Which Master Will You Serve?
Nehemiah 9:32-10:39

Let's recap where we've got to in this story:

Nehemiah has returned to Jerusalem and has managed to rebuild the city's wall in just 52 days. But he also knows that if the people are to be a light and a blessing to the nations around them, which is what God calls them to be, then they themselves needed to be rebuilt as the people of God. So, we're going to rejoin the story as Nehemiah and the priests lead the people in a final prayer of repentance as they recommit themselves to God.

Nehemiah 9:32-10:39

You'll Always Serve Something
Now, there are times when you hear about something bad that's happened to someone, and the tragedy of it hits you. And you think, 'that's terrible, things were never supposed to turn out like that'. Well, if we were closer to the Jewish people of Nehemiah's day, we'd feel something of that emotional reaction when we hear them pray: 'Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, we are slaves.' (Neh 9:36)

And that's terrible because it was never supposed to be like that. When God first promised the land of Canaan to Abraham it was as a blessing for him and his descendants. And when God first formed the people of Israel as his people, by delivering them from slavery in Egypt, it was so they could be free in the land of promise, not so they could just swap the Egyptians for a different slave master. But for the last 200 or so years the Jewish people have been conquered and enslaved by first the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, and now the Persians. Verse 37, 'and [the land's] rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please and we are in great distress.' In other words, things should not be like this. The promise and the call of God on the people of Israel was never meant to end in more slavery.

But one hard lesson of life, and maybe you've experienced this, is that sometimes it takes everything to be stripped away from you, before you face honestly the issues in your life. And these guys honestly face why they are where they are: v33, 'we have acted wickedly'; v37, it's 'because of our sins'.

And it's why they are where they are that has so much to teach us.

You see, they've ended up serving these foreign kings because they didn't want to serve God. Talking in v35 of their leaders and fathers they say, 'Even in their own kingdom, and amid your great goodness that you gave them… they did not serve you.' So, it's ironic isn't it: because they wouldn't serve God, they ended up enslaved to other masters. Because they wouldn't acknowledge that ultimately their lives and possessions belonged to God, they ended up having to give those things to foreign kings. In other words, because they didn't want God as their king, they were reduced to being slaves of other kings.

Now you might hear all that and think, 'yeh and what's that got to do with me?" Well, the truth is that we will always end up serving something, won't we? You

see, the question isn't, 'will I serve something or not?'; the question is 'which master will I serve?' Listen to what the American writer, David Foster Wallace said in a commencement address at Kenyon College: 'In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.' And he went on to explain why there's a good reason you should worship God and nothing else. And that is that 'pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things — if they are where you tap real meaning in life — then you will never have enough. Never feel you have enough… Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you…. Worship power — you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart — you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.'

And he's right isn't he? Because what you worship you inevitably end up serving. What you worship ends up mastering you. And we think we can do without God as the Israelites did, or push him to the side in some kind of supporting role, and instead pursue career or wealth or academic success or romance or whatever, but you find that these things demand more and more from you. And you discover, as the Israelites discovered, that you've exchanged one master, a good, loving, merciful master, for one that is cruel, for one that sucks the life from you, or from your family or your marriage, a master that can break you, a master that becomes a monster.

Well, if that's the case, how can you avoid that happening? How can you stop a good thing becoming a God thing in your life? Or if you recognize it's already a problem, what can you do about it?

Repentance and Rest

A couple of summers ago we spent a week walking high up in the French Pyrenees. And on one walk we were trying to do a loop up and around a mountain, when it started to rain. And it was one of those long, hard summer downpours. And before long we were absolutely drenched, and Su's brand new sun hat turned to pulp, which was when we realised it was made of paper, and the walking map began to disintegrate. And we knew we needed to take a path up through the trees, on the right, but we never found it. Instead, we kept on walking until we found ourselves on a rock face, overlooking a steep drop below with no way up and no way across. So the only thing we could do was to retrace our steps and try and find the right path again.

And that's what these guys in Nehemiah's day did. They heeded the words of Isaiah the prophet that "In returning and rest is your salvation." (Is 30:15). In other words, God says, you will only find true freedom and true satisfaction in life if you come back to me, if you come back to the right path.

And so what Nehemiah does is he leads the people back to that right path. And what they pledge themselves to do directly addresses what got them off that path in the first place.

Firstly, because they had failed to pay attention to God's word, they commit to get back to listening to and obeying that word. Verse 29, they promised 'to walk in God's Law.' Now, imagine you need to get somewhere, but you can't find the place and you realise that you're lost, what do you do? And you haven't got a smart phone! The ladies amongst us are humble enough to ask for directions aren't they? Us men, pretend we've got it all under control and we know precisely where we are. But if we knew where we were we wouldn't be lost. And in life, it's when you recognise that you're lost that you realise you need someone to show you the way. But you've got to be humble enough to admit it, to realise that you need a guide, some authority outside of yourself to lead you. And so these people recommit themselves to listen to God's word as that guide. And if we are humble enough to admit it, our need for that voice is no less than theirs.

But they don't leave it in the realm of generalities. Instead, they highlight specific areas where they're going to make their repentance real. And each area takes aim at stuff that could enslave them, that could get them, and you and me, worshipping and serving stuff other than God.

Verse 30: 'We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons.' Now, this has nothing to do with racial purity. Instead, as you read through Israel's history, you'll see that this issue of intermarriage keeps coming up, because it brought with it the pressure to conform to the surrounding culture. But God's people aren't called to conform, are they? They, we, are called to be a distinctive community, to be a light and a blessing to those around. But if you were Jewish and married a pagan, your pagan husband or wife brought his or her idols into the marriage. And that inevitably resulted in compromise and God's people becoming indistinguishable from those around them.

And that's one of the reasons why a Christian shouldn't date a non-Christian. Because if you do, while you hope the flow of influence is going to be from you to them, almost inevitably there is pressure the other way: the pressure to conform to their ways, in a sense to adopt their idols – the stuff they think is important - as your gods. And when that happens, just as it did for Israel, it can cripple your ability to be a blessing and a witness in their lives.

But there's something else behind this pledge against intermarriage. You see, in Nehemiah there's the implication that families have married into pagan families to gain a step-up, to climb the social ladder, to forward their prospects, to gain business advantage through marriage. And so when they pledge here not to intermarry, they're saying that God is going to be their God, not the drive to get ahead. Their going to honour God first, even if that means business suffers, or people think less of them. And listen, if you fail to do that, and instead allow what others think of you, or this drive for success to rule you, you'll begin to sacrifice stuff for it, stuff like your integrity or your family.

Then the second specific they settle on is observing the Sabbath: v31, 'And if the peoples of the land bring in goods or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them.' Now, as Isaiah said, 'In repentance *and rest* is your salvation', but the Sabbath was always meant as something more than one day off a week.

God delivered the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt and then Moses said, 'You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day' (Deut 5:15). So the Sabbath was this tangible way of saying: look, you're not a slave anymore, so don't live like one. Don't allow yourself to become enslaved to the task-master of work, or the constant drive for more, that will wreck your lives.

Now, if they needed to hear that message, what about us? You see, when you're ambitious to succeed, as many of you are, it's easy for that driven-ness to become a slave-driver. And work and success become a task-master. But the sobering truth is, that it's only slaves who can't put their work down.

But it wasn't just the Sabbath *day* – it was also the Sabbath *year*: v31: 'And we will forego the crops of the seventh year and the exaction of every debt.' Now the law specified that every seventh year a farmer's fields should lie fallow. And on the one hand, this was a major lesson in trusting God, wasn't it? You had to trust God to provide enough in the sixth year to see you through the seventh. But there's something deeper here too. You see, it wasn't just that the farmers weren't to work the land, they also weren't to harvest what came up in that fallow year – it was to be left for the poor to harvest. And so the Sabbath year served as a kind of social security system for the poor. It's why Nehemiah also says they will also forego the exaction of debt in the Sabbath year.

Now why do they pledge this here? Because money and possessions, or, in their day, the yield of their land – can have this strange power over us, can't it? You always think you need just a little bit more, that you never have quite enough. That if we worked a bit harder, we'd have a bit more. But you never get there. And when money gets a grip on you like that, it kills generosity and your heart for the poor, because *I* need this, so I can't give it away, I haven't got enough to share: 'when I earn a bit more, then I'll start giving.' But that day never arrives. So obeying the Sabbath year was a way of saying, 'I am not going to allow money and wealth to master me. I'm not going to serve money. Rather I am going to use what God has given me to serve him, by serving the poor and the needy.' And so it's not just the task master of money that they're nailing, it's also the self-centredness that puts my wants above others needs.

But the third and final rubber-hits-the-road area that they address can be summed up in their final words in v39: "we will not neglect the house of our God." And no less than 9 times in 7 verses they mention 'the house of our God'. So they pledge to make the temple their major priority. They promise to each give a yearly sum of money to fund it. They pledge to provide wood for the altar fires. And finally, they promise to bring the first-fruits of all their produce and livestock into the temple, including their own first-born sons who they'd then redeem with an offering.

Why do they pledge all that? Because, in Jesus's words, 'where your treasure is, there your heart will be also' (Matt 6:21). Now imagine that you have 100k to spend and you decide to spend that on some flashy car. You're not going to treat

that car like the Slacks treat their cars, are you: all smears and dirt and crumbs and litter everywhere. You're going to wash it, and clean it, and garage it properly. Why? Because this cost you, and your heart follows your money. And by pledging to give like this to the temple, they are saying, 'we commit ourselves to make this city a city of worship, where God is central.' And not in some nebulous way, but all of us, as individuals are going to give our best to this, *because* we want to give our hearts to this, to make this city a place where God is glorified.

Now just as every individual worships something, the same is true of every city, and every culture. And a society's public buildings often say a whole lot about what they do worship. Millions spent on the Rolex Learning Centre say something about what the god of the campus is. Hundreds of millions spent on sports arenas, or global financial centres, say something about our modern idols. And by ensuring there is a vibrant temple at the centre of their city, the people are making a statement about what they are going to worship: that it's not going to be profit, or money, or self, or individual freedom, because they've experienced what happens when you worship these things. Rather God is going to be at the centre of their life together.

But there's a problem isn't there? You see, if you read on to the end of Nehemiah you discover that whilst the people meant well, over time their commitment waned. And we've all experienced this, haven't we? New year's resolutions that don't last a month, let alone a year. New determination to do something, or change something in our lives, that fizzles out when difficulties come.

So when we recognise that things have got a hold of our hearts that shouldn't have, how can we see real change that lasts? How can we worship and serve God as God and keep these other things in their right place?

Knowing the One you Worship

And firstly, we can start where they started, with thinking rightly about God. Now, 40 years ago JB Phillips wrote a book called, 'Your God is Too Small.' And when we reduce God to our little helper, whose sole reason to exist is to be my therapist or to make me happy, it's no wonder that other stuff seems more attractive and captures our hearts. But listen to how these people describe God: Chapter 9 v32, "Now… our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love." And when, like them, you realise that God is greater and more awesome than you have words to describe, that he is more faithful and more loving than you could ever imagine, then love for him and desire for him, begins to stir in your heart. And it begins to challenge some of our attitudes and decisions in life. Because how could this other stuff possibly compare with him?

But you also need something more than that, because they needed something more than that. And the good news is that though their resolve for God weakened, God's resolve for them and for us never weakened.

And here in v32 they describe God's 'steadfast love'. In Hebrew it's God's *hesed* love, his covenant-keeping love. His love that won't let go of you. And that *hesed*

love is the golden thread that runs through all the Bible, and it culminates in God sending his Son into world: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son' (John 3:16). You see, these men and women pledge to give their firstborn sons to God, but in each case they redeemed them back with an offering. When God gave his firstborn son, there was no redeeming him back. Instead Jesus willingly gave himself to redeem us back. And where time and again you and I fail to keep God's law, Jesus kept it perfectly, and then gave his life for us who don't. And whilst our resolve to love and worship God above everything else may falter, His resolve to love us never faltered, not even at the cross.

And when the full extent of God's love for you in Jesus sinks into your heart, it does something to your heart. And money and career and self and sex and ambition all begin to find their right place. And you realise that there is nothing and no-one more worthy of your worship and your life's service than him. And even though you know you're going to fail a thousand times, you also know that now you're not putting your trust in yourself anymore, but in the steadfast love of God for you in Christ, and that never fails.