

Not happily ever after Nehemiah 13

Nobody likes an anticlimax. Imagine *The Greatest Showman* finishing with the Big Top tent catching fire too. Or *Snow White* finishing with the dwarves getting evicted from their house for failing to make the rent. We really like our stories to finish, 'And they all lived happily ever after.' But this one doesn't.

Nehemiah feels like it should finish at the high point in Nehemiah 12. The walls all built up, the people of God all restored and changed by God's Word and prayer, the city getting filled up again, the joy and celebration of the whole community gathering. In that impressive scene of two massive choirs walking the walls of Jerusalem singing their hearts out with the orchestra playing, *that's* the bit where it feels like the credits should roll and the story should end.

But then we get Nehemiah 13. And it's such a *downer*. It feels like everything that had been won gets lost. All the renewal and unity and joy and commitment to God is suddenly emptied out for this going back to old ways, unfaithfulness, compromise. And the way it's all dealt with feels cold and sharp.

Can you think of a film, TV show, book or real life experience that finishes with an anticlimax? What does experiencing that feel like?

We read in vv.6-7 that Nehemiah had been away - he'd returned to Babylon where he worked for the King, his secondment to Jerusalem over. But now he'd been given permission to return to see how things were going.

And it seems like when Nehemiah's back was turned, everybody went back to their old ways. Everything that God's people committed to together *in writing* in chapter 10, they have broken their word on.

The people declared in 10:39, 'We will not neglect the house of our God.' But Nehemiah pointedly asks in 13:11, 'Why is the house of God neglected?'

vv.10-11 describe how the gifts that God's people had signed up to give, weren't being given. So ministry in God's house couldn't happen. People relying on those gifts for their livelihoods headed out of Jerusalem to find another way to provide for their families. The mission and ministry of the place had been replaced by renting out offices for an enemy to the LORD and His people.

The Tobiah mentioned in these vv.4-9 is the same guy that had been threatening God's people as they built the walls of Jerusalem. And now here he is, worming his way in to the house of God, compromising it from the inside.

The people declared in 10:31, 'We will not buy merchandise from the neighbouring peoples on the Sabbath.' But 13:15-22 tells us that they blew that one, too. And the leaders were going first, v.17 tells us. All through the book, the leaders of God's people set the rudder and the example in bold, sacrificial faith. Now they're setting the rudder and example the other way. A cautionary tale there for those who lead.

Nehemiah describes these actions as 'desecrating' the Sabbath - he uses that word twice in vv.17-18. Not just 'failing to make the most of the Sabbath' or 'doing some damage to the idea of Sabbath' - '*desecrating* the Sabbath.' The Sabbath was one of the most defining things about God's people, the thing that made them stand out and be distinct as those belonging to the LORD. But it was just another day at the shops now.

The people declared in 10:30, 'We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons.' But in 13:23-29, they're marrying Moabites and Ammonites. This isn't about race or ethnicity. It's about uniting with people with a track record of turning the hearts of God's people from worshipping Him to worshipping other things (vv. 26-27), and raising children who don't know how to speak to God (v.24).

I'm guessing you probably know what those people of God felt like. Because you remember making commitments to God, you remember saying, 'I'm not going to live like that any more!' - and then you did anyway. You know what it feels like to be called out on that.

You probably think you're the only one in the room who feels that way; that you're the fraud in a room full of good Christian people who only ever do the things they committed to God to do. But you're not the only one. Most of us feel the same as you, and those of us that don't probably should. We've done the opposite of the things we committed to God to do. Or that we committed to stop doing. We have not been what God called us and rescued us to be.

Do you ever feel like you keep breaking commitments to God, even though you honestly meant to keep them? How do you deal with that?

All of the issues in Nehemiah 13 - providing for God's house, observing the Sabbath, who believers married - were becoming issues because God's people were living in a new context now. They used to live physically separately from other nations. Now, after being deported and resettled and all of the population change around Jerusalem, they were living shoulder to shoulder with people of different nationalities, beliefs and cultures. So, a lot more like our world.

How are Christians to live faithfully to God in 21st century Inverness when it comes to the three issues in Nehemiah 13? I think the starting point is the same for all three. We need to remember who we are. We are, first and foremost, adopted children of the living God. Your relationship with God is the primary and defining relationship of your life.

And faithful choices prioritise that. Anything we choose that draws us further *away* from that relationship is a wrong choice. All three of these things we tend to treat too lightly, because we don't weigh them heavily. We treat these things as stuff not to think about too much or as simply a matter of opinion, rather than being prayerful and careful about how to love God more than anything else in these decisions.

So when it comes to providing for God's house, making a commitment to give, not to 'pay your way,' but out of love and worship to our God, is an expression of Him being first in our hearts, minds, and even our finances.

When it comes to observing the Sabbath, thinking about how we take time to rest and refresh the way God designed us to need it, and be recreated in time with Him, is an expression of wanting to *be* with Him more than anyone else. Can it be on a Sunday alongside the community resting and worshipping together? If not, when in the week will it be? Whose help do I need to get time away from screaming kids or an elderly parent needing constant care?

Now, what about marrying people who don't worship the Lord as you do? Well, the conclusion of Nehemiah 13 is that 'marrying those who don't worship the Lord leads to hearts turned away from the Lord.' That's what they found both in Scripture and experience.

In Scripture, as in 13:1-3 they look back to Numbers 25, where God's people start marrying Moabites who lead them to worship other gods. And as Nehemiah points back in 13:26 to the story of Solomon in 1 Kings. In 1 Kings 9, Solomon preaches to God's people not to go after other gods, but just two

chapters on in 1 Kings 11 we read that he started worshipping the gods of the women he married.

That's a pretty consistent theme throughout the Old Testament. It's never about race or ethnicity - there had *always* been provision for people of other nations to come and worship the Lord as God, and a great example of that is in the story of Ruth. There's a whole book in the Bible about a Moabite, no less, becoming a worshipper of the Lord and also the great-grandmother of King David and the ancestor of Jesus.

The issue is about hearts drawn away from God to worship other things. It's easy to say, 'But my boyfriend/girlfriend/partner doesn't worship the Baal of Peor, or any god for that matter, and they're quite happy for me to have my faith.' But the reality is, everyone's got something that's king and god in their life. That steers the heart; sets the path. And if it's not the Lord, it's something else.

On into the New Testament, Paul talks about it this way in 2 Corinthians 6:14-16 - 'Do not be yoked together with unbelievers... What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said, "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people."'

Now this passage is not explicitly or exclusively about marriage. But there's no human experience of yoking - being bound together to walk in the same direction for the long haul - as deep and significant as marriage.

When someone who has committed their life to following Jesus marries someone who hasn't, you're going to get this pulling in different directions. And that's going to hurt. Because the counter-worldly Jesus says, 'Follow me,' and you do. But they don't. Or maybe, neither of you do.

Here's the question - is marrying this person going to help me follow the Lord more whole heartedly, or cause me to pull away from the Lord? And from what I've observed in Scripture, and bitter experience, Christians beginning relationships with those who aren't Christians almost always leads to the pulling away, and marrying those who aren't Christians leads to pulling away from God at worst, or pain in the different paths you walk at best.

That's why Paul does spell it out clearly in 1 Corinthians 7:39. In a chapter all about marriage, Paul tells Christians widows that they're free to marry again,

but of course, 'he must belong to the Lord.' Earlier in that chapter though, he also writes this in vv.12-16...

'If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him... How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?'

People sometimes use this passage to say, 'Look, it's okay if I marry someone who doesn't believe in Jesus! Maybe they'll come to faith through it?' But the passage doesn't invite us into these marriages. It tells us to stay in them if that's where we already are. God doesn't want marriages torn apart for this.

Paul was living at a time where people were becoming Christians with no background of faith in Jesus. A bit like today. One person in a marriage might have come to faith, the other hadn't (yet). Should they stay together? Paul says, 'yes!'

This is quite different to how Nehemiah and also Ezra deal with things at the end of their books when they find God's people married to those who worshipped other gods. I think they got it wrong. We'll come to that in a minute.

But here's how I'd sum up what God's Word says about marriages between someone whose first love is Jesus, and someone who doesn't follow Him. If you're not in that marriage, don't get into it. And if you are in that marriage, don't come out of it.

God's heart behind both those things is the same - that we wouldn't treat marriage lightly, that we'd weigh it more heavily, and that our relationship with Him would be the primary and defining relationship of our lives.

What things do you find pull you away from loving God? How do you deal with that?

Nehemiah finishes in chapter 13 with a cold and ugly feel to it. Look at how Nehemiah behaves. He's throwing stuff out in v.8, threatening to beat people up in v.21, actually beating people up in v.25. At the end of the book of Ezra, Ezra is literally tearing his hair out over the people's sin in marrying

those whom they knew would lead them astray from God. We read in Nehemiah that he's literally tearing *other people's* hair out over this!

The final chapters of Ezra describe how Ezra and all the people unite to take action. They're convicted of their sin, and they've decided they're going to do something about it. They're going to break up those offending marriages. They're going to send all the foreigners away.

We read something similar in Nehemiah 13:1-3 - the people read in their Bibles that no Ammonites or Moabites should ever be admitted into the gathered worship of the Lord, because these people had a track record of pulling people away from God. So they decide to chuck *all* the foreigners out.

But God didn't tell them to do any of this! Where do we read 'and they prayed, asking God what they should do in response'? In Ezra 9, they do the 'God, we're sorry' prayer. But then they all get up and take matters into their own hands to try to fix it themselves. And they throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Or rather, they throw all the foreigners out with the Moabites and Ammonites. They have no regard for those who have put their trust in the LORD. They break up families and deport people. Don Carson says, 'they try to become more holy than God.'

What should have been a revival becomes a purge. We don't see the beauty of open hearts weeping over sin and celebrating over God's faithfulness to forgive like we did a couple of chapters back. We see violence, tearing up and throwing out, as human beings trying to be holy stomp all over other people ordering them to change.

There's a huge lesson in here about how we respond to the sin that we see in ourselves, and in our society. *We can't fix ourselves or the world around us, and we should stop acting like we can.*

When we see sin in ourselves, we either tell ourselves to try harder and do better, or we give up trying and let that sin in to root and to rule. And when we see sin in our society or our churches, we can throw our weight around like Nehemiah does, shouting about specks in other people's eyes entirely blind to the log in our own eye marked 'bitterness, coldness, resentment and superiority.' None of this works. No-one's calling out to God.

We also see Nehemiah repeating a few too many times, 'Remember me, God, for everything I've done for you.' At the end of each section on what *he* does about the house of God being neglected, what *he* does about the Sabbath being desecrated, what *he* does about God's people marrying those who don't worship Him, he says, 'Look at me, God.'

v.14, 'Look at what I did for you.' v.22, 'Look what *else* I did for you.' v.29, 'Look at what *they've* done that's so awful.' And then vv.30-31, 'I sorted out the mess God. I also shelled out for that expensive wood for worship. Look at me, remember me.'

Do you know who he reminds me of? The older son in Jesus' parable in Luke 15. 'This other son of yours has blown all your money on whores! And you're throwing him a party?!? Look at me, look at all I've done for you! Where would you be without me living so well and putting things right, eh, God?'

The Old Testament doesn't do many happily ever afters. It's full of anticlimaxes. It's full of those stories that are like our own lives - we really meant to follow you God, but then we fell down again. It keeps making you feel, 'there's got to be something more, something better.' It keeps pointing you forward to something - *someone* - who is.

We really, really need Jesus. We need someone who can deal with the sin inside of me, and the sin I see around me. Someone whose name we can call on to discover real forgiveness, real renewal, real transformation, power to break the constant cycle of trying and failing that we all know too well.

Jesus lived, and He both challenged people and encouraged people with an incredible restorative gentleness that brought about real transformation. He died, next to a criminal on another cross who said 'remember me - not because of any good I've done but because I know you can forgive all the badness in me'. He rose, and with Him all of us who will call on His name.

The human heart loves a happily ever after, but it never quite finds one in real life in all the places it searches for it - until it knows this story. The one that really does go on ever after.

I think God wants to say something to us today in two verses that, when I read them this week, popped out at me and sat with me. (Watch out for those, for what God is saying to you and to our church.) And I think they're verses that are teaching us to do what Nehemiah forgot to do. Verses that tell us what to do instead of trying to fix our own lives or fix other people's.

2 Chronicles 7:14 - '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 I will hear from Heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.'

Acts 3:19 - 'Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.'

You and me, and this church, and this city - we all need transformation. We all need healing. We all need refreshing. But it isn't going to come from one or two zealous leaders beating us up and telling us to behave better. It's going to come when we *all* get gripped by a need, a thirst for God, and we get down on our knees and pray.

'If *my people*' - all of us - 'who are called by *my name*' - this is who we are, the children of God, belonging to Him, representing Him in this world, those whose identity and first relationship is in Him - if we will *all* 'humble ourselves and pray and seek His face and turn from our wicked ways...' (or, 'Repent and turn to God so that our sins may be wiped out...') - what will happen?

Sins wiped out. The healing of the land. Times of refreshing. Do you want that? Do you want that more than you want the things that have been pulling your heart away from our God? Do you sense the prompting of the Holy Spirit of God telling us - all of us, together - now's the time to get real, get honest about wandering off, get down on your knees, and get made new by the One person who can really do that - Jesus Christ?

'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 I will hear from Heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.'

That's where the happily ever after stories will start to break out.