Problems, Passion and Jesus
Nehemiah 13:4-31

If I were to ask you whether you had any plans for retirement, most of you would probably laugh wouldn't you – we've only just started, we're still getting going! But what if the end were in sight, what would you have in mind? I remember a story about a man who applied for a position at a missions agency, and he was being interviewed by this wise old missionary. And the candidate asked this senior man what the retirement policy of the mission was, what the pensions prospect was like. And this old missionary replied, 'oh we have an excellent retirement policy, we have this beautiful grave yard just opposite the offices.'

And Nehemiah would have agreed with that. You see, by chapter 13 Nehemiah is getting on. He arrived in Jerusalem in the 20th year of King Artaxerxes, but in v6 he tells us 'In the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes… I went to the king.' So 12 years after his arrival in Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the walls, he returned to the King in Persia. And it's obvious from what goes on here that he has been away from Jerusalem long enough for people to get married and have babies and for those babies to grow up into kids who can now speak. So most commentators agree that Nehemiah is probably well into his sixties. But he's not about to retire.

Instead he returns to Jerusalem and once more throws himself into the fight. You see, the heady days of the walls being completed, and the people re-dedicating themselves to God are long gone, it's probably 20 years ago. And whilst we left them in chapter 12 having this wonderful celebration as one worship band went one way round the walls and another went the other way, those days seem like a distant memory as this ageing man, Nehemiah, walks back into Jerusalem and takes stock of what's been going on in his absence.

And so we could talk about Nehemiah's perseverance and how he embodies Winston Churchill's maxim to never give up, but instead I want us to look at his problems, and then at his passion, and then we'll finish Nehemiah by looking at his master.

Nehemiah's problems

And the problems Nehemiah met when he arrived back in Jerusalem were enough to make the strongest of hearts wilt. If you remember, 20 years previously, back in chapter 10, the people had pledged themselves to be faithful to God, to not intermarry with the nations around, to keep the Sabbath, and to provide for the Temple. In fact, their words, 'We will not neglect the house of our God' rang across Jerusalem (Neh 10:39). But now, 20 years later, every one of those promises lies broken, and the people have compromised.

Just think about this situation with Tobiah, the Ammonite. Remember him? He was one of Nehemiah's arch-enemies. He had opposed and attempted to frustrate Nehemiah's work all along the way. And yet, Nehemiah returns to find that Tobiah has been given a room in Jerusalem by none other than a priest, Eliashib. And not any old room to rent, but one in the Temple, one right in the centre of Israel's worship life, and he's handed over a room that should have stored articles for worship, to the use of this foreign agent.

Now in today's world, if a spy is caught in MI6, or the pentagon, spying for a foreign power, it's a huge deal, not least because their mission depends on secrecy and them going undetected. But here, everyone knows Tobiah is living in the Temple, and nobody does anything about it, because he's been invited in, he's been given an office. And it's the fact that this is so blatent that makes it all the more galling.

You see, Nehemiah's enemies did not go away when he went away. They were as resilient as he was. It's an indication, if one were needed, that the enemies of your souls, the stuff that wants to bring you down and discourage you, never give up either. And any pause in the battle against sin must be seen as just that.

But that situation begs a question, doesn't it? Why was this room that was supposed to store the people's tithes and offerings that supported the temple workers, empty in the first place? Well, Nehemiah soon discovers why, v10, 'I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them'. So it seems that the people had stopped bringing their tithes, so the storeroom in the temple was lying empty, which is why Eliashib could even consider letting Tobiah use it in the first place.

But the people's failure to give to the work of the temple had had another disastrous effect as well: v10 again, 'so the Levites and the singers, who did the work, had fled each to his field.' You see the tithes provided the Levites who taught the bible, and the singers, who led the worship, with their salaries. And with no food coming in they had been forced to leave Jerusalem and go back to their fields. It's interesting isn't it: the people's failure to worship God, in this case by giving, left a vacuum at the centre of Jerusalem. And the thing about vacuums is that they get filled, and Tobiah filled that vacuum. It's a reminder, isn't it, that if we don't worship God, with our lives and our stuff, if he doesn't fill the storehouses of our hearts, something else will take his place.

And now, with the Levites gone, with no one to teach the people the Bible, things begin to disintegrate. And Nehemiah discovers that the Sabbath day is being widely disregarded. And the Jewish people are working, and foreigners are trading, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem are buying, all on the Sabbath, and it's all happening, as Nehemiah says in v16, 'in Jerusalem itself!'

It's interesting isn't it, when the word of God ceases to shape public life, when the worship of God is neglected or excluded from the public square, materialism and the pursuit of profit or self-advancement becomes the new god.

But this disintegration was not confined to the public life of the city, it extended to the heart of family life as well. Now, if there is more than one way to skin a cat, there is also more than one way to destroy a city. And what Nehemiah's enemies had failed to do in their attempt to stop the rebuilding of the walls, the people themselves stood on the brink of achieving by intermarrying with the nations around them. Verse 23, 'In those days also I saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon and Moab'. And as a result half of their children, Nehemiah tells us, could not speak Hebrew. And if they couldn't understand Hebrew, they

wouldn't be able to understand God's word. So as Nehemiah sees it, it doesn't matter whether or not the walls of Jerusalem have been rebuilt, within one generation the people will have been assimilated into the surrounding pagan culture.

So, Nehemiah has returned to find a city that is flourishing materially, that is secure, but one where God and his word are increasingly seen as a peripheral thing, and where, as a result, the things that really matter are beginning to unravel. And it's all the more tragic given the promises and the determination they had all made and shown 20 years before.

But maybe you recognise that pattern, either in your own life, or the life of someone you love. The desire and the determination to change, the promises made, the re-dedication to do the right thing, but then things begin to fall apart and the enthusiasm wanes and before long we find ourselves back where we were, only this time with less hope and less enthusiasm for change.

So how did the people get here? What had gone wrong between Nehemiah's departure and his return? Well, the truth is that it was probably a subtle slide, wasn't it? Probably no one set out to see things end this way. Maybe Eliashib the priest thought that Nehemiah was a bit too harsh, a bit exclusive, and he wanted to be more inclusive and build bridges towards Tobiah. Or maybe in Nehemiah's absence he just grew tired of resisting and fighting Tobiah's advances. Maybe Tobiah made him an offer he couldn't refuse. Maybe the same was true for Sabbath trading: maybe the people just got worn down standing against the drive to make money on the Sabbath. And maybe the people saw that there was more to be gained by keeping their tithes rather than being generous in their giving – I mean, just think of all the other stuff we could get if we kept this for ourselves. And maybe the same thinking was at play in intermarrying with the nations, that they stood to gain by marrying into these more wealthy pagan families.

Whatever it was, there is always this pressure to conform or be squeezed into the world's mold, and it can be hard and draining to keep resisting. Sometimes it seems easier, in fact sometimes it *is* easier, to give in and go with the flow, and think or behave just like everyone else, especially if the gains seem greater or life seems easier. And as happened here in Jerusalem, over time there is this growing insensitivity to sin, and we give it a home, we accommodate it in our hearts and lives, as Eliashib gave Tobiah rooms in the temple.

Well, that was the Jerusalem Nehemiah came back to: the Bible teachers had stopped teaching and the singers had been silenced, both because their salaries couldn't be paid; meanwhile, unprincipled merchants were raking it in; and fathers were spiritually negligent as their children grew up ignorant of God's word.

So what does Nehemiah do?

Nehemiah's Passion

Well, what he does is he explodes! Now, in our day people would set up a committee, a working party, and they'd draw up a report and write discussion documents, to see whether we could accommodate Tobiah in the temple, to show how Tobiah living in the temple was really not such a bad thing but should be welcomed as a sign of progress. But Nehemiah doesn't negotiate with Tobiah, he doesn't try and find a compromise solution with him, there is no negotiation, he just walks in and Tobiah's furniture flies out. v8, 'I was very angry, and I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber.' It's incredible isn't it, it's so politically incorrect.

You see, whereas there is always this temptation to tolerate sin or excuse it or compromise with it or find a way to live with it in our lives, to Nehemiah holiness and righteousness were not negotiable. As Jesus would later say, if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.

And Nehemiah was angry; *very* angry, he says. Now, Is that wrong? No – because it all depends what you're getting angry about, doesn't it. If I get angry because I'm not getting my own way, then it's not just my anger that's wrong, I'm wrong. But here, Nehemiah is angry at sin. And the truth is that all the time that sin does not really bother us, nothing much is going to change. Sometimes it takes us to get emotionally engaged with a problem, and see it for what it really is, before real change is going to happen.

But the truth is, when we read some of what Nehemiah did, like v25, 'I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair' our modern sensibilities are offended, and we sure as anything wouldn't tolerate behaviour from a leader like that today. So was he over the top? Could he have been more gracious, more diplomatic. Possibly. Nehemiah wasn't perfect. But if Nehemiah could be accused of being over the top, could we be accused of not caring enough about holiness? As Jim Packer writes, 'Nehemiah should not be criticised for thinking that there are more important things in life than being nice.'

And just ask yourself, what is driving this level of passion? Well, firstly, if you look back at chapter 1, Nehemiah has this heart for Jerusalem because this is the place that God has chosen 'to make my name dwell there' (Neh 1:9). So for Nehemiah, God's honour is at stake here. But there's something else – and that is the welfare of the people themselves – the very thing that first brought Nehemiah to Jerusalem all those years ago. Look at v18, as he acts against the Sabbath breakers: '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 on Israel by profaning the Sabbath.'

Now the German philosopher Hegel famously said, that 'the one thing we learn from history is that we do not learn from history.' Well, Nehemiah has learnt from history, and he knows that the people's attitude to the Sabbath was just an indication of their wider spiritual carelessness, and he could see the road they were heading down and he would do anything to protect them from that. They

might think that making a bit more by working on the Sabbath was great, but Nehemiah knew that the opposite was true, that they were storing up wrath for themselves. And he would spare them that.

And Nehemiah went into orbit over intermarriage not because he was some kind of closet racist, but because he could see that it was the kids who were suffering, it was they who were going to reap the whirlwind, if they grew up unable to understand God's word or expereince God's grace. You see, isn't it often the way that when us fathers drop the ball spiritually, and become careless and fail to engage, then it's the next generation who suffer. And if this drift towards paganism continued that is exactly what would happen. And Nehemiah uses the example of Solomon – that even a man who was chosen by God and loved by God and favoured by God, could fall into sin and be brought down by it. And all the time Solomon thought he was having the time of his life surrounded by all these beautiful women, and in the end it ruined him. Because sin does. And Nehemiah desperately, passionately, does not want the same to happen to his people whom he loves.

But all this begs the question, what's going to happen when Nehemiah's gone for good. What's going to happen when Nehemiah is no longer there to keep people in shape?

Well, we know what happened, because whilst Nehemiah is not the last book of the Old Testament in terms of position, these events are the last events recorded in the Old Testament. And 'what comes next' happens 500 years later when John the Baptist steps onto the stage and calls on the people to repent.

But in between, and thanks to Nehemiah's perseverance, the people never really lost this clarity of faith. But it wasn't a faithfulness rooted in the heart. With time it became legalistic and a matter of rules and regulations. And the end point became the hollowed out faith of the Pharisees – the externals were all there, but the passion and the purpose and the heart, weren't. It became a matter of preaching, but not practising, of concentrating on the externals but not the internal matters of the heart. A type of religion that made a big deal over tithing herbs, but forgot about justice, mercy and forgiveness.

And when you read this last chapter of Nehemiah, it leaves you wishing the ending were better, it leaves you wanting more. Because you realise that what the people need is a new heart, they need to be changed from the inside, they need to *want* to live for God's glory and not just be *made* to do it. They need something greater than the Temple to inspire them, something greater than the Sabbath to change them, to help them see that life will only thrive with God at the centre.

But it's not just them who need that, is it? We all do. You see, sometimes, when the fog lifts and we see things clearly, we can see that life would be better if I got this right in my life or I stopped doing that, but when I try, the power's just not there. And you know the issue's to do with your heart. Or maybe you look at the totality of your life, your private life, and it just seems a mess and you know deep

down that what you need is a new start, to start over. But for that to happen, you need to change, like they needed to change.

So, coming back to Nehemiah, what the people need, what we all need, is not just to have rules imposed from the outside, but to be remade from the inside.

Nehemiah's Master

Well, Nehemiah battles to get the people to recognise the importance of the temple and the Sabbath, but 500 years later Jesus would walk into this same city and say 'I tell you, something greater than the temple is here' and 'the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath' (Matt 12:6,8).

And Nehemiah was not the last person to cleanse the temple was he? If Nehemiah threw Tobiah's furniture out into the street, Jesus made a whip and drove the merchants and the money-changers from the Temple courts. And if Nehemiah tells us he was very angry, it was said of Jesus that zeal for God's house consumed him.

But that is where Nehemiah and Jesus part company. You see, whilst Nehemiah beat and pulled the hair of others to get them to see the gravity of their sin, Jesus gave himself to be beaten and had his beard pulled out by the soldiers who crucified him, because of the gravity of our sin. And he gave himself willingly in our place, because of his great love for us.

You see, when Nehemiah prays, he knows that he, just like the rest of us, is a man in need of God's mercy: v22, 'Remember this also in my favour, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love.' And that never-ending love of God reached its climax at the cross, as Jesus gave his life in our place. And if we struggle and fail to love God and others as we should, the apostle John wrote, 'this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins' (1 John 4:10). So instead of God casting us off because of our failure to love him as we should, he loves us to the fullest extent and gave himself for us. And that word *propitiation* means something that turns away wrath – so at the cross, Jesus took upon himself the very thing Nehemiah dreaded coming on the people, the wrath of God that we all deserve, and absorbed it all.

So if you're here and you know you need a fresh start, that you're not yet a Christian, then look to him, and put your trust in him and be joined to him by faith, because it's as you do that, that Paul says the very thing you need happens: 'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come' (2 Cor 5:17). And if you're already a Christian, but you see these areas in your life where things are not right and you've accommodated sin and given it room space in your heart, then do the same: look to the one who loves you so much he died for you, and allow his Spirit to change your heart. And for all of us, it's as we look to Jesus and understand afresh his love for us, that our love for him will grow. And then, just as Nehemiah did in his day, we'll live with a passion for God's glory and for the good of his people, and for the blessing of the next generation.