

A Haunted Christmas: The Gospel According to Nehemiah.

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[0 : 00] God, thank you so much for your presence. God, thank you for your word, the Bible. And as you have throughout the history, throughout time, you've spoken to your people.

God, I pray that once again you would speak to us, that we might not just hear my words today, but that we would actually hear from you. Those who know you and are so familiar with the Christmas story might have a fresh encounter with you.

And that those who are still wrestling or struggling or just not even believing that you're real. God, in your love and mercy, would you do what only you can do and reveal yourself to us, that every one of us in this room would know you personally and intimately in a way that sets us free and brings us to life.

In Jesus' name, amen. Please be seated. Have you ever walked into a room in the middle of a story and found that what you're hearing is extremely bizarre?

And you kind of like make a face or maybe you say something and they're like, oh no, you don't understand. And you realize that coming into the middle of a story, you've misunderstood what you're hearing.

[1 : 10] Or have you ever thought that you found that you really thought you totally understood what was happening, but then once you find out that, again, you walked in the middle of a story, that there's actually so much more depth and vibrancy to a story than you thought you knew.

Well, that has definitely been a real experience for me. And I believe it's actually an experience that every one of us experiences every year at Christmastime, though many of us don't even know it. And that's because if you were to ask someone, what's the beginning of the Christmas story? They might start with the angel appearing to Mary and telling her about how she is soon to conceive a miraculous child, God's own son.

Or maybe those who really know their Bibles will start with the scene where Mary's cousin-in-law was in the temple. He's a priest. An angel comes to him and tells him about his wife coming pregnant with John the Baptist as the child.

So there might be various ways that you start the Christmas story, but we always start with the New Testament, with the Gospels accounts. However, if that's how we tell the Christmas story, we're actually starting in the middle of the story.

[2 : 17] And as a result, either we're misunderstanding what the Christmas is all about, or though we might get it, it is so much smaller than the real vibrant story of Christmas if we were only to start at the beginning.

And so today I'm going to be preaching a Christmas message from a page of the Bible that I've never heard a Christmas message from. So if you have your Bibles, turn to Nehemiah 13. You might have trouble finding it.

No shade thrown your way. Nehemiah is found in the first half of the Bible, a bit before Psalms. It's before Job. It's before Esther. Right before Esther. You can find it.

Or you can just go to the index at the start of your Bible. It's a rare book. What you might not be familiar with the fact that Nehemiah, though it's in the middle of the Old Testament, it's actually the final pages of the Old Testament.

The Old Testament has historical books, and it has poetry, it has prophecy, but Nehemiah is the final, it takes place as the final moments in the history of the Old Testament.

[3 : 16] So the final words of Nehemiah are the final moments of the Old Testament. And so I'm going to be preaching from the final moments of the book of Nehemiah, which is the final moments

of the Old Testament, but if we're really going to try to start not at the middle of a story, we really should back up to the very beginning.

Many of you will be familiar with the account that the Bible tells us, that at the very beginning of a time, there was a being named God who created the universe. And he created it in perfect harmony, that there was no decay, there was no despair, there was no death.

Everything was in harmony. But humankind rebelled against this good and loving God, and in so doing, we broke the universe, and introduced decay, and grudges, and gossip, and lies, and mistrust, and even death.

And that not only did we break the universe, but in our rebellion, the good and loving, just judge of the whole earth, God, pronounced judgment and a curse upon all that is.

But beautifully and mercifully, in the very moment that he pronounces this curse, judgment upon the universe, he gives a promise. He promises that he will restore harmony to the earth.

[4 : 34] We get this little glimpse of this promise. And then as the story, the true story of the Bible unfolds, you see that God brings more and more clarity as to how he's going to restore harmony and love to the world.

Part of the breaking of the universe was in our rebellion, in our sin against God, because he's pure and we've defiled ourselves, there's this distance between us and God. That before, humankind used to walk with God, but now he's invisible to us, for he's too pure for our broken eyes to see.

And so as the story of the Bible unfolds, we see, and this isn't myth or legend, but we see in real history that God called a people to himself, a people group, the people of Israel.

And he gave the people of Israel his holy ways of harmony and love. And more than anything, he not only gave them his ways, his good laws, he not only gave them a good country to have, but the most significant and special thing, most magnificent of all, which made them the holy people, is that he gave them his presence.

And so in the center of Israel, there was a temple. And in the temple, there was not an idol to remind them of a God, but rather the very presence of God himself in a very thick and real way.

[5 : 50] And yet the people of God, the people of Israel, as you can read through the Bible, they continue to rebel against them and defile themselves and do horrific things.

And they end up offering children burning up the children as a worship to God, which is a horrific, ungodly practice. And they do all manner of evil things. And God is a good God, a just God.

And so he continues to call them to turn away from that. And as he does, he warns them, if they are not to walk in God's ways of love and harmony and justice, that he will punish them, that he will remove them from their land, that he will take away his presence from them.

And over time, he finally did that. And it's recorded in history that the Babylonian kingdom ripped the people of Israel from the land, took them from Jerusalem, and they destroyed the temple.

And it's recorded for us in the Bible that God removed his presence from the temple, from his people. But along the way, even in the warnings of judgment, even before judgment came, God includes in those warnings his tender love toward them and all the earth, saying that even though he would judge them, even though he would punish the people of Israel, he will restore not only the people of Israel to the land, but also that he will bring healing to the whole earth.

[7 : 09] And most significant of all, that he will restore his presence to his people, that he will bring the people back to Israel, and that he will restore his presence in the temple and throughout all the earth.

And so along the way, we finally get to the book of Nehemiah, the final historical book in the Bible, in the Old Testament, and what we see here is that there are three great leaders. First Zerubbabel, then a man named Ezra, and then Nehemiah, of whom this book is named.

Zerubbabel was a priest and he helped rebuild a broken temple. And then Ezra was a scribe and he helped call the people back to holiness and to knowing God's ways. And then came Nehemiah.

He's the most vibrant of all. And he helped them rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. And he not only helped them rebuild the wall to reestablish the city of God, but he calls the people to holiness. And this book is so upbeat.

If you haven't read it, I recommend it. You see that in record time the people come together and rebuild the wall. And then he calls the people back to the holy feasts and they have this incredible, massive celebration of the Passover.

[8 : 11] And he calls the people to repentance. And the people, with one voice, confess their sin. It's beautiful, it's humble, and it's holy. And then the people not only confess their sin, but they covenant themselves afresh to God and say, God, we will follow you.

We will observe your holy ways. We will do the Sabbath and we will love you. And they turn away from their defilements. And there's so much hope. And if that's not enough, the people gather together and they sing worship.

They declare their love for God through song. And it's so loud. It says that the noise of Jerusalem was heard very far away. That's how loud they sang. Thank you. And so, there's so much hope. And then we come to the final pages of this hope-filled book, the final pages of the Old Testament. And yet, it all just crumbles in Nehemiah's hand. Nehemiah discovers that the priests, that people aren't giving to the priests in the temple the food that they're deserved.

And so the priests have gone away and that the temple is forsaken and that the people aren't following God's ways. And he begins to panic. Verse 10, Nehemiah writes, I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them so that the Levites, the priests, and the singers who did the work of God had fled each to his field.

[9 : 27] So I confronted the officials and said, why is the house of God forsaken? And I gathered them together and set them in their stations. Go down to verse 14. Remember me, oh my God, concerning this and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God, the temple, and for his service.

In those days, I saw in Judah people treading wine presses on the Sabbath. They're violating the Holy Sabbath. Down to verse 17. Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, why is this evil thing that you are doing profaning the Sabbath?

What is this evil thing that you're doing profaning the Sabbath? Did not your fathers act in this way and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city, Jerusalem? Now you are bringing more wrath, more judgment on Israel by profaning the Sabbath.

He continues on writing about the horrific things going on and how he's trying to fight against it. In verse 25, he writes about how the people of God have married foreigners who do not believe in God and this is one of the practices that actually led originally to them being removed from the land and he's panicking over seeing the people turning back to these evil things.

In verse 25, and I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. He didn't just pull on their hair, he pulled out their hair and I made them take an oath in the name of God saying, you shall not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves.

[10 : 57] Did not Solomon, king of Israel, sin on account of such women? Among the many nations, there was no king like him and he was beloved by his God and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin.

Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women? You hear Nehemiah's heart is in his throat.

You hear the panic in his voice. He's yelling at the people. He's seeing these people turn from sin and walk in God's ways and rededicate themselves and rededicate the temple.

Yet he just sees them turning again to these evil, defiling practices. He's tried so hard and he's yelling at them. He beats them and he pulls up their hair. You'll see if you read through the whole chapter in this whole book that multiple times he forces the people to divorce these people.

They weren't supposed to marry. And as you're looking at Nehemiah, you must be asking the question, is this how a man of God acts? And the answer is no. He actually, in his zealotry to try to make the people holy, he actually starts himself sinning.

[12 : 04] In no place does the Bible commission a man or a woman of God to be pulling out people's hair or to be beating people. In fact, the book of Malachi is the book of prophecy that takes place at the same time as this.

And Malachi, God through, the prophet, is actually saying, guys, stop doing divorce. This is unholy. And yet, you see Nehemiah forcing the people to divorce in his zealotry to try to make them holy.

See that Nehemiah is going beyond God's ways and actually turning from God's ways and trying to turn the people to God. He's panicking, he's freaking out, and he's doing things he shouldn't. What's happening?

Well, I mentioned that so much of this book is hope-filled, but there's actually a moment that if you and I aren't familiar with the true big story of the Bible, we might miss. But the people would not have missed it.

You see, among all the hope and the joy that they have rebuilt the city, that they've rebuilt the temple, and that they dedicate it to God and commit themselves to him. And if you're not familiar with the Bible, or even if you are, but whatever, you may have missed the fact that even as it sounds all happy and you keep reading, there's actually this haunting moment that they're still in the midst of when things begin to crumble.

[13:15] But it's a haunting moment that they're even in the midst of, even while they're feasting or while they're singing and making such noise to God. And the people, the Jewish people who were reading this would not have missed it.

And that's because centuries before when they built Solomon's temple and Solomon, the leader, like Nehemiah, the leader, Solomon dedicates the temple to God and there's this rush of wind and this thick cloud of God's presence.

It's hard to explain, but it's like there's this thick fog that comes into the temple and it's holy and the people can feel and get this glimpse of the presence of God and King Solomon, the great king and everyone else, falls on their faces in worship.

King Solomon acknowledging that there's a king above him, God the king. And it's this holy, sacred, special moment that they record, they write down, eyewitnesses write down. And that's what they expect.

And they expect it not just because it happened before, but because in the prophecies and before this, God said that he would restore the people to Israel, that he would rebuild the temple, reestablish Jerusalem, but most important of all, he would return his presence to the temple, to Israel, to the earth.

[14:27] And so they've done everything, they've seen it, the people came back to Israel and they rebuilt the temple and all that stuff, every part of the prophecy has come true except for one, the most important thing, the presence of God.

They rededicate the temple, this is the moment that they were waiting for, for God's presence to rush in for that thick cloud that descended in the past. But nothing happens.

And they continue on, they sing and it's recorded for us to the beautiful noise of their singing filled Israel, but where's God's presence?

This is the most significant thing. Where is God's presence? And so if you go back to verse 11, so he confronted the officials and said, why is the house of God forsaken?

You hear panic in Nehemiah's voice. Why is the house of God forsaken? And on first reading, it sounds like he's simply speaking of how they have neglected the house of God.

[15:28] But the people who were first reading this, the Jewish people would hear in this as well, why is the house of God forsaken? Of the presence of God. That's the thing that causes the most panic for Nehemiah.

Where is the presence of God? A temple without God's presence is just an empty room. Where is the presence of God?

What you see as you read through this book, Nehemiah, the final pages before the New Testament, is that the people have tried so hard.

Nehemiah and the people of Israel have tried so hard to be moral. They've tried so hard to obey God, to be good people, to be religious people, and yet you see it crumbling that these people who have promised to not marry the pagans have once again started marrying pagans and having sexual relations with them.

And the people who've covenanted to obey the Sabbath are now forsaking the Sabbath and they're neglecting the temple and they're just, despite their best efforts, perhaps you can relate to that.

[16:36] You've promised yourself to do better. You've promised yourself to not turn to whatever dirty habits. You've promised yourself not to gossip or tell lies. You've promised yourself to be more holy and yet you find yourself returning to defiling things.

We try so hard. And the pages of Nehemiah, the pages of the Old Testament end with this.

Thus I cleanse them from everything foreign and I establish the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work. I provide for the wood offering at appointed times and for the first fruits.

Remember me, oh my God, forget.

And it ends. It doesn't end with the people walking in holiness. It ends with Nehemiah's effort. I did this and I did that. Remember me, God.

As it ends, there's this hauntedness, this question that remains unanswered. Where is God's presence? That is a question they would have been asking those days following the dedication of the temple.

[17 : 41] And a question that continues to be asked, unanswered, as those days turned into months, turned into years, turned into decades. And finally, four centuries go by.

The people of Israel had been used to the voice of God through the prophets and the poets and through the anointed kings sometimes. Always God had found a way to break through their defilement and break through their busyness and to speak into their lives.

And yet here, as they're waiting for God's presence to return, there's no cloud, there's nothing, nor is there a voice, nor is there a prophet or a seer or anything, and they wait.

It was in that context of brokenness, in that context of the people's best efforts that are still not good enough, trying to be holy but defiling themselves, trying to be moral but still failing themselves and God.

Silent, panic, waiting, where is God? That the Christmas story bursts open. That there is a priest who's in the, in a sense, in the empty temple in a temple without the thick presence of God and he's just doing his job as they've done for years in silence, not expecting God to ever speak and all of a sudden this angel shows up.

[19 : 03] They haven't seen angels in centuries. This angel shows up and speaks of this miracle son named John the Baptist who's going to prepare the way for the Lord. And then months later an angel shows up to Mary and says that she will have a son to name him Jesus because he will save the people from their sin.

And then an angel shows up to Joseph and says that this son, one of his names he will be called is Emmanuel, God with us. that is the name that is the answer to the question where is God's presence?

We find there that this baby Jesus is not simply a prophet nor will he be some moral teacher but that he is the son of God, God himself. That as, that Jesus the baby is brought into the temple for dedication that that is the moment long foretold where God comes back into the temple.

And you can see it where there's Anna the prophetess and, and Simeon, Simon as they wait. They've been waiting for years, praying, praying, waiting for God's presence, waiting for God's presence.

And you can read about it in the Christmas story where they rejoice. They hold the baby and rejoice that God has come back to the temple. That it's not a cloud or some kind of inanimate matter like that but it's actually God himself.

[20 : 32] Jesus, Emmanuel, God is with us. That's the context of Jesus. That's the context of the Christmas story. That's the miracle for all of you with nativity scenes in your homes of the little baby in the manger that it's God has come not just to Israel but to the earth.

That people, as people walk with Jesus through Israel that they are once again walking with God as we used to do in the garden. And you can read through the gospel stories the teachings of Jesus as he once again declares and reveals God's holy ways and moral laws and the ways of harmony and love and justice.

But if you simply were to end the story there then just as you started the Christmas story in the middle so we end the story before it ends. Because the reason for Jesus to enter into the earth not just like a cloud but as a human is because God himself had decided just as it was prophesied at the beginning of time that he would crush our enemies.

That he would defeat death through his own death on the cross. That he had come not simply to teach us moral laws but to bring our forgiveness our reconciliation to God.

Peace on earth. that God had come to die on the cross and then because he is the very author of life he could not stay dead but he came back to life and he lives today.

[22 : 00] That's the context of the Christmas story. There are some of us perhaps many of us in the room that are living life like in Nehemiah chapter 13 where we are trying so hard to be good people we're trying to even be holy people we promised ourselves to do better some of you are making New Year's resolutions where you're promising yourself to do better this year you'll finally hit the gym this year you'll finally stop this bad habit whatever it may be we're trying so hard but you must I must we must hear the beauty of the Christmas story that God himself is with us every

religion every religion whether it's Islam with its five pillars Judaism with its 613 laws is about doing enough good to climb our way up into heaven in Islam you must follow the five pillars they're all good things do these five pillars and if you do these things you can earn your way up to heaven it's like every good thing you do is like a rung on a ladder you're trying to climb or Judaism the 613 laws you do these things and if you do them well enough it's like you're climbing a ladder or the eastern philosophies they're not so much about what you do but learning to think in an enlightened way it's not so much about your moral deeds as much as your your enlightened thoughts your enlightened thinking and if you can if you can learn to think right it's like every right way of enlightenment is like another rung on the ladder you can climb your way up into nirvana to heaven in a sense even in those of us in the room who might be secular atheists you're not it's not heaven you're climbing to but success and everything you do all your achievements and your degrees and your philanthropy and all the good stuff it's like you're trying to climb your way out of meaninglessness into significance but if you and I are honest and the Bible is very honest our best efforts all every step on the ladder it's like the rungs and ladders break before us and we slip down and we climb and we try and it breaks before us and the ladder we cannot climb that ladder up to heaven that our greatest achievements still leave us feeling empty and that our best habits and our best success it still crumbles in our hands our lives are like the book of Nehemiah where we try so much and we do some things that we still find ourselves with an emptiness inside and so many of us in this room are exhausted from trying so hard to climb to heaven and this is where you and I need to hear the Christmas story the true story of Jesus that what separates

Christianity from all other religions and philosophies is that it's the only one that says you don't climb to heaven but that heaven has climbed down to us that the gospel that Jesus turns the ladder on its head instead of us climbing up heaven climbs to us that Jesus the Christmas story is about God climbing down into the brokenness and decay despair and even death of the human condition that it's not about what we try to do but it's what he has done and that's where Christianity is not about a new way of thinking even if it changes our way of thinking and it's not about a moral code although there's moral things in it but at the heart of Christianity at the heart of the Christmas story is not a philosophy but rather an event it's news something has happened and the thing about news an event is that it's true regardless of how much you believe it or how you feel about it the reality is that

Christianity isn't about getting you to think differently but rather the fact that God himself has come into the earth in the story of Christmas that it's true he's come into the earth and that there's eyewitness accounts there's good historical evidence that God himself that Jesus died on a cross and came back from the dead and so all that's left for us to do is nothing but receive his presence nothing but to receive his forgiveness and so in a few minutes we're going to have communion where we're going to be remembering Jesus' death and resurrection and I want to invite you to as you come up here to take communion to forsake that effort that trying to do enough to get God to like you and to receive his love to receive his forgiveness some of us you're not out of place yet you're not a Christian you're wrestling with these things I want to invite you

I want to challenge you that there's a better way than just trying really hard to live a good life that the only way to live a life that's so fully alive the only way to live a life where you're at peace with others and yourself is to have peace with God and the only way to peace with God is to receive his forgiveness by asking him for it he's already provided forgiveness we just need to ask and finally it should break our hearts those of you who have received the forgiveness of God those of you who are Christians it should break our hearts that there are so many people who are living life as if it's still the time of Nehemiah 13 who are living life as if God hasn't broken into the earth who are exhausted there's still so many who are exhausted by trying so hard I want to especially highlight the fact that the majority of Jewish people around the globe today are like Nehemiah 13 and the years following where they're still waiting waiting with panic and exhaustion waiting for God to come back to the earth waiting for the presence of God to come back they've missed the fact that he already has that the Christmas story is the climax of all that there is about for the Jewish it's the climax of creation it's the climax of what it means to be Jewish that God has come and so I want to invite the musicians to come back to the stage and we're going to sing a Christmas song many of you know well O Come O Come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel I want to invite you to sing this song as a prayer of intercession both for Jewish people who don't know the promised Messiah as well as for any of your friends or family who just don't know that God

has come back to earth in the body of Jesus and so I want to invite you to stand I'll say a prayer and then we'll sing

[28 : 51] God thank you that you love us way too much to be content to just watch us from a distance but that you have broken into human history in real time in real space 2,000 years ago that you came to earth as Jesus that you did what we couldn't do living a perfect life and that you gave your life for us on the cross and have come back to life and that today we're not here to simply remember a great teacher of the past but to be in your very presence and so God I pray that in your love and tender mercy that you would lead us in the fullness of what Christmas is all about you bringing us peace with God your very presence may we treasure that more than anything else and may we live in the rest that that brings in the name of your son

Jesus we pray amen all love so to be and listen to