

Remember Me, O God, for Good

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 29th of August 1999. The preacher is Phil Muleman.

His sermon is entitled, Remember Me, O My God, for Good. It is from Nehemiah chapter 13, verses 4 to 31.

Let's pray. Gracious God, we pray that you would open our hearts and our minds to help us understand your word and that we may live it out in our lives for your sake. Amen.

Well, today we conclude our series on Nehemiah. And if you'd like to follow along, I'm reading from a different Bible.

I can't remember the page number. I think it's 389 or 85 as we look at chapter 13. I enjoy reading stories to my children because they are generally stories with happy conclusions.

[1 : 13] For example, the story of Cinderella, which we all know so well. Prince Charming finds Cinderella, tells her he loves her and asks her to marry him.

And she says, All right. That wasn't a set-up. That's just been rehearsal from the proms over the past two years.

For those who are visitors today, we have these parish proms each year and the staff put on this atrocious play of Cinderella. And our boss is Cinderella.

Also, last week at the proms, I enjoyed the embellished fairy tale of Jack and the Beanstalk because the grotty, the picking the golden leaves of the Beanstalk.

And it was another story which had a happy ending, wasn't it? Well, we all love stories with happy endings. And if Nehemiah had finished his memoirs at the end of chapter 12 or even at the end of verse 3 of chapter 13, then it too would have ended on a bright note.

[2 : 20] But happy endings belong to fairy tales. In the real world, we constantly grapple with unfinished tasks, unsolved problems and unresolved conflicts.

And for the Christians, we will, life will have a happy ending, but not necessarily just yet. Now, in chapter 13 of Nehemiah, we learn that Nehemiah has returned to Jerusalem after a number of years' absence from the city where he was serving Kenar Xerxes in Babylon.

And that's how the book of Nehemiah began, where Nehemiah is the cupbearer to Kenar Xerxes.

And then he goes to Jerusalem to be involved in the process of rebuilding the walls.

And before he left Jerusalem to serve Artaxerxes again, he had been instrumental in the rebuilding and the reforming of God's people in Judah and in Jerusalem.

Now, Nehemiah was in for a shock on his return some years later back to Jerusalem. The promises and the agreements that God's people had made in chapters 10 through to 12 had been willfully broken.

[3 : 40] Faithfulness to God had willfully declined during Nehemiah's absence from the country. And the fairy tale ending that seemed to be in place when Nehemiah left Judah had been totally fractured on his return.

A less man than Nehemiah would have sunk into a black hole of depression. Nehemiah didn't though. He rolled up his sleeves and he got stuck into his final reforms as the governor of Judah. God had given Nehemiah a work to do and he fulfilled that task regardless of the setbacks and the obstacles. God, who had given him strength in his previous spell as governor, would empower him once more as he took up the reins again in this chapter.

What are the issues that Nehemiah faces in this chapter? Three things I want to point out this morning. First of all, in verses 4 through to 14, we see that God's house has been abused.

That is, God's temple. The temple worship has deteriorated. The second thing is that in verses 15 through to 22, we see that God's day has been abused.

[4 : 56] That is, the Sabbath day has been abused. There's no observance by the people on the Sabbath. And the third thing is in verses 23 to 27, we see that God's people, his own people, now pose a threat to their very own culture, to the identity that they were before God.

So Nehemiah sets about to reform these crucial areas of God's people. I want to deal with each one in turn. So first of all, God's house has been abused.

Now the responsibilities of temple worship and practice are seen just at the end of chapter 12 and verses 44 through to the end of the chapter. And to sum it up, basically, the responsibilities of the people were to bring their offerings of their tithes and their contributions into the temple according to law and so on.

Now the temple played a huge part in the life of God's people throughout their history. And when Nehemiah left Jerusalem to return to Babylon, the temple worship and the practice was in good shape.

The people were doing the things that they had been commanded to in law. They were doing those sorts of things. But on his return, he sees its practice in a sad state.

[6 : 16] It's deteriorated somewhat. Eliashib was the high priest placed in charge of the temple and under his rule, we see the steady decline of temple practices.

Once Nehemiah left Jerusalem, Eliashib's true character is seen when he provides the wicked Tobiah with a large room in the temple for his personal use.

In verse 5 we read about that. And this partiality of Tobiah was reprehensible because Tobiah was an official of the banned race of the Ammonites.

Look at what verse 1 of chapter 13 says. 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.

Well, we've heard about the wicked Tobiah in the weeks gone by and how he was opposed to Nehemiah's leadership. And we also learnt that Tobiah was an Ammonite.

[7 : 25] And here is an Ammonite in the very temple courts of God's house. They have abused God's house. God's people have abused God's house.

And the room that he took wasn't a small room. It was a large room. And it was a room that was previously used to store items used in the temple worship and for the contributions given by the people for the upkeep of the Levites and the priests, as verses 4 and 5 tell us.

It seems here that Eliashib's policy was peace or tolerance at any price, even if that entailed befriending those who hated God and was therefore bitter enemies of Nehemiah.

Tobiah's presence in the temple no doubt also would have upset the sincere worshippers of God who supported Nehemiah, but they felt powerless to oppose Eliashib who was the high priest of this temple.

Now it's hard to speak up for God when opposed by the ecclesiastical, if you like, hierarchy. It takes an unusual kind of courage to stand alone.

[8 : 44] And there have been so many people that have been martyred over the centuries as they have tried to oppose the ecclesiastical hierarchy in order to speak up for God.

It's a very hard thing to do. It seems the ramifications of Tobiah's accommodation in the temple courts were far-reaching. The loss of storage space for the produce given to the Levites and priests meant that the tithes or the offerings and contributions of the people given to them by the people gradually diminished.

And in time, the priests and the Levites had to go back to their farms to scrape together a living. And the priests and Levites were entitled to the food and the produce that were brought in by the people into the temple courts according to law in order to get on with the business of serving God's people.

But with this diminishment of this food and offerings into the temple courts, it now meant that they had to go and provide for themselves. And the effect of this was a lowering of the spiritual temperance of God's people.

Nehemiah's astounded by this. And when he returns and sees what is happening, he immediately does four things. First of all, in verses 6-9, he turned Tobiah out of the temple.

[10 : 17] Nehemiah is angry. He has a righteous anger. And he threw him out of the temple. Secondly, in verses 10-11, he reproved or remonstrated the officials for their neglected duties.

And in verses 12-13, we see that he appointed trustworthy people for the distribution of the supplies. He says the people that he appointed were considered to be faithful. In these three areas, Nehemiah acted decisively because he believed that God's law must be obeyed whatever the cost.

Whatever the cost. Church leaders or officials have no warrant to discipline members whose views differ from their own. But they must not avoid their responsibility when there is a glaring disregard of God's word in the life of the church.

Problems that aren't dealt with have a habit of growing into bigger problems later. And you'll notice here that Eliashib does nothing to oppose Nehemiah because he realises that Eliashib cannot argue with God's word.

[11 : 31] So, in the church, criticism is squashed when the leaders are seen to base their decisions on the guidelines laid down in the Bible because it is their authority on matters.

Alternatively, criticism, I think, is heightened in the church when God's word does not seem to be central in the leader's decision-making processes and so on.

Well, the fourth thing that Nehemiah did immediately was that he, in verse 14, he asked for God's favour. He prayed. Once again, we see Nehemiah pouring out his soul to God and prayer throughout the book of Nehemiah has been central to him.

Every time something is about to be initiated, he prays. Prayer is central. And he addresses God as my God because he felt so much at ease in his relationship with God.

You'll notice that four times in this chapter, he pleads with God to remember him. Here in verse 14, verse 22, verse 29, and verse 31, this repeated plea was a cry for God's help.

[12 : 48] He recognised that the reforms that he's bringing about here would not be possible and would have no lasting effect on the nation of Israel without God's blessing upon them.

So in these prayers, Nehemiah sought the approval of God and had also anticipated the reward which awaits all those who faithfully serve our God.

He wasn't concerned about criticism or ridicule from other people. Far from it. He was concerned, as verse 14 says, for the house of my God and for his service.

He was on about serving God. The temple was the place where God was present.

Therefore, care for the temple was an expression of his love for God. He wanted to obey the commands that were written down in scripture and show his care for the temple.

[13 : 56] The church, that is, the people, you, we, me, the people, not the building, the church is now God's temple as 2 Corinthians tells us.

We cannot love God if we do not love his temple. That is, the people of God. We cannot love God if we do not love his people.

Well, the first area of reform is seen in God's house. The second area of reform that Nehemiah looks at is restoring God's day in verses 15 to 22.

When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, he saw some Jews treading wine presses on God's day while others were bringing merchandise into the city for the Sabbath day market.

All sorts of things were being brought into the city to be sold. Now, listen to what the prophet Jeremiah says about the Sabbath. He's basically saying to keep it holy.

[14 : 57] Jeremiah chapter 17, Thus says the Lord, For the sake of your lives, take care that you do not bear a burden on the Sabbath day or bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem.

And do not carry a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath or do any work, but keep the Sabbath day holy as I commanded your ancestors. Yet they did not listen or incline their ear.

They stiffened their necks and would not hear or receive instruction. God promised prosperity if his people obeyed his commands and punishment if they broke his laws as those verses from Jeremiah 17 continue on with.

God is a God of promises and history shows where God has blessed Israel and punished Israel for breaking his laws. Nehemiah's contemporaries here were in danger of stirring up God's wrath again if they didn't stop their Sabbath trading.

Nehemiah again acts decisively just as Jesus does when he cleanses the temple that we read about in the Gospels. Nehemiah here does several things.

[16 : 19] First of all in verse 19 he orders the closure of the city gates on the Sabbath day. He places a guard to ensure the orders are carried out again in verse 19.

And in verse 22 he commands the Levites to renew their devotion to God and to guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy. And in verse 22 Nehemiah prays again.

Now the noise of buying and selling on God's day was a distraction to the temple worshippers which was bad enough. But more importantly it robbed the Sabbath of its true purpose of the adoration and worship of God.

Now Christians aren't bound by the elaborate and laborious regulations which govern the Jewish Sabbath. So what is the significance of the Sabbath for us today?

The principle of one special day in seven for rest from work and the corporate worship of God predate the Sabbath laws that were given down to Moses.

[17 : 30] The special day of worship has its roots in God's rest from work after the six days of creation and is laid down as a model for people of all ages and all cultures.

Jesus himself laid the basis for our understanding of the Sabbath when he pointed out that it was made to the benefit of human beings. As for the commercial activity that Nehemiah stopped we see an example here of human greed robbing people of proper rest and true recreation.

one day is set aside to enable us to renew our strength and to refresh our spirits and to worship God.

The moment we turn that day into a legalistic test of right beliefs or right orthodoxy and so on we have misunderstood the Sabbath thrill purpose and the moment we neglect it to make money to profit ourselves or whatever it may be we damage ourselves and laugh at God's generosity shown towards us.

Nehemiah was concerned for his people for the people he was serving particularly for those who had to tread wine presses and load donkeys to make more money for their employers.

[18 : 53] Sure those people were going to get paid their wages and so on but employers and employees alike have to be taught that man does not live by bread alone and isn't that so true in our world today where people are being pressured to work more and more hours so that they can profit themselves they can profit their organisations and so on.

The third reform that Nehemiah brings about has to do with God's people in verses 23 to 29. It's difficult for us in our tolerant age where anything goes to appreciate Nehemiah's distress here because of the marriage of the marriage of Jewish men to foreign women.

His reaction of verse 25 where he says and I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair that reaction may seem a little like an overreaction to us today it may seem a bit strong however I think various factors should be considered.

Nehemiah here was acting in his official capacity as governor of Judah and his actions weren't that of a private individual he was there serving God representing God.

Mixed marriages meant that there were people present who could not understand God's word. So in verse 24 we see that there is a generation of children that are growing up that are not familiar with the language of Judah they are familiar with various other languages but not with the Hebrew language thus they can't read the scriptures and so on.

[20 : 48] Mixed marriages were also repeating the sin of Solomon whose marriages to ungodly women in violation of God's law brought suffering on the Jewish race as verses 26 through to 28 tell us.

And the distinct identity of the Jews as God's witnesses in the world here was also under threat. If Nehemiah ignored and compromised on this issue now it would have serious repercussions for the future and so he needs to attend to it now being true to God's word and reforming God's people and being courageous in his leadership probably becoming unpopular in the things that he's having to say and do but he's been obedient to God's word.

Our world today is a society that doesn't like to be told what to do. It's increasingly in conflict with biblical values and so Christians will increasingly face opposition and even dare I say it litigation merely for teaching something that is biblical.

So where a church exercises discipline for example in sexual matters or other sensitive issues it risks being sued for invasion of privacy because the individual doesn't like what they are being told from the Bible.

You see Western society in its ever increasing devotion to individual rights resents church authority in church matters. Everybody wants to be their own authority on matters ignoring what the Bible has to say on such matters as marriage and sexuality and other sensitive issues and that's why I think the world is in such a mess.

[22 : 42] We more than ever need to be praying that God will continue to raise courageous leaders who will exercise wisdom and biblical values in the leadership arena especially on the sensitive issues.

Well we've explored Nehemiah over the last seven weeks and I've been wondering what to say at the end and I guess as we've studied Nehemiah we've been challenged in many areas.

We've been challenged about living lives that are godly and obedient. We've been challenged to look beyond ourselves and to see that it is the God of creation who sustains us, who gives us success in all that we do despite the circumstances that may be surrounding us.

We've been challenged as well to take God's word seriously to value it to live it out and to apply it.

We've also seen that life is not a fairy tale as many of us would like it to be.

Just look at the difficulties Nehemiah found himself in trying to rebuild and reformed God's people. It wasn't an easy job. But God enabled him to do the things he did because God is a God of promises.

[24 : 16] Life for us as God's people involves many challenges and even hardships. We've touched on some of those challenges albeit briefly this morning referring to temple worship to looking at the Sabbath to looking at God's people and so on.

So as Christians in this 20th century world we shouldn't be surprised when difficulties and challenges come our way. We should expect them.

How we respond to them though is what's important. On our own we are bound to fail. We're doomed for failure. But with a knowledge of who we are before our great and awesome God we can be certain of victory.

Maybe not in this life and in the way that we would like it to be but certainly we can be certain of victory in the life to come and we can be certain of Christ's enabling presence now as we continue on serving God.

I'm going to pray and then I want to introduce a hymn as where we continue on in worship. Let's pray. Our Father, our gracious God, we do thank you and praise you that your word instructs, guides and teaches us.

[25 : 42] Help us to be faithful expositors of your word so that we may know how to live according to your word. We thank you Lord God that you sent your son Jesus who died on the cross for our redemption, who brings us salvation and in obedience to his will.

We pray that we may be better servants for you. Lord, we pray that we would have courage in this world which seems to ignore authority, that we would have courage to come under your authority and speak out and speak up for how you say we should live.

And Lord, we thank you that your spirit lives in us and works in us, enabling us to do this. Amen. Our next hymn is 537.

Who honours courage here? Who fights the devil? Who boldly faces fear? Who conquers evil?

We're not afraid to fight. We'll scorn the devil's spite.

Christ gives us the right to be his pilgrims. Christ gives us the courage and the strength to go on in our day-to-day life of service of God.

[27 : 03] Let's stand and sing this hymn. Amen.