

AM Nehemiah 13 "Remembering and Forgetting"

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[0 : 00] Word together. This may not be a chapter that you will have heard, read in church before, but it is the last chapter in the book of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah chapter 13. This is God's word for us this morning. On that day they read from the book of Moses in the hearing of the people.

And in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God. For they did not meet the people of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them.

Yet our God turned the curse into a blessing. As soon as the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent.

Now, before this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, and who was related to Tobiah, prepared for Tobiah a large chamber where they had previously put the grain offering, the frankincense, the vessels, and the tithes of grain, wine, and oil, which were given by commandment to the Levites, singers, and gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests.

[1 : 32] While this was taking place, I was not in Jerusalem. For in the 32nd year of Artaxerxes, king of Babylon, I went to the king. And after some time I asked leave of the king and came to Jerusalem, and I then discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, preparing for him a chamber in the courts of the house of God.

And I was very angry. And I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber. Then I gave orders, and they cleansed the chambers, and I brought back there the vessels of the house of God with the grain offering and the frankincense.

I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them, so that the Levites and the singers who did the work had fled each to his field.

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.

Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses. And I appointed as treasurers over the storehouses, Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and Pediah of the Levites, and as their assistant, Hanan the son of Zechariah, son of Mataniah, for they were considered reliable.

[3 : 04] And their duty was to distribute to their brothers. Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God and for his service.

In those days, I saw in Judah people treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them in donkeys, and also wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of loads, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day.

And I warned them on the day when they sold food. Tyrians also, who lived in the city, brought in fish and all kinds of goods and sold them on the Sabbath to the people of Judah in Jerusalem itself.

Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, What is this evil thing that you are doing profaning the Sabbath day?

Did not your fathers act in this way, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Now you are bringing more wrath than Israel by profaning the Sabbath.

[4 : 17] As soon as it began to grow dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut, and gave orders that they should not be opened until after the Sabbath.

And I stationed some of my servants at the gates, that no load might be brought in on the Sabbath day. Then the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice. But I warned them and said to them, Why do you lodge outside the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you. From that time on, they did not come on the Sabbath.

Then I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come and guard the gates to keep the Sabbath day holy.

Remember this also in my favour, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love. In those days also, I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon and Moab, and half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod.

[5 : 25] And they could not speak the language of Judah, but only the language of each people. And I confronted them, and cursed them, and beat some of them, and pulled out their hair.

And I made them take 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. 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 him, 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? And one of the sons of Jehoiada, the son of Eliashib, the high priest, was the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite.

Therefore I chased him from me. Remember them, oh my God, because they've desecrated the priesthood, and the covenant of the priesthood, and the Levites. Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites each in his work.

[6 : 43] And I provided for the wood offering at appointed times, and for the firstfruits. Remember me, oh my God, for good.

This is the word of God. God's word, it really can set us back in our seats as we realise the amazing messages which he presents to us in that word.

What I hope to think about this morning, though, is what it tells us in that very last sentence. It's all about remembering.

Now, which of us has not set off from the living room for the kitchen with the best of intentions to pick up the electricity bill or put the cooker on to make the tea, and on that long journey past the spare bedroom, our wits have deserted us completely, and we arrive at our kitchen destination, but we've got no idea why we actually have come there.

And so we end up on a return journey with a cup of coffee instead of the electricity bill. Now, it happens. We forget. We do not remember. And this is a phenomenon common to us all.

[8 : 16] And it's not remotely the same as that scourge of dementia where not just memory but very many higher mental functions are undermined by that dreadful degenerative process.

That forgetting is quite different. But I'm sure you will have remembered that on the last few occasions that I've been privileged to be here, I've looked with you at a variety of books of the Bible and how they have ended.

The last verses. And these book endings have been anything but mundane. They've been really rather wonderful. We've had the glory of the Lord in the cloud and in the fire at the end of the book of Exodus.

We've had God's concern for the people and the cattle of Nineveh at the end of the book of Jonah. And we've got the radiation of the gospel of Jesus Christ round the known world even though Paul was chained for two years to a Roman guard at the end of the book of Acts.

But God willing this morning we'll look at the end of the book of Nehemiah and then this evening at the end of the book of Ephesians. Now, like every other book in God's own word to us the book of Nehemiah is a wonderful book.

[9 : 48] So remember that as a result of persistent sin and idolatry and disobedience to God's word and his covenant firstly the northern kingdom of Israel had been dispersed all over the known world with the fall of Samaria in 722 BC.

And the southern kingdom of Judah or Judea did little better in Obedien's terms. She failed to heed the warnings of prophet after prophet and in 605 BC there was the first of three tranches of exiles carried off to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar before Jerusalem was utterly destroyed in 586 BC.

But then when the Babylonians in due course themselves in God's perfect timing are overrun by the Persians after 70 years of Jewish exile had been completed King Cyrus of Persia moved by God himself decreed that Jews should return and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.

Now we read of this in the early part of the book of Ezra and indeed the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are thought if not in whole but certainly in part to be parts of the same historical writing by Ezra the scribe.

Now Ezra was someone who himself is described as having devoted himself to the study and observance of the law of the Lord and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.

[11 : 35] And would that we could put that particular accolade on our own CVs. So the first group of exiles returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel in 538 BC 70 years of exile completed.

And they began to rebuild the temple but it was a bit of a stop-start affair and it took 20 years and more for the temple reconstruction to be completed.

And would you believe that the initial enthusiasm to serve God after the trauma of exile the enthusiasm petered out.

But then it was resuscitated by Ezra coming to Jerusalem 60 more years later. We're now at 458 BC. Now a day is a long time in politics as we know in our own country in recent times.

A day is a long time in religion. It takes a moment to give your heart to Christ. So how about 60 years? Well in that time Jerusalem had got into a terrible state again.

[12 : 50] And word about this dire state with structurally still broken down walls structurally and spiritually as to word reached a high up and thoroughly trusted Jewish official in the court of Artaxerxes the king of Persia and his name was Nehemiah.

He was cup bearer to the king. That is to say he tested everything the king drank to make sure he wasn't poisoned and that was either accidentally or more likely intentionally.

The king's life depended on Nehemiah's trustworthiness. And if we read the book of Nehemiah through and it is a good read we are struck by the beautiful prayers that Nehemiah offered and which are recorded for us particularly in chapters 1 and chapter 9 but also the short sharp arrow prayers so called that he offered.

And the most famous of these is in chapter 2. You see it was a capital offence to be sad in the king's presence. But Nehemiah was so overwhelmed by the bad news his brother Hanani had brought him about the state of Jerusalem that he couldn't hide his feelings.

And when the king asked him why he was sad we have that wonderful arrow prayer then I prayed to the God of heaven and that prayer which occurred in the intake of one breath. And as Jesus later taught us not to worry about what to say when accosted but to trust that the spirit would give us the words at that moment.

[14 : 36] So Nehemiah told the king about his sadness and the outcome was that under God's providence Nehemiah was commissioned by Artaxerxes to return to Jerusalem to rebuild its walls and restore its buildings.

Now remember that in terms of journey length that would be a three month's walk and maybe a quarter of that time by horseback.

Well the book tells us of the opposition that Nehemiah experienced back in Jerusalem when he came to do the king's bidding to rebuild the temple walls the walls and the buildings and the main people opposing him were Sanballat the Horonite who was the governor of Samaria and Tobiah the Ammonite but there were a lot of others and they mocked him and they tried to undermine him and intimidate him and humiliate him but Nehemiah showed exceptional wisdom and tenacity and humility and leadership and he got his own hands dirty in the rebuilding as indeed did a ragtag crowd of all sorts of repatriated Jews even goldsmiths got their hands dirty rebuilding walls and perfumiers and priests and you know what someone called Shalom even got his daughters involved in the physicality of the building repairs so equality of the sexes was alive and well in Israel it seems when that building was complete and the repairs were finished there remained the task of repairing or reforming the backslidden people

Ezra read God's word out loud there was renewal of the covenant confession of sin and the people entered into a binding agreement again to serve God and not neglect the house of their God and the walls were dedicated with great ceremony and pomp and rejoicing and while all this was going on Nehemiah made a return trip to Artaxerxes in 433 BC but he returned as we read in our chapter to Jerusalem the next year only to find that the same recidivist backsliding tendencies had

reasserted themselves in the people which is why the chapter we read outlines a whole raft of actions that Nehemiah took to purify the temple and those who worshipped there how he purified the observance of the

Sabbath and along with Ezra took steps to prevent intermarriage of Jews with non-Jews and adoption of their idols as gods in the very manner that was causal in Solomon's downfall so the last sentence in the book of Nehemiah is remember me oh my God for good and the immediate context in verses 30 and 31 is thus I cleansed them from everything foreign and I established the duties of the priests and Levites each in his work and I provided for the wood offering at appointed times and for the first fruits this is the real practicalities of looking after the temple and temple worship remember me oh my God for good let's try to define remember a little bit first of all after all [18:29] Nehemiah here and we quite often especially in our prayers will use that very word and phrase remember our Lord please remember this person remember that person remember implies that they're stored in our brains information that we then bring to the forefront of our awareness such that what's not in our current thoughts is voluntarily brought to the forefront of our minds I might say to Leslie remember that holiday in Tuscany visiting the fortress in Montalcino do you remember that too and so from the archives of our minds we recall memories which we then share that's fine but what have you forgotten no I've never been to Italy yes you have it was in 2016 don't you remember oh yes now you say it

I remember or maybe the conversation might continue no no no you're getting confused it was actually the fortress in San Gimignano you're talking about and so the memory is inaccurate or frankly wrong on the part of the person who first recalled or the other person or both so humanly speaking we bring events or writings or sayings or thoughts stored in our minds back to the surface and though our remembering may be clear and sharp and accurate it may be incomplete highly selective some spouses might allege or it may be frankly wrong or it may be absent altogether the remembering may be a deliberate and triggered process triggered by a question or the remembering may be spontaneous coming out of a blue sky where did that come from mind you a memory can be triggered by other senses too by a sound a scent a taste a touch oh that's the perfume so and so used to wear the writer of

Nehemiah probably Ezra the scribe uses the word remember a lot he quotes Nehemiah's own words and uses remember when he asks the Jews to remember the Lord in chapter 4 verse 14 when he asks God to remember himself Nehemiah in 5 19 13 14 13 22 13 31 and when he asks God to remember others who have done wrong and their wrongdoing 6 14 and 13 29 it's as if Nehemiah has a vision of God as a superhuman human a God who has the attributes of humanity and so despite his divinity needs prompted and reminded to attend to certain details now actually that literary vehicle is a very common one in scripture it's got a long fancy name called anthropomorphism but it means attributing human qualities to the divine don't misunderstand me when the Lord

Jesus conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary was born in Bethlehem he was fully human and fully divine and even now is fully resurrected human and fully divine that's a matter of scriptural fact but aspects of human structure and behaviour are attributed to God by God himself through the work of the Holy Spirit inspiring scripture and so we have scripture talking of the hand of God the eyes of the Lord his hearing the mind of the Lord the heart of God and so on and this helps us to understand a little of the character of our God but God is spirit as Jesus himself tells us in John 4 and those who worship him must do so in spirit and in truth and when we do so we're stepping beyond merely human dimensions from length breadth height and time tied as we are to these in our humanity and we're moving into another dimension another realm all together where the spirits that we possess as the pinnacle of God's creative genius spirits gifted and breathed into us along with life itself unlike the animals those spirits answer to God himself in adoration and worship in humility and in awe and in thankfulness and invested in righteousness not our own but that perfect righteousness of Jesus himself and there's a day coming when in recreated regenerated resurrected bodies we will understand substantially more than we scabble around to understand now and all our resurrected senses and purpose will be focused on the worship and the praise of our triune God in all his transcendent majesty and outrageous grace but for now we feel the need to remind God to remember what he has not forgotten in the first place and always has at the forefront front of his awareness and that is because he is other than us he is almighty eternal omniscient the all remembering one yet scripture

[24 : 56] God's own his very own word to us tells us what pleasure he experiences when his frail fallible forgiven children and their weakness ask him to remember in our stumbling thoughts and words in effect we are saying father we love you your will be done in the lives of this person and that one and us too may the pain of this broken world as it impacts on our and their lives not be too much to bear for we know you love us and your plans and purposes for us are to prosper us and not to harm us to give us hope and a future with you remember us for good father what we are really asking when we pray to God to remember us is to look with favour on us to let his face shine on us as we have it in numbers 6 24 to 26 the Lord bless you and keep you the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace that peace is shalom it is not just absence of war it is wholeness it is superhuman peace in God's presence and in

Psalms 67 we have that wonderful verse may God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us and as we were singing in Psalm 106 those first four stanzas contain this wonderful verse remember me oh Lord when you show favour to your people help me and in that Psalm 106 we have got a complete package of praise and thanksgiving of proclamation and blessedness and favour and shalom and wholeness and there are arms outstretched in acclamation and confession and supplication and the remembrance if you like is a shared experience where God's face shines on his beloved as his beloved covenant people remember him in worship for adoration so when we approach

God asking him as Nehemiah did to remember us in favour or for good implicit in that are these three things the first is we are asking God to remember his covenants that he made with Noah and Abram and Moses and David his chosen people Israel the literal Israel in the Sinai covenant and the spiritual Israel in the covenant of grace covenants where in his grace God himself initiates agreements pledges where he took the initiative and he took the risk and in those covenants we have the outpouring the articulation of God's love for his people those covenants also demanded that his people respond with obedience so that's the first thing

God remembers his covenants that is our understanding that when Nehemiah says this there's a whole background there's a whole infrastructure and he is asking for God's remembrance on the basis of God's word God's promises God's faithfulness you know when we when we think on these things if we ever get a bit dismayed by it all we should have a wee read at Luke chapter 1 because there are some wonderful references there where God first through the angel speaks to Mary and Mary gives us that magnificat but then we have Zechariah pouring out his heart in verse 68 to 75 of Luke chapter 1 blessed be the Lord God of Israel for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant the oath that he swore to our father Abraham to grant us that we being delivered from the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days so point one remember your covenants Lord but also secondly implicit in this approach is that God will remember not just us but after one look at us that he will remember mercy as well that in much deserved wrath

[31 : 13] God will remember mercy Habakkuk 3 and 2 tells us O Lord I have heard the report of you and your work O Lord do I fear in the midst of the years revive it in the midst of the years make it known in wrath remember mercy God is a holy God an all consuming fire if you O Lord should mark iniquities O God who could stand but with you there is forgiveness that you may be feared Psalm 130 so even as we long for favourable covenantal remembrance and mercy remembered we also crave not remembrance but forgetfulness of our father when it comes to sin Micah 7 and 19 describes what some have called the ocean of God's forgetfulness who is a

God like you pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance he does not retain his anger forever because he delights in steadfast love he will again have compassion on us he will tread our iniquities underfoot you will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea you will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old we have to be so careful to avoid presumption here presuming on the fact that because our father delights in steadfast love and is waiting to be gracious this is who God is it is integral to his own salvation plan but where is our obedience in this

Jeremiah put in writing in chapter 31 of Jeremiah verses 33 to 35 this wonderful summary but this says Jeremiah inspired by the Holy Spirit is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days declares the Lord and after those days we are thinking about after the coming of the Lord Jesus I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts and I will be their God and they shall be my people and no longer will each one teach his the Lord for they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest declares the Lord for I will forgive their iniquity in Christ and I will remember I will remember their sin no more forgetfulness and this friends is the gospel of Jesus Christ we all agree that Genesis 1 affirms that we've been made in the image the likeness of our father our creator God that is what it tells us we are to be like him and if we're to follow him closely and please him Ephesians 5 and 1 tells us ever so clearly be imitators of God as beloved children so we too like our heavenly father are to be rememberers and we are to be forgetters as well this starts to get really interesting when we examine our own hearts and didn't Paul tell us to do that 2 Corinthians 13 5 examine yourselves he says to see whether you're in the faith test yourselves so do I remember God you might say well I'm here haven't I yeah but how often do we remember

God is it in our quiet times and at bedtime or morning and night time not in between or is it just on Sunday or is it just when we're in trouble or pain or difficulties or loss or distress or need and for all of us these circumstances heighten our awareness of our need to be in God's presence but do we have to be an extremist before we look to him and be lightened so that our faces will not be ashamed or like the Lord Jesus are we often seeking out silent places lonely places places where we meet with God in quiet and without distraction to pray and to listen do we like Enoch walk with God every day every step mindfully in harmony do I remember God's covenant his laws his sacrifice his son is he my study all the day do I remember him in bed at night

[36 : 40] Psalm 63 that we sang do I meditate on him in the watches of the night and remember Derek Prime's definition of meditation as being occupied with God occupied with God and do I forget do I forgive and forget or do I forgive but very actively remember all the hurts and iniquities and slander that others have inflicted on me every day of my life do I have no problem at all recalling past sins against me even while I hope and expect that God forgives my debts even as if through clenched teeth I squeeze out reluctantly as I forgive my debtors Stuart Townend composed a beautiful hymn called the Liturgy of the Hours which addresses this question let me read the lyrics to you with every morning

I will kneel to pray to be a blessing to this coming day in everything I say and everything I do to wholly honour you at noon remind me through this day to give my full attention to the ones I'm with be mindful of those things around and those within and fully enter in teach me the wisdom of remembering and give me the wisdom to forget lead me oh teach me to live each day for you and in the evening as my thoughts retell this passing day let me remember well so that no bitterness takes root within my soul help me to let them go and in the night time may my mind be free to truly rest and be refreshed in sleep and by releasing every worry every strain be free to start again Christ be with me

Christ within me Christ behind me and before Christ beside me Christ to win me Christ to comfort and restore Christ beneath me Christ above me Christ in peace and Christ in storm Christ in hearts of all who know me Christ in friend and stranger all so let's forget those things that we should many a church has foundered and denominations split through failing to forget what we should and failing to remember what we should I suppose it might jar a little that Nehemiah asked God to remember what Tobiah and Sanballat and Nodadiah and Joyadah the son of Eliashib the priest have done but he's not calling down fire on them he's asking God to remember their attempts to undermine the rebuilding of Jerusalem even as he craves

God remembers his own efforts to do God's will doing those good works which God prepared in advance for him to do Ephesians 2 10 God is judge and not us and that's how we should put these issues to bed not seeking personal revenge for who are we to judge another our perspective on the size of the speck or the plank in our own eye is rather flawed I think but we have to commit these issues to God in prayer and leave justice and due reward to him alone and resist any temptation to give God a helping hand a wee shove in the right direction regarding the feelings of others so there we have it remember me oh my

God for good remember me with favour oh my God is that our cry today is that our prayer as we are covered by the blood of Christ shed on Calvary as the covenant of grace is ratified in our lives and

as we seek God's mercy to us sinners each day as we crave that our sins and iniquities will remember no more but that he will see us covered in the perfect righteousness of Jesus our saviour as we seek to serve him day by day and as we seek to walk with God one last thing to remember is that Nehemiah means the comfort of God or God comforts and is not the Holy Spirit himself our comforter let's pray together who