

# An Unhappy Ending?

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Preacher: Johan DeJong

[ 0 : 00 ] As we come to God's Word this morning, do have that passage open, Nehemiah chapter 13. Before we start, let's just take a moment, perhaps bow your head, close your eyes, prepare your heart to hear from the Lord, from His Word.

What's the hallmark of a great story, do you think, a true story?

You need a good plot, certainly. Good characters. I think actually the mark of a true story, a really good story, is that it's both deeply realistic and it's really hopeful as well.

You need a good plot and the engaging characters. The thing is, if they're caricatures, really, and the world of the story is too shallow, then it doesn't grip us, does it?

We need realism. We need hopefulness. It's been great to be in Nehemiah together as a church, hasn't it, these last few weeks. Nehemiah 13 seals the whole book of Nehemiah with the hallmarks of a true story.

[ 1 : 40 ] Because there's realism and there's hopefulness. It ties together all the different themes that we've seen in the book. It tells us what the world is like.

It tells us that there is a hero and that there is hope. I wonder, as we were reading this passage, were you waiting for the happy ending? It's not really a happy ending, this chapter, is it?

In fact, it breaks into three sections, each describing an unhappy reality of what people are like. How God's people have broken faith with God.

And each of those sections ends with those prayers that we heard read from Nehemiah to God. The first one's a sort of a top and a tail. The theme at the beginning is the theme at the end as well.

And it's told from the point of view of Nehemiah. So we're back into kind of first person, Nehemiah speaking. And in the story we find faithless folk, a lonely leader, and the need for a superior shepherd.

[ 2 : 48 ] So if you like your alliterations, then today is your day. And the story is really unfinished, isn't it? You can feel that. But there are hints in it that point to another ending.

So let's get into the meat of this. It'll be good to have it open today because we're going to be looking back and forth quite a bit in the passage. First of all, we find faithless folk.

This week, in preparation for preaching, I was researching sheep. I know, it's great life being a pastor. You get to research sheep. There's a story of two sheep being rescued in Wales, 2001, from a cliff face.

You might be thinking, why that story? Surely that sort of thing happens all the time. That's true.

Sheep do tend to get stuck on cliff faces all the time. But this one made the news because after being rescued at great expense and great difficulty and brought back to where they were safe with the rest of the flock, they promptly escaped and went straight back to the cliff face.

And apparently that's quite a common phenomenon in sheepology. We didn't know there was such a thing. There is. Sheepology. Sheep, apparently, they like to choose the known over the safe.

[ 4 : 10 ] So if they've been at pasture somewhere, whether it's good or bad, because they have been there and eaten there, it gets imprinted on their fairly simple brains, doesn't it? So when they're led away from danger, unless there's a fairly strong shepherd to keep them where it's safe, they go straight back to where they know, even if it's dangerous.

And that's what Israel have done here. That's what people are like. Faithless folk. And we see this really in three broken promises.

You remember if you were here a couple of weeks ago that we saw Israel coming to God and saying, yes, that is what we're like. We are faithless. But we want to promise now to be faithful. They made a commitment to God, didn't they? They made three promises. And here they break them all. Here's the first one. Broken promise number one. We will keep ourselves pure.

Somebody just flick back to chapter 10, verse 30 for me and read that out. I haven't prompted anybody, so I'm relying on your kindness. Chapter 10, verse 30.

[ 5 : 19 ] If you get there, just read it out for me. We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the people around us or to take their daughters to our sons. Thank you, Bob.

Here we are in chapter 13, verse 23. Moreover, in those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples and did not know how to speak the language of Judah, which means, of course, they didn't know how to read the word of God.

Do you see? The problem here is that the people have not kept pure. And we saw in the passage where that ended up. Both Tobiah, enemy number two, and Sanballat, enemy number one, were inside the gates.

In fact, they were even inside God's house. And they're the ones who tried to stop the wall, that wall that represents safety, protection, security, salvation, rest.

They tried to stop it being built in the first place. Verse 26 tells us the problem very clearly using the picture of King Solomon. Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon, king of Israel, sinned?

[ 6 : 35 ] Among the many nations, there was no king like him. He was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel. But even he was led into sin by these women.

See? Even the greatest of God's people get led into sin. Now, what does that mean for us today? Does that mean we should get divorced if we're married to somebody who's not a believer?

No, that's not what it means. And actually, the New Testament makes that very clear. If you were to turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 7, and verse 12, Paul is talking.

He's giving instructions about exactly this. And he says, middle of the verse, 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's willing to live with her, she must not divorce him.

So for us today, as in so many ways, in the new covenant, it is not a question of ethnic purity. And of course, it wasn't here either, really.

[ 7 : 39 ] It is a question of spiritual purity. The call is not to get rid of all outsiders because we know from the rest of the Old Testament that Israel was the most welcoming society for outsiders and accorded them the same privileges, provided they were willing to follow the Lord, as a natural-born Israelite.

So this is not we hate foreigners. This is to make sure that we are distinct from them, that we do not become like them and so are pulled away from Jesus and end up back in exile again.

Not because people who are not believers are evil through and through. That's not what the Bible says. But because they are not walking the same path. They are not walking with God.

That is a very painful reality for some of us, isn't it? God's people are to be pure. We walk God's way.

That's why we teach the Bible. That's why we have a basis of faith. That's why we promote membership. It's not because we're difficult or dogmatic. It's because otherwise we just dissolve into the rest of society.

[ 8 : 49 ] And that's why the churches who have abandoned the Bible no longer bothered about it are the ones that are shrinking. Friends, we should love things that protect our purity.

We should take it seriously because God does. Broken promise number two. We will not neglect God's house.

Flick back again to chapter 10. Somebody can find the very end there. Just read out the last phrase. It's verse 39. We will not neglect the house of God.

We will not neglect the house of our God. And here we are. The rooms that used to be full of God's things are full of the enemy's things.

Those who are set aside, who have given up their own bread winning to serve in God's house, have had to go back to their fields to put bread on the table because Israel has stopped giving to God's house.

[ 10 : 02 ] Chapter 13, verse 11. What does Nehemiah ask? Why is the house of God neglected? It's clear, isn't it?

And it's still a thing. It's easy for us to fall into this trap, isn't it? Resources slowly divert away from God's work, God's house. Our possessions start to take the place of things that belong to the Lord. Jesus was willing to give up his life for the church. That's how precious he felt it was. Broken promise number three.

We will rest in God alone. So, again, back to chapter 10, verse 31. 31a. If anybody's got that. If you can just read it out, that would be good. Amen. When the neighbouring people research the Bible of the grave to tell on the Sabbath, we will not lie to them on the Sabbath or any holy day. [11:19] Fantastic. Thank you. Here we are in chapter 13, looking at verses 17 and 18. I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, what is this wicked thing you are doing, desecrating the Sabbath day?

And the verses before that tell us that they were doing exactly what they had promised not to do, buying and selling on the Sabbath. That hard-won rest within the rebuilt walls, that safety, Sabbath safety, which was supposed to be a haven and a hope for everybody around them forever. It was being literally traded away for more food, more stuff. This is not happy news, is it? But it is real. It has the hallmarks of a true story. The truth is we are forgetful folk, even when all of God's blessings are ours to enjoy.

And if we don't believe that, then actually we are doing exactly the thing that Israel did in this passage, going along with the world's way of thinking instead of what God's word tells us.

[12:31] We are like sheep. We go our own way. We choose the familiarity of satisfying our stomachs from the pastures that we know, whatever form that takes in our lives.

We run straight back to failings and flaws, even when it's danger. Paul puts it like this in Romans chapter 7.

Romans chapter 7, verse 15. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do. But what I hate, I do.

For I have the desire, verse 18, to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do. This I keep on doing.

That's our problem, isn't it? Who will help us? Faithless folk. But the other element in this story that we can't miss is Nehemiah, the lonely leader.

[13:41] Do you remember right at the beginning of Nehemiah, we saw that Nehemiah gave up comfortable life, status, security, as the servant of King Artaxerxes in Susa.

He gave it all up to come to Jerusalem to a pile of rubble. And here we see the same thing again. Because what has Nehemiah done?

We learn in verses 6 and 7a, he's not in Jerusalem. All the joy, all the progress, that Sabbath rest, that security, the worship that we saw last week.

He's given that all up. He's made another sacrifice in order to keep his promise to King Artaxerxes and go and serve again in a foreign land, far away from his home.

But he hasn't forgotten Jerusalem and he comes back. After his solitary sacrifice, he comes back. And what happens? Like Moses coming down from Sinai, he finds a big mess that the other leaders have apparently just allowed to happen.

[14:50] And he alone, just as he made that sacrifice alone, he alone remembers history. He alone remembers human nature. And he alone is willing to grasp the nettle and do the difficult thing.

Do you think Nehemiah was popular by the end of this chapter? He shows us once more that he has a passion for purity.

Faced with that faithlessness, what does he do? Three times, he calls it out and then he throws it out. The foreigners who had married Israelites, the merchants who came on the Sabbath, the things in God's house that had replaced the things that were given to God, he calls it out, he throws it out. Now here's my reaction when I read this chapter in preparation. You can't do that. You can't do that sort of thing, Nehemiah. Just think of the damage that you're doing to these relationships. How dare you interfere with marriages?

What about those children? But Nehemiah is right because that stake is the purity of God's people, their relationship with God, their future with him, their ability to stay with him rather than going back to exile again.

[16:20] And Nehemiah points that out, doesn't he, verse 18. Didn't your ancestors do the same things so that our God brought all this calamity on us and on this city? Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel.

The question at heart here really is who do we ultimately, exclusively, intimately belong to? is it the Lord who paid the bride price with his blood?

Or is it some other finite thing or person who will never be able to love you the way that the Lord loves you, no matter how hard they try, no matter how good their intention? See now why we call Nehemiah the lonely leader?

Because this too is part of what it is to be a leader, to know yourself to be God's man or woman, to say and do the difficult things even if that means you're alone, to be faithful even when others are not.

Nehemiah was passionate for purity. Again, if you're like me you'll still be thinking at this point wait a minute, isn't this exactly the kind of reckless and thoughtless and tyrannical leadership that has led to all the kinds of problems that we see in the world around us today?

[17:51] Nehemiah's acting like he's not accountable to anybody, isn't he? Well actually, what does Nehemiah do after every decisive action that he takes?

Decisive and difficult action. He immediately turns to God in prayer, doesn't he? Because he knows that he does all of these things under the eyes of the judge of all.

Nehemiah is prayerfully accountable to God and every true leader knows himself and shows himself as Nehemiah is doing to be personally directly accountable to God.

And we get just another little sign of that in verse 29. So one of the sons of the leaders, the highest leaders in the country, has intermarried with the biggest enemy of the Israelites at this point in time and Nehemiah has driven that man away and then he says, remember them, my God, because they defiled the priestly office and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.

Do you see what he's doing? He leaves the final justice and punishment, if there is to be any, to the Lord. He lets that go. He doesn't have a God complex because he can let go.

[19:14] He's absolutely clear who the ultimate judge is and of course that ultimate judge who will judge Nehemiah is both more holy and more compassionate than any human judge can ever be.

I wonder if his actions still seem a little bit extreme to you. Here's a story, a story from another Bethel Baptist Church that might help us understand.

During the Great Depression in the United States, socialist and communist propaganda made its rounds, even in parts of the Deep South. Bethel Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, located in a mainly African-American neighborhood, had its share of controversy.

Some of its members in the 1930s were communist activists. The pastor, Milton Sears, was anti-communist. On one occasion, Sears helped police find an accused black suspect in a criminal investigation and that drew the anger of many African-Americans and also of communist party activists.

They circulated propaganda against Sears and when a communist-led crowd rose up against Sears during a service, Pastor Sears pulled out a shotgun and drove his antagonists from the sanctuary.

[20:34] Extreme danger requires extreme measures. And if we feel that the measures that we have seen here are too extreme, then perhaps it's because we have not really understood how dangerous these things are.

It's easy to criticise leaders, isn't it? He's too dogmatic. I didn't like that service very much. She's always so scatty.

Do you think like that ever? I have. It's even easier to criticise leaders if you don't want to think about your own faithlessness. It's easy to think of leaders as one-dimensional, isn't it?

Oh, I know what they're like. Any given situation, I can tell you what their answer will be. Nehemiah proves that this is unwise because he's both ruthless about purity and if you were here last week, he's absolutely passionate about joyful worship.

That's not one-dimensional. leadership is a lonely, sacrificial business. Let us love lonely leaders wherever we find them.

[21:58] Let us thank God for them if they are passionately committed to purity, even at the cost of their popularity. And let's encourage them to be prayerfully accountable to God.

the lonely leader. Even so, Nehemiah's actions and his tone by the end seems pretty desperate, doesn't it?

And disappointed. I don't think God's people were feeling the joy that they felt in chapter 12 either. And this is the end of Nehemiah's part in the story.

Does it leave you dissatisfied? A bit of a bad taste in the mouth, maybe. It's not a happy ending, is it? Good and bad leaders, and we have plenty of both, don't we?

They all leave us longing for something more, even the ones who aren't one-dimensional.

Nehemiah leaves us with his unanswered prayers. Will God regard him with favour?

[ 23 : 06 ] Will he show mercy to us according to his great love? Verse 22. What about that problem that Nehemiah points out in verse 18? The problem that we just are always repeating the sins of our ancestors.

How can we ever be truly safe inside those walls forever? Rest guaranteed. No danger of exile ever again. Really pure in our hearts.

That's deliberate, that feeling. We're supposed to feel this way. We're meant to feel this is the wrong ending. We're meant to think there must be a leader who can permanently solve this problem.

There must be a Jerusalem that will never be infiltrated by enemies, and that we can live in forever. That's the whole point of the end of this book. In fact, it's the whole point of the whole Old Testament. It is to expose the need for Jesus.

No amount of confession and recommitment can make us what we ought to be. For that, we need Jesus. Story has a hero. It's not Nehemiah, though, is it? It's the God he prays to.

[ 24 : 22 ] God does answer that prayer. Show us mercy according to your great love. How does he answer it? By sending Jesus. Jesus. Someone who sacrificed the rest of the Jerusalem above and all of the joy that he had there to come to this faraway country.

Someone who, in his passion for purity, would clear the temple as well in his own time. Someone who said, holiness isn't just about your behavior, but about your heart. Someone who, if you read the New Testament, is inescapable that he is prayerfully accountable to his Father above and whose prayers show us that he was completely committed to God's plan and God's way, even if nobody else understood or agreed.

How does Graham Kendrick put it? Lone and friendless now, he climbs towards the hill. See, Jesus is the superior shepherd.

shepherd. He's both the one who guides us with his rod and his staff and also the one who lays down his life so that all of those broken promises can be forgiven and forgotten.

That's the meaning of the cross. That's what happens at the cross. Jesus permanently solves the problem of the human heart. He guarantees that that Jerusalem above will never be infiltrated by sin and that we need never fear being exiled from it again.

[ 25 : 57 ] It's clear, isn't it? We can't depend on our own confession and commitment to save us. If that's what it depends on, we're lost. And we can't depend on any human leader to do that for us either because they will come to the end of their powers like Nehemiah did.

It must depend on Jesus. who dies so that his purity can be ours. I think we're all afraid at some level of an unhappy ending to our story, aren't we?

If you're dissatisfied with how the story of your life is going, if you're doubtful about your leaders, if you were disappointed by this sermon, if you fear an unhappy ending, then look beyond.

Look beyond faithless people. Look beyond lonely leaders and look instead to Jesus who gives us true rest and security for always.

peace. Because that's what this book encourages us to look to. We find that thought finished in the New Testament.

[ 27 : 21 ] We read what Paul felt about his own struggle, his inability to be faithful. Paul, the lonely leader himself. He finishes Romans 7 like this.

What a wretched man I am. Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Answer, thanks be to God who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord.

That's not an unhappy ending, is it? Let's pray. Lord God, we confess that in and of ourselves we are not faithful.

And Lord, we confess that no human leader can fix the problems that we face in this world and in our hearts. Thank you for the book of Nehemiah.

Thank you that it exposes that deep yearning need for you, Lord Jesus. The Saviour who will change us from glory into glory, who guarantees our place of safety within your walls, who dies that we might live.

[ 28 : 37 ] Help us, Lord, to trust in him alone. Amen.