse on them in v.25. He beats them and pulls out their beard hair to shame them. He forces them to take an oath, to do what they promised to do in obedience to God.

And you can't help but kind of think what is he doing? One books I read on Nehemiah called this chapter "When Leaders Lose It!"

And I think Nehemiah's actions are not recorded here to be commended or imitated. This is not 'how to get a holy church in a week' or 'godly leadership 101'.

His actions really just contribute to that overall deflating feeling of the spiritual decline of the whole community despite the success of the wall and what they promised. Yet tragically Nehemiah's reforms aren't going to make any lasting difference.

It seems so clear and obvious that as soon as he leaves the people will just compromise and regress. And so while we rightly see the unhelpful measures he uses, what is so clear is how seriously he takes sin, how passionately he longs for God to be glorified through his set apart people living faithfully as a holy community shaped by God's Word.

Before we criticise and dismiss him we must surely reflect if in any way we share his zeal for holiness in ourselves and in each other?

As we see God's people recapitulate into sin and even feel how often we are just like them – does it leaving us longing for more? I think the book deliberately ends this way to give us that longing. To be God's holy people we need more than a good leader, more than the security of a wall, even more than a fortified will that commits to do the right thing.

We need more! I think Nehemiah himself gets that. Four times he prays that God would *Remember!* (v.14, 22, 29, 31). ¹⁴*Remember me for this, my God, and don't erase the deeds of faithful love I have done for the house of my God and for its services.* ²²*Remember me for this also, my God, and look on me with compassion according to the abundance of your faithful love.*

Now some see this as Nehemiah trying to separate himself from the people. A kind of a Pharisee and Tax Collector at the temple situation – remember how hard I tried – I'm not like them! But that's not what I think is going on at all.

To ask God to remember is to ask God to act according to his character and promise. His prayer reflects a deep awareness of the weakness, incapacity, and sinfulness of humanity. That unless God remembers and is faithful Nehemiah knows his efforts will ultimately be ineffective.

God don't forget how sinful and frail your people are. Remember and provide for our unholy hearts and weak wills. Remember and enable us to be your holy people. It's the prayer of someone who knows that walls and wills are not enough. He is praying, longing for more.

One commentator puts it this way: "It is as though the book is pointing to its own failure, reminding us that however important good structures and routines may be... nothing can substitute for the renewal of the naturally perverse inclinations of the human heart."

So while Nehemiah 13 is probably not how we might have ended the story, perhaps not how we would want the story to finish, but it is the story we need. Because it reminds us that being a Christian is not a self-improvement project. Not about turning over a new leaf and trying again.

It's not about a positive mind set and some new boundaries that will help us on the journey to finally living a holy enough life for God to be pleased with us. It's about a longing and need for a complete transformation that we can not achieve ourselves – a work only the gracious God can do. And he has.

Almost 500 years after this prayer, another entered that same temple and like Nehemiah drove out that which should not be there as he purified the people's worship of God. In the coming of Jesus we know that God has remembered his promises and provided all we need to be his holy people.

In Jesus we have one who, like Nehemiah, calls out our sin and hypocrisy but in order to offer us forgiveness through his death in our place. One who comes not to threaten and impose on us the curse for our disobedience but take it on himself to set us free from the power and penalty of sin.

In Jesus we have a security so much greater than a wall to keep the world out, we have the gift of Christ's own righteousness imputed to us. We have new hearts and new wills given as a gift through the Holy Spirit, just as was promised in Jeremiah and Ezekiel as God establishes a New Covenant.

A New Covenant Jesus has secured by his blood as we will remember and celebrate shortly in the Lord's Supper. As Paul says in 1Corinthians 1:³⁰ *you are in Christ Jesus, who became wisdom from God for us—our righteousness, sanctification [holiness], and redemption.*

In Christ we are never alone, with the Holy Spirit poured into our hearts who constantly helps us, always at work to make us more like Christ, to stop our zeal from crumbling, our faith from fading, our love from cooling, and our holiness eroding.

And so if you can see a similar deflating pattern of Nehemiah 13 in your own holiness, if you find yourself joyful and committed on the one hand, yet so easily drifting into

compromise on the other, look afresh on the one knows you completely and has given you all you need to be his holy people.

As Peter says, ³*His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.* (2Peter 1:3)

Isn't it wonderful that saved by Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, our commitment to holiness is never one made under threat, never a begrudging burden, nor a wasted effort that's doomed to fail. In Christ our efforts for holiness are the joyful pursuit of becoming more of what He has made us to be.

The joy of seeing the horror of our sin and not be crushed by it but confess it to find forgiveness. The joy of being part of a community that calls out sin and restores each other by pointing one another to the boundless riches we have in the Gospel.

As we resolve to take responsibility for our call to be God's holy people, seeking first his kingdom and righteousness, proclaiming good news to a needy world and building up Christ's church, let Nehemiah point you to Jesus to delight that he is and has given us so much more than an example to follow, but one who loves us, has died for us, and clothed us in his righteousness.

I close with helpful words of Dane Ortlund in his book 'Deeper': "If you feel stuck, defeated by old sin patterns, leverage that despair into a healthy sense of self-futility that is the door through which you must pass if you are to get real spiritual traction... We must go there. But we dare not stay there... it must melt us afresh into a deeper fellowship with Jesus..."

Let that despair take you way down deep into honesty with yourself. For there you will find a friend, the living Lord Jesus, who will startle and surprise you with his gentle goodness as you leave Self behind, in repentance, and bank on him afresh, in faith."

Let's pray.