

God's people are different

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[0:00] And the first question I'd like to pose and put to you is why read the Old Testament?! So I was reading this passage again this week for this message today and there were parts of it and I was thinking well it can be quite dense, it can be quite difficult to get into the Old Testament.

We've been going through the Old Testament in the last Sunday mornings but it's a fair question to say why should we even be looking at the Old Testament?

It can be long, repetitive, upsetting and disturbing and even in the chapter that we've just read there are probably things that we've read and you thought it doesn't quite seem like Christianity.

It doesn't quite seem like the sort of behaviour that we should be having in 21st century Britain. So in Nehemiah chapter 13 his words and behaviour are sometimes jarring and appear a bit harsh or unreasonable.

He throws Tobias stuff out of the room, disqualifies those priests, puts his hands on some people quite evidently and he sort of manhandles them out of the scene of that.

[1:23] How do you reckon with that? The New Testament appears to offer calmer waters of clarity and a flavour of grace and mercy and love.

So it gives us a certain hesitancy about the place of the Old Testament. And I just want to say something this morning before we go into this passage to establish and perhaps re-establish our confidence in the Old Testament.

Because it does constitute two thirds of the volume of the Bible. So this is the Bible.

How he handled the temptations that he faced in the desert. How he quoted from the scripture the book of Moses. It was certainly the position of the early apostles.

And they quote extensively in the Gospels and Epistles, the letters, from the Old Testament.

Demonstrating how what was said in the past has been fulfilled, especially in Jesus Christ.

[2:58] And the early Christian church had no problem at all with these scriptures. The early church was founded upon their Old Testament scriptures. Remember, the New Testament wasn't put into a format that people could enjoy as we do today.

For probably 350 years after the resurrection of Jesus Christ. They had the documents. They had the Gospels and the letters individually.

But the formalisation of all that took a degree of time. And meanwhile, they were basing their understandings upon their understanding of what God had said in Old Testament times.

And how that was fulfilled by the apostolic teaching about Jesus. The Old Testament is foundational to our understanding of the New Testament.

I think it's interesting that we don't hear a great deal about some of the practices of the early church. And for that reason, people can think, well, it was all kind of free and easy.

[4:01] I don't think it was like that. I think the early church came from a Jewish background predominantly. They understood the way the synagogue worked. They had the reading of the scriptures.

They knew about prayer. And these things were the foundation of the early gatherings of the people. They didn't start with a complete blank sheet. In the Old Testament, we get a better impression of the fullness of God's story.

So Galatians 4.4 talks about the coming of Christ. And it says, when the time had fully come. There was a time. There was a period. The time went on.

Year went on. Decades. Centuries. Jesus hadn't come. The Messiah hadn't arrived. But after all that time, when the time had fully come, Jesus came.

That reminds us that God had a purpose before the day of Pentecost. And he was revealing himself from the creation of the world. In the book of Genesis onwards, God is unfolding his story.

[5:12] His purposes. And we see the revelation of God's character over that period of time. How long-suffering is our God?

It's one of the characteristics of God. He's a very patient God. How patient is he? Well, I can tell you how patient he is. And we can all see how patient he is because of the way he deals with his people in the Old Testament times.

Again and again, he calls them to himself. And again and again, they drift away from him. And he calls them back. And that's how patient he is.

Because he holds back his anger. And we were talking just now about the exile of the people into Babylon. But that only came at the end of an enormous period of time.

When God was showing his great patience to his people. Now, what an encouragement that is for us in our lives. Because we know what it is to stumble and fall and to drift away from God.

[6:19] But to know how patient he is on the basis of the evidence of how he dealt with his people in the past is really helpful. Remember, the New Testament period covers less than 100 years.

That's all that's recorded in the New Testament period of time. But the Old Testament is covering a passage of at least 4,000 or 5,000 years.

If one were to sort of do the arithmetic. But thousands of years are encapsulated in that way. And we see God's character over time. And we see also the outcomes of those who follow God and those who don't.

So we see the beginning of the story of somebody like Saul. And how it starts with bright promise. Even from his birth. But the ending is so sad.

We see someone like David. And we see that though he fell and sinned badly against God. Nevertheless, God could save him.

[7:30] Looking back over the whole of that man's life. Well, that's a man after my own heart. And the truth is told in these ways through life stories.

So here we're encountering today in Nehemiah a life story, a real event. So much of the Old Testament is not dealt with in terms of doctrine.

Objective teaching. But in terms of the life stories of people. So we read of the faith of Abraham. We see the patience of Job.

We see how Elijah was made bold and how he learnt to pray. And it was in their life stories. And we all love life stories. We can all identify with that.

And that is part of the encouragement of reading the Old Testament. So I've already said that Nehemiah 13 is set in a situation where the people have come back.

[8:41] They're not as numerous as they were. They face enormous problems. But they've been overcoming those problems. They've faced opposition.

But they've managed to deal with the opposition. They've had a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other. They've built and they've fought.

And reforms have been put in place. Now this chapter is an interesting one because it tells us something about the distinctives or the differences that should be associated with the people of God.

We're going to be looking at some of those differences this morning. I just want to do a little sort of side comment on this point. So in Nehemiah we read a lot about the relationship of God's people to God.

But we also read a great deal about their relationship towards other people. Rather inelegantly one could say that God's people were called out from their own backgrounds, their past life.

[10:08] They were called to be a nation. They were called to be a people who belonged to God. And God was going to do such a work in them that there would be a demonstration of what would be the best in humankind.

So as David was saying earlier, it's special to be made in the image of God. It's a sadness to have that image spoiled. It's a delight and the grace of God that that spoiled image can be restored.

And Nehemiah and indeed most of the Old Testament comes back to that theme again and again. God says, I've called you out. I've called you to be special. I've called you to be a different people. Not to carry on in the old ways, but to have new ways. Ways that please me. And there is sameness and difference.

To be the best of humankind means something which is same, but also something which is different. So it's mainstream Christian teaching these days to say that to be a Christian means that you're going to be a really excellent worker in whatever place you're set.

[11:29] You are going to be a great student. Not necessarily with first class qualifications, but in terms of your attitude, your aptitude, your relationship to those who teach.

Your dedication, your discipline. Well, that's kind of mainstream being a Christian is to be such a student. I encourage that.

I applaud it. You're going to be an excellent mother. Not because you've got all the skills, but your attitude, your priorities are going to be of that order.

There's going to be an excellence and a high standard about you. And you could go through all the kind of different roles of life that we're in.

And you can say, yes, to be a Christian is to be having our life restored, the image of God restored about us. If you're a Christian friend. If you're a Christian friend.

[12:38] If you're an older person, what a blessing to be a Christian older person. And there should be something which is a bit like the same as what we've been in the past.

But it's cleaned up. There's restoration taking place. We are being recreated. So, Paul says, if any man is in Christ, he's a new creature, a new creation.

Old things have passed away. Behold, all things have become new. And if you're a young Christian here today, I just want to encourage you with that thought.

That you have been introduced into an enormous world of opportunity. You are able to find out what the almighty, gracious God can do in the life of a man or a woman.

Who is saved. Every aspect of your life can and should be touched by the presence of God.

[13:48] There is no pitfall of danger that you're facing that God by his grace cannot overcome. There's nothing about your past that is going to necessarily just hold you back.

Drag you back. You're a new creature. You've been born again by God's Holy Spirit. What a blessing. As you sit here today, you're thinking about your life and the problems and pressures. We're all conscious of our personalities. We're all conscious of our failures, our weaknesses. But by God's grace, we can be overcomers. And we can be those who, as it says in Colossians, Philippians rather, shine like stars in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.

You've got to shine. You can shine. You can shine on Mondays. You could shine like a star for Jesus Christ. Because that's what he does. That's what he loves to do.

That's his purpose in his work in our lives. But I also want to suggest to you today that there's also difference. So, in the book of Acts, it's very interesting to see that from time to time, the people, when they saw the early church, this spirit-filled church, this post-Pentecost church, one day they were saying, well, this is great.

[15:28] I'd love to be a part of that. And it says they had great favour with the people. That word favour is used a lot. So, you think, well, that's great.

And we would love to have favour in this place, wouldn't we? And we do have favour. Believe that the church here enjoys the favour of this particular community. We have invested in this community. And we are pleased and delighted, but not over-surprised, because we've got the precedence before us, that when God's people behave in godly ways, that people look up to them and respect them.

And they're able to say, there's something good about these people. There's something I can really appreciate. But at the same time, again in the book of Acts, same period of time, there were things that happened every so often, that it says, caused the people around the church to fear.

And it says in one place, no man dared to join them. You think, how does that work? On the one hand, people look at them and say, well, they're lovely people.

[16:51] And part of them says, I'd love to be part of them. But on the other hand, it says, no person dared to join them. Well, if you put those two things together, you have to say, there's a bit of a tension in the Christian life.

And the tension is, between being the same and being different. showing something in our lives, which is extremely attractive, because people can identify with it, and at the same time, showing a difference in our lives, that causes people to be a bit nervous, suspicious, anxious, anxious. So tales were told about the early church. As much as it had favour, there was all sorts of rumours of what went on in their meetings, as they got together. What was this bread and wine? What was that about? Oh, it was a bit strange. These sort of feasts that they had. I said that sameness is something we can really identify with, because we all want to be respected, loved, appreciated, embraced.

Difference is not such a comfortable place to be. To do things differently to others puts us out on a limb.

[18:33] And yet, interestingly, God calls his people in Old Testament and New Testament times to be better than they ever have been, but also to be different, distinctive.

And they will do certain things that others don't do. So the constant call in New Testament teaching is, and here's just one example, 1 Peter 1.15, be holy, for I am holy.

We read that, and we, holiness is a very slippery word. What on earth does holiness mean? We think of saints and sort of very, very clean and proper people.

What does holiness mean? Well, we have to think about God then. God is perfect, and Christian people are called to be perfect.

Did you realise that? Did you realise, actually, that we are called to be perfect? And that's what God is calling us to be.

[19:41] But we're also called to be different, as different as God is from us. So we think of God and we can say, what a great God, what a marvellous God, but, wow, this is not a God to be trifled with.

He's not a comfortable God. He's not a cosy God. He's not a come and sit on my lap sort of God.

And we need to be very careful, as Christian people, that we don't fall into that sort of trap because our language is constantly in the area of love and grace and acceptance.

We serve God with reverent fear. Christians serve God with reverent fear because he is a consuming fire.

He's different. And in various ways, we're called to be different as well. We're called to be different because this world is a fallen place, a place which has blackened the image of God and have drifted away from him and blocks its ears to his voice and doesn't want to have this king to rule over it.

So every so often, there will come points in all our lives where that difference that I have to stand on this, I have to say no whilst everybody else is saying yes when those things actually happen.

[21:19] And we're seeing this something in Nehemiah 13. Now there are various quite major issues of difference which are picked out in Nehemiah 13. We're just going to look at three this morning because of time and I hope we'll have opportunity in a coming Sunday to look at the next two.

Now the first thing I want to draw attention to in Nehemiah 13 is the point about where do we get our wisdom and guidance? Christian people, where do we get wisdom and guidance?

Where do people in the world get wisdom and guidance? Just think about that for a moment. The people you work with, mingle with, the rest of your family are not Christians, where do they get their wisdom and guidance?

Well they might get it from their families, parents. Social media is a really strong driver. Not so much that it's actually saying this is wisdom with a big placard against it but it's saying well this is the way things are done.

This is the way we behave. So just the general everydayness pressures of peer group. You're in a group of people, how are they doing it?

[22:39] Well I'll do the same. You just do it because everyone else does it. Now if I need guidance, well what do I do for guidance?

Have I got decisions to make? Where do I go for that? Well again, you can get self-help books can't you? They're always popular. There's a lot of stuff on the internet.

Wisdom and guidance. Now, I'm an engineer. I go to the books to get my engineering knowledge. I talk to fellow engineers about this in order to be a better engineer.

but I'm also a Christian engineer. So how do I live my life? How do I take the big decisions of my life?

How do you do that in your situation? The decisions you're going to be facing and so forth. Well, Nehemiah 13, 1 to 3. It's easy to slip over this but let's not slip over it.

[23:46] On that day, the book of Moses was read aloud in the hearing of the people the book of Moses was read aloud. The first five books of the Bible they were read aloud.

I think the whole of those five books was read. There's another example of it in Nehemiah chapter 8 where the Bible, the first five books because that's what they had was just read aloud and it says there were men and there were women and the children and they were there for some hours just listening to the public speaking of the word.

It was just read aloud. And what happened was this that when God's word was read aloud and when it was explained to them they immediately saw that there were things in their lives that needed to be changed.

It says in Nehemiah 8 that they were desperately upset. When they heard the word of God read they were upset. Need to tick the box?

They were upset because they saw that something was wrong in their lives and something had to be put right. And we're seeing exactly the same thing here in Nehemiah 13. On that day the book of Moses read aloud of the hearing of the people and there it was found that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be admitted into the assembly of God.

[25:18] It gives a reason for that as well because there's history. There's a reason for that. God always not always but quite often gives his reasons. A sin was uncovered because as we read the rest of the chapter we see that in all sorts of ways Ammonites the Moabites had been very much admitted into the household hold of God by marriage by geography they'd been allowed in and it was as the word of God was read that they realised that what seemed completely sensible practical after all I've got to deal with the Ammonites and the Moabites haven't I?

I've got to trade with them I've got to live side by side with them but God's word said to them be very very careful there are boundaries to that relationship and one of the boundaries is you're not to have those people in the assembly of God's people I say in passing that's actually a cardinal principle about what it means to understand church and belonging to church what is the church? the church is the gathering of people who have been saved by Jesus Christ and acknowledge him as Lord and Saviour that is the church on a Sunday lots of people may gather in a building but the church is a distinctive group of people who have known what it is to be cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ they've been born again and the Old Testament here is teaching us this message and the importance of making sure that we always understand the church in that way and as far as humanly possible and by God's grace that we recognise the church as the church that's why we have a membership here not the only reason but we have a membership here where we know one another and we say of one another we are brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ that's not just a word that's reflecting an actual experience that we've received praise God and it's important for the church of Jesus Christ to be kept as pure as is possible so sin was uncovered and practical obedience took place verse 3 when the people heard this law they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent that was not easy that would not have been an easy task there were relationships and you know how hard it is when relationships go wrong to be handling that but they did it because their wisdom and their guidance came from the law of God it came from the Bible and here was a boundary which God had said was important it was something they had to do you know if I had gone to the United Nations they would have said well that's a crazy way of behaving but they had to do it they had to work out what this wisdom and guidance from God meant in their lives but the one thing they said was this although we've been living in a different sort of way if this is what

God says we will do it and may God have mercy upon us in doing it may God help us in doing it but we will do it so my question my question is are we hearing and responding to God's word that's why we have such an emphasis upon the speaking of the word of God because it is the vehicle of God's word which is the way in which God communicates primarily with his people in order to turn them from a bad way and turn them into a good way to change their minds their attitudes and their hearts Colossians 3.16 is the New Testament equivalent of that Old Testament passage how often was the word of Moses actually read aloud pretty infrequently I think there were sort of high days and holidays when that happened and after all the scriptures in that time were sort of wrapped up on a papyrus scroll and kept locked away but we have open Bibles now you've got it on your phones you can open it and it's a beautiful expression of what we read in Colossians 3.16 the beautiful opportunity in the 21st century let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God we receive the word the word goes into our heart the word changes us we encourage one another with the word of God and that's the pattern and it's kind of like this is 24-7 we don't have to wait these occasions are great but we don't have to wait for a Sunday because we can share and be encouraged in the word of God together

God's people are different because that's where we get our wisdom and guidance God's people are different because there's there has to be consistency in our lives we're not consistent we're all inconsistent but actually we're called to a consistent life it's not normally a great problem for people who are not Christians and you can see the evidence of that just by reading newspapers just listen to the news and you can see that most people live lives which are pretty inconsistent they say one thing and do another they tell people one thing but they don't follow it themselves their life appears to be one thing but actually you know in the secret part it's completely different and so often these sort of things leak out in social media and you say wow didn't think that person was like that at all but they are they say well that's just life it's just the way it is but God says my people are to be different there has to be consistency in every part of life so here in Nehemiah chapter 13 verses 4 to 5 and 7 to 9 we have an extraordinary story about the priest

[32:39] Eliashib the priest had been put in charge of the storerooms of the house of God and he was closely associated with Tobiah do you remember Tobiah from this story of Nehemiah do you remember Tobiah Tobiah and Sambalat these were the two arch enemies of the rebuilding of Jerusalem those were the people who stood outside and constantly tried to prevent the work taking place was it a good idea to be friendly with them what was their agenda well it appears that in Nehemiah's absence back in back in Babylon Eliashib the priest the spiritual leader he'd been put in charge of the storerooms of the house of our God in other words the temple and he was closely associated with Tobiah he provided him with a large room formerly used to store the grain offerings and incense and temple articles and also the tithes of grain new wine and oil prescribed for the

Levites singers and gatekeepers as well as the contributions of the priests it was through the reading of God's word that this problem was uncovered this gross inconsistency that at the very heart of the presence and worship of God which was the temple that this enemy of God had been entertained have a room have space and I would say it's a beautiful picture it's a very strong picture of the way in which we can give room in our lives for things which are totally inconsistent with a Christian profession and just as much as Tobias settled in and that was his home that was his address number four room temple I've been there for years now just as he could feel so comfortable and so Eliashib the priest was completely comfortable about this so we can get very comfortable with things which if we were to receive the word of

God we would have to feel very uncomfortable about and this is what happens as the word is read seriously and as the word is preached that people will be upset and you may be upset even at the moment because you're thinking yeah I wish he wouldn't talk about that because I've got areas in my life that I just don't want to have God's touch upon it I just want to close the door on that just leave me alone in that I'll operate fine in other areas but I don't want to have conversations about this but that's what God by his spirit is doing as the word of God is read there was compromise at the heart of God's work and there's a domino effect of refusing God's lordship over the whole of our

lives and the domino effect is this and it's very interesting so here's the room where Tobiah is living and it was the room that was used previously for the storing of grain and other things and tithes for the

Levites so all that's been removed and instead there's a nice double bed and it's a living quarters for Tobiah to live there but all that should have happened in that space was now excluded and hadn't been going on for a while so the tithes weren't coming in that's the next thing we'll be talking about if the tithes aren't coming in the Levites aren't being supported if the Levites aren't being supported they've gone back to the land which has been allocated to them historically not in Jerusalem any longer not actually operating as they should be which was explainers of the word of God as part of their work but they're out in the fields earning their crust of bread every day because the tithes have not come in and because the word of God is not now being explained then the people are continuing to go astray and sin is just rampant in the whole community one sin everybody's affected so in the church what you do in what you think is your private life does not only affect you but it will affect everybody

Paul says quoting from the Old Testament something like a little leaven leavens the whole dough in other words a little tiny bit of yeast affects everything a little yeast leavens the whole dough tiny inconsistency very very damaging for the whole community so here's the question are we wholehearted I don't mean are we energetic and vigorous for some things but is the whole of our heart ready to be pure and it was said probably first of all in the 19th century if he is not lord of all he's not lord at all think of the definition you're my lord that means everything comes under his control and authority and in the

[38:29] New Testament Glossians 3 5 to 14 which we won't read but it talks about things that we have to put off and things that we have to put on make a note of those verses and please read them later and finally I want to talk briefly about the use of money and to say this that just as I've just said there that tithing had stopped Nehemiah 13 verse 10 I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them and that all the Levites and singers responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields so I rebuked officials and asked them why is the house of God neglected interesting isn't it they might say oh it's just Levites they're just doing their own thing no one's got hurt temple's still there Nehemiah cuts right through that sees right through that completely and he says do you know what's happening the house of God is neglected the house of God is neglected as a result of this something really desperately bad is happening so the use of money how do people feel about the use of money how does the world operate in the area of money well God's people have to be different whatever answer you might give to that

I've got to say God's people are different in this use of money because they're taught from the Old Testament times about the importance of giving and being very careful about this giving so that the house of God should not be neglected so that the work of God's kingdom should be able to carry on the maintenance and extension of God's kingdom needs the sacrificial giving of God's people I think that's a fundamental point that we've always had to wrestle with here and face and praise God I think we learn the lesson but I mention it again because we don't talk about this matter of money very much in the church and if you're fairly new to the church you might think well what's this all about I was with a long standing Christian the other day and he told me about the first time he heard about the idea of tithing and he got to the end of the conversation or the talk that he'd had and he turned to the person and said what is tithing

I don't understand what this is well very simply it is this that in Old Testament times everybody was responsible for giving approximately 10% of their income to the maintenance and extension of the house of God and that's the way in which the ministry was sustained there were physical things to be done and there were livelihoods to be sustained and it was approximately 10% I say approximately because there are all sorts of add on things and so forth gets quite complicated in the end but that's what God's people learnt in Old Testament times and it's been very wisely said that in our time in New Testament times where Jesus is our Lord that our very first thinking and our first priority ought to be what is my responsibility in the matter of maintaining and extending the

kingdom of God it's the first thing the people had missed out on that they'd forgotten that they weren't reading the word but the word does speak about this have we faced this issue lots of us just put it off

I do want to encourage you to do it from your very very earliest days if you just become a Christian do think about this now because it's going to become harder and harder for you to think about it in later life when things like mortgages and paying for this and that and the other and big bills start accumulating it becomes increasingly hard if you haven't got this sorted once and for all before the Lord and we read in 1 Corinthians 16 verse 2 exactly what the early church did it's not dramatic in the sorts of wow it's just straightforward stuff on the first day of every week each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income saving it up so that when I come no collections will have to be made it's a discipline it's just something for you to do something for you to think about every one of us because actually every one of us has some sort of an income so it's not just left for a few who've got certain amounts of money in their bank balance but just like the widow came into the temple and Jesus remarked on her because she put in all that she had it was tiny but it it was splendid it was wonderful in the

Lord's eyes God's people are different I'm not expecting people in Vardapp Road to give to the church here I'm not expecting Brighton Council to give to this church why should they I wouldn't even want it wouldn't even want it God's people sustain God's work it's a privilege it's something which he's given to us it doesn't need to be that way he doesn't need to have done it that way at all it could come down from heaven but we are involved in God's work and there is this wonderful dynamic whereby God's people are different because they hear the word their lives are consistent they use their money in different ways the apostle Peter writing to

[44:30] Christians says you're a chosen people you're a royal priesthood you're a holy nation a people belonging to God that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light and part of the way in which we show the praises of this great God is by saying God you're so wonderful I love you so much that I want the whole of my life to be yours you're so precious you're the first I want the whole of my life to be governed by what you have said it even comes down to all that I have all the resources that you've given to me I just want to put it all on the altar it's a sacrifice but it's a wonderful sacrifice and when a people of God are living in this sort of way it shows to the world something of how great this

God is you may declare the praise of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light so what is God saying to us and to you we close with take my life and let it be number 850 20