

Nehemiah 13 Failing

The book of Nehemiah ends with a profound sense of anti-climax as God's people continue to live unfaithfully. This points us to Jesus as the only hope that any of us have. He wants to use the very things that Israel neglected to do us good.

The rebuilding of Jerusalem's wall led God's people to recommit themselves to God (10:29-39) but after their initial enthusiasm had faded, and Nehemiah had gone back to Babylon, they returned to their previous unfaithfulness (13:4-5, 10, 15, 23-24, 28-29). This sense of anti-climax chimes with the Old Testament as a whole, and maybe our lives too. Moments of excitement and good intentions aren't enough to keep us obedient to God.

Jesus is the perfect fulfilment of all that Israel and we have failed to do:

- They didn't obey God's Word; Jesus is God's Word (John 1:1), embodying it and going way beyond any kind of nit-picking rule-keeping to the fullness of love and faithfulness that it was always meant to show (Matthew 5-7).
- They neglect the temple; He is the true temple, the meeting-place of Heaven and Earth, God and man (John 2:19-22). His death is the sacrifice, to which all the thousands of sacrifices before it were mere signs (Hebrews 10:14). He establishes true worship of God, in spirit and truth (John 4:21-24, 1 Corinthians 3:16).
- They dishonour the Sabbath; He is the Lord of the Sabbath (Matthew 12:8), doing good on it, restoring wholeness and joy to people so that it can be kept as it should be. His great work of re-creation in Easter week is followed resting in the grave on the Sabbath day (Hebrews 4:9-10).
- The people of Israel marry other nations and become like them, losing their distinctiveness and faithfulness; Jesus is the only utterly faithful person who has ever lived, faultless on all counts (John 8:46). He brings the nations to Himself and makes them like Him (John 12:20-32, Romans 8:29) by the power of His Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18).

How do Christians respond to this when we consider our weaknesses failings? Belonging to Jesus, having His life in you, doesn't isolate you from these things (Psalm 43:5, 103:14, Isaiah 40:30, 2 Corinthians 4:7, 7:5). God knows this about you, and He doesn't hold it against you. The perfection He requires has been fulfilled by Jesus, the life that we need to be faithful to Him is in Jesus alone.

There are so many ways Jesus gives us the grace we need, including the four things mentioned in Nehemiah 13:

1. Scripture

Reading the Bible regularly can change your life: you can know who God really is, hear Him speak to you in different ways, learn to obey Him (Matthew 7:24-27, James 1:22-25). We've

put together Reading God's Word Together to help you discover this for yourself and with others.

2. Church

If the tent and the temple in the Old Testament were known as "the meeting place" (Exodus 27:21 and on) – how much more is the church (James 4:8, 2 Corinthians 3:18)? We can now worship Jesus at any and every time but it is always God's intention that His people gather together to praise Him (1 Corinthians 12, Hebrews 10:24-25). We must be intentional about this.

Giving is part of this. It's a "grace" that does us good, not a burden that leaves us poorer (2 Corinthians 8:7-10). God makes amazing promises about giving (Proverbs 19:17, Malachi 3:10) – wouldn't you like to see if they could be true?! Our Christmas offering is a great way to start this, giving regularly to King's is a great way to continue it.

3. Sabbath

Sabbath is a time of rest and rejoicing, when we bask in what Jesus has done and realise that it's not down to us. The pressure that builds up in us to strive and perform and achieve and be accepted gets punctured. For more on this, see Luke's message from January 2020, "Rest and Rejoicing".

4. Company

Nehemiah's horror at Jews marrying people from other nations can sound like terrible racism in our ears, if we don't understand what is going on. God had always welcomed people from other lands who believed in Him (Exodus 12:38, Numbers 9:14, Ruth, Isaiah 56:3-7). That isn't what's happening here: these marriages were less about faith and love and more about making connections with the surrounding peoples to get influence and prosperity.

Paul puts it bluntly, "bad company corrupts good morals" (1 Corinthians 15:33). If most of the messages you're getting from people around you (in person and the media you consume) are negative, sceptical, unhealthy, perverse, godless, hopeless, consumerist, raging, selfish... I don't think you'll survive not being impacted by that. We need people around us, close to us, who will help us to remember God's goodness when we're forgetful, share our burdens, teach us in word and deed, bless us with their gifts and abilities and opportunities and perspectives (Galatians 6:2, 1 Corinthians 11:1, 1 Thessalonians 1:6, Romans 12:4:8, 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, Ephesians 4:11-16). And we need to be those people for others, too.

--

Questions for small group discussion

- It was wonderful to hear Jan's testimony about giving his life to Jesus, and seeing him get baptised on Sunday. How old were you when you got baptised, and where did it happen?

- What do you think the biggest issue causing you to struggle in your following of Jesus at the moment?
- How do we balance an understanding of ourselves as being impacted by external factors (other people's sin, environmental circumstances, etc.) and also being people still under the influence of sin (though not its life-controlling power, Romans 6:5-10)?
- How do we keep Jesus's achievements on our behalf at the front of mind?
- Which of the four points Luke highlighted would you like to step into more? What practical steps can you take to make this happen?