

From Rubble to Return: Rebuilding with God's Bodies

Nehemiah 13:23-31

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Please open your Bibles to the last chapter of Nehemiah – chapter 13. You will find that on page 353 if you are looking in the Pew Bible.

As you are finding that let me just tell you that today is the conclusion of the *From Rubble to Return* series we've been in for the last couple months. If you haven't been with us we've done 10 weeks in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. And today's text is an interesting one.

It isn't one that gets preached very often because it has some seriously strange stuff in it – you may have picked up some of that from the reading earlier. And we will deal with that. But before we get into today's messy details I'd like to review the journey.

I don't know about you, but in Nehemiah I've been blown away again by how God is the Master Puppeteer. He's sovereign over everything in the cosmos. And so, He is in the business of eloquently causing events and situations to align in our lives so that a passage of Scripture composed 2400 years ago still speaks directly into our circumstances. This is God at work in a way only He can be. And I'm encouraged and challenged and inspired by this all over again and I hope you have been as well.

Now that is true of all scripture, but the reason I mention it here is because this is one of the dominant themes in Nehemiah – namely YHWH cares, and is involved, and is leading us through the plight we find ourselves in.

So, the story of Nehemiah takes place in roughly 400 BC with Israel just coming out of 70 years of Babylonian captivity. Jerusalem is in ruins. Its walls are broken down; it is at the mercy of every group of marauding thugs that want their way with it. And the Jews have been released to rebuild, but they are leaderless and in a difficult place.

Into the midst of that context God gives a vision of a return from the rubble to King Artaxerxes' wine taster. And Nehemiah receives this message and runs with it. He gets permission from the king and moves 1200 KM's to Jerusalem where he becomes the governor and gives himself to 12 years of reform – rebuilding walls and restoring the religious devotion of the now much reduced nation.

Now throughout this series we've commented several times on the difference between the descriptive and the prescriptive parts of this story. And this is something I hope you can take with you as you read the Bible. Whenever a text is narrative there are elements to it that are not meant for us to emulate, they are simply there to establish the story. It's from within the story that God speaks truth into our lives.

And this is true for the Old Testament, and it's true for the New Testament too. So when Peter walks on water that is descriptive. If you try that you are going to get wet. Instead as you read that story let your heart well up with love and worship for the God who reigns over chaos and so can lift you above your own. Or when Paul's handkerchief heals people, that's descriptive. There is no promise that your handkerchief is going to do the same. Now does God heal today? Yes. But the way He does that is up to Him.

And similarly, none of us are wine tasters or city wall builders today. These are the descriptive aspects of the story, and yet the story speaks. There are prescriptive truths in Nehemiah that are relevant for life in Prince George in the 21st century.

So as a book there are several themes that rise to the surface, and we've worked to unpack a few of them. First, Nehemiah is a man who has allowed God's heart to inhabit his own. And this takes the form of caring for those who aren't like him, and then working to alleviate their suffering and lead them towards God.

Now this happened in backwater Israel 2400 years ago, but it is also something God deeply desires to do in backwater Canada in 2016 – You're saying "Hey, this is no backwater, this is the Northern Capital of BC."

Friends, God has always been on the lookout for people to participate with Him in bringing His salvation to humanity, and a big part of that involves being willing to see our neighbours the way God sees them.

So brothers and sisters, are your eyes open? Are there people that God has placed beside you that you can image Christ to? Are there people in your family, or your work place, or your school or your church that don't necessarily see the world the way you do, or don't have the same preferences you do, but that if you were intentional you could image Christ to? Are there people like that in your life?

Remember Jesus *was* nothing like us. He was holy and possessed the throne of heaven. And then He came down from that throne to walk as one of us. And in the process of lisping to speak in a way we could understand He purchased our salvation by dying as one of our criminals. He became like one of us, but He didn't start out that way. That's the God Nehemiah's story calls us to imitate – a God who cares about people who are different from Himself.

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Then we looked at the prayers of Nehemiah, and we came across what could be described as the secret of living a life connected to the miraculous intervention of God.

Now everyone wants to witness the miraculous power of God in their lives – right? Everyone would love to see a miracle. Even our secular culture is enamoured with this idea. There are so many shows out there right now about the supernatural – people are hungry for an encounter with the divine.

And as Christians we know the supernatural exists and I am certain all of us would love to see God show up in power right? I mean who wouldn't want to witness a loved one's cancer disappear before their eyes. It would be awesome to see God move!

But I say this tongue-in-cheek because the book of Nehemiah is all about how God *is* moving in the middle of the mundane. And Nehemiah's "secret ability" – if you will – is his capability of taking this in.

You see God's involvement in Nehemiah's life wasn't spectacularly obvious. There are no Sea splitting, manna producing, earth opening miracles in Nehemiah - none. And yet the entire book is about God directing Nehemiah to participate in His work to increase His glory and bring His ultimate plan for the salvation of humanity to pass – Jesus was born into the culture Nehemiah rebuilt!

Now Nehemiah had no idea what role he played in God's story. Only 400 years later would this become clear. And yet without knowing the end Nehemiah was able to perceive that God was directing him, and he followed.

So this is an eternally significant book, but the really exciting part about it is that its prescriptive truths speak into our lives. So Nehemiah is not just about what God did 2400 years ago, it is about what it looks like for Him to show up in our lives today.

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So here's a small example of how I've seen this over the last couple weeks. Some of you know that I've been keeping a journal about the encounters with God that I've had. My purpose in this has been to awaken myself to the reality that God is at work because I want to live like Nehemiah. I want to go through life with my vision fixed on God's movements. So I've been praying "God give me the eyes to see where you are working and the boldness to participate with what it is You are doing." And the crazy and encouraging thing is God has answered.

So I recommend this to you. If you want to see God move; if you think that might do something positive to your faith; then ask Him to give you the eyes to see where He is working, and write down what you see. A week or two later when things are going bad and – if you are at all like me you've forgotten God is doing anything in your life at all – then you can go back and read your account and encourage yourself that in His sovereignty God is showing up in your world.

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So as I've told you before I plan out my sermon series months in advance. So the date I was going to preach today's text was determined about half a year ago. Now this might sound well orchestrated, but really all that happens is I calculate how many weeks a particular book is going to take and then slot the messages into the calendar – there is no secret agenda to it.

And then stuff happens which I have little to no control over or even knowledge about. So on November 4th and 5th Mark Buchanan, who wrote "The Holy Wild", was here and spoke at Cultivate.

And I was on the committee that brought him up, but we told him to speak about whatever he thought God wanted us to hear. He did that, and one of the topics he touched on was what the Sabbath means for Christians today.

Now this has been a troublesome topic. We know Jesus fulfilled the Law, and yet we still aren't supposed to murder or commit adultery, but what do we do with the command to honour the Sabbath? Well largely we don't do anything with it. And Mark spoke about this, and his talk generated some good questions among our people.

And some of these questions were brought to my attention. But as I prepared to find answers for them I realized God was working. You see six months ago He orchestrated that I would preach out of Nehemiah 13:15-22 the week after Mark was here. And that text is all about Sabbath. And that's what we did last Sunday.

Now if you think that's me being sneaky you are thinking way too highly of me – talk to my wife she will let you know I'm not that smart. But coincidence also isn't an option. I mean to my recollection I've never spoken on Sabbath before. So out of the millions of topics and verses available to have two weeks in a row on this rare topic is impossible. And if your Care Group finished this last week like mine did then it was actually 3 weeks in a row.

But as I watched this unravel I wasn't even surprised because this kind of thing has happened dozens of times over this last year as I've been keeping this journal. Something else is going on.

So when King Artaxerxes decided to let Nehemiah take a 12 year leave of absence to rebuild Jerusalem Nehemiah said "it was because the gracious hand of God was upon him."¹ And it seems to me that it is because the gracious hand of God is on me that He ordains to speak to His church through plans I jumble together months in advance.

And lest you think I'm making myself out to be special, this isn't just for city rebuilders and pastors, this is for everyone. God wants to show up in your life. He wants to move in your mundane. He wants to turn you into a man or woman of faith who participates with Him in building His kingdom and expanding His glory in this city.

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Now we probably aren't going to see this all come to pass. Nehemiah didn't. He got to see the walls rebuilt, but God's master plan for Jesus was beyond his pay grade. And so we aren't going to see everything Jesus plans for this city come to pass either. But we can participate anyway. And years from now people will be tempted to look back and say "Wow, God was working at Fort George in 2016. Man, what it must have been like to live back then." Don't you want to live in those days now?

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Alright, let's follow this theme into the last few paragraphs of this book picking it up in Nehemiah 13 verse 23.

¹ Nehemiah 2:8

[Read Nehemiah 13:23-31]

Now the first thing I want to do is deal with the descriptive elements of this story that could be a bit confusing.

So, some people have used this text to argue that inter-racial marriage is a sin – that white people shouldn't marry black people or whatever – we are going to deal with that. And then we get verse 25 which is just crazy. I mean Nehemiah goes on a curse spewing, hair-pull rampage – none of us are supposed to make this into our life verse.

Like at graduation when every kid in the Christian school says their favorite passage is Jeremiah 29:11 – “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and... give you hope and a future.” And then you get up and say “Man, for me I'm just all about Nehemiah 13:25 and beating up the disobedient.” You probably shouldn't do that.

So what's this all about?

Well remember that chapter 13 is a three-part description about the backslide that God's people had slumped into. They had fallen into not using their money or their time or now today their bodies in a way that honoured God. After all the reform Nehemiah worked for the people had slipped back into living like they had before he arrived.

Now that certainly isn't a Disney ending. But if you think Nehemiah is depressed as you read his epilogue in chapter 13 you've missed the point. Even here he is speaking the grace of God. These people needed to know how to live given their fallen humanity.

And what he writes is prescriptive. It shouldn't surprise us when we find ourselves slipping back into the same patterns we've fought to resist before.

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This last week I was speaking with one of my accountability partners who knows my weaknesses and speaks grace and truth to me. And we were encouraging each other and he said “you know Dan, when God calls us He does it not just forgiving every sin we've committed, but knowing where we were going to sin in the future. He knows we are going to struggle again, and He saves us anyway.”

I thought, wow that's right. None of our backsliding surprises God. He isn't caught off guard when we slump. He isn't up there slapping His forehead and saying, “Man, what a waste! I poured My grace out on that guy, and now look what He's up to.” That's not how it works.

When God saves He does it knowing what the future holds – and He saves us anyway. That should encourage you. It should encourage you in those times when you surprise yourself with your ability to walk away from God – have you ever done that? You thought you had worked through something, and then found yourself back in it again?

In that moment you hear Paul saying “I’m the chief of sinners” and you think, “Surly I’ve one-upped you by now! I’ve got to be worse than Paul.” In those moments, we need to remember that we might be surprised but God isn’t. He saw it all in advance and poured His grace out anyway.

And this is what Nehemiah is doing with Israel. Yes, he hadn’t been gone long, and yet the people were right back in it again. But Nehemiah doesn’t say “you’ve had it, give up.” He does what God does and offers a way for sinners to come back. He teaches them again how to use their money and their time and now their bodies in a way that honours God. Hear the hope here. If there was none, he wouldn’t be talking to them.

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So now, a brief word on the troubling parts of this text. In verse 23 the point is not that people of different colors shouldn’t marry. To try to make the text say that demonstrates an absolute misunderstanding of everything that is going on here. Rather Nehemiah is chastising the Jews for marrying themselves to people who hated their God.

The women of Ashdod, Ammon and Moab weren’t different colors – they were all Middle Eastern – but they did serve other gods. And so Nehemiah is saying you’ve invited people into the covenant community who are opposed to everything YHWH stands for. “Don’t do this” he says.

And then in verse 26 he gives them an example why. So Nehemiah says watch yourself on this one, because Solomon was a pretty smart dude. In fact there was no king like him; not in Israel or anywhere else. And God loved him and chose him to be king. So this guy is better than you; He’s smarter, he’s wiser and he’s more favored by God.

But even from this high height Solomon fell. And the reason he fell was because he invited people who hated his God into his house. He married women from foreign lands, and he let his guard down with them. And eventually 1 Kings tells us:

As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been. (1 Kings 11:4)

The wisest man who ever lived and this is his epitaph – what a shame. So Nehemiah says don’t make this mistake.

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Now most of us here have already made the decision about who we are going to marry, but just for a second I want to address you if you aren’t married. And particularly if you think some time in the future you might like to get married.

It's hard to be single these days. Our culture advertises over and over again that if you aren't with someone then you can't be happy and you are probably a failure in life.

And this becomes increasingly hard as you get into your 20's and your friends start getting married off. There is a lot of pressure in a situation like this. And the pressure is just to find someone.

And so people do. A young Christ honouring girl – I've seen it more with young women than men, though it can work the other way around too. So this girl finds herself being left behind as all her friends get hitched. And she starts feeling lonely. And this is a very vulnerable place to be. And then all of a sudden some nice guy starts paying attention to her and she's hooked.

He's a good guy, he just doesn't love Jesus all that much. Now he's not an atheist. He even comes to church occasionally when she asks. But he isn't an on fire, sold-out, hardcore Jesus lover. He's just along for the ride. And so she goes for him.

Now here's why this is short-sighted and foolish. What's the goal of a family? Is it to buy a bigger house and a faster car and go on a nicer vacation than you could by yourself? Is it to have someone around who is going to make you happy and meet your needs? Is it to raise kids in order keep the human race going? None of those are evil things, but they aren't the purpose of family.

For a Christ follower the purpose of marriage and family to increase God's glory and expand His kingdom. Actually this is our purpose for everything. This is why we exist. Our lives have meaning beyond our biology. So we need to guard the temperature of our homes.

Here's how this plays out practically: If you are raising kids with a secular spouse you know how hard it is to tell your kids that the purpose of your family is to bring God glory when daddy doesn't agree. Or how hard is it to use the resources at your disposal in a way that honours God when one spouse thinks the only reason they have money is to increase the square footage of the house? Talk about no eternal value!

Single people, the reality is that being married is not the goal of our existence. There is more to life than this. And if you tie yourself to someone who does not have the same desire for increasing God's glory you have you will find yourself torn between your ultimate purpose and the daily concerns of a person. And even Solomon couldn't handle this pressure. He caved. So don't make this mistake.

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Now to those of you who have already done this and find yourself in the difficult spot Nehemiah is talking about, Paul's words are for you:

To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.

To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him.... But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? (1 Corinthians 7:10-16)

Paul says if you are married to an unbelieving spouse this is your mission opportunity. Be Christ there. Bring His peace home. Serve your spouse like Christ served humanity when our goals were not aligned with His. So give up your desires, give up your preferences and lay your life down for your spouse that they might meet Jesus in you.

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I hope that sounds hard, because it is. It's hard enough to image Christ to a Christian spouse who is also trying to image Christ to you. But to do this to a non-Christian spouse requires the infilling of the Holy Spirit and a special grace. And so if you aren't married yet don't foolishly say, well I'll marry him and then convert him. It didn't work for Solomon, and the chances are it won't work for you. But if this is where you find yourself, then give yourself to pursuing Christlikeness.

And this is why Nehemiah reacts as strongly as he does. In verse 28 he kicks the grandson of the high priest out of the city because he'd married into Sanballat's family. And back in verse 25 he starts pulling hair and dropping curses on people who are doing the same. The point here is that allowing ourselves to slide slowly into passivity isn't a small problem with minimal consequences – everything rests on this.

And so Nehemiah treats sin the way it needs to be treated. He doesn't say it's no big deal, he opposes it strongly. And we need to oppose sin strongly as well.

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There is one other aspect of this text I want to bring out that connects to what has come before, and that is Nehemiah's ability to see the problem and confront it – Nehemiah could see God working and he could recognize sin when he saw it. So in verse 23 it says "Moreover, in those days I saw men of Judah..." and then it goes on to describe the situation they had slumped into.

And we get similar words describing the slide into using their money and their time in a way that didn't honour God. So in verse 15 it says "In those days I saw people in Judah treading winepresses on the Sabbath." And in verse 7 we read "Here I *learned* about the evil thing Eliashib had done in (giving the tithe storage room in the temple to Tobiah to live in)." So Nehemiah was able to see sin for what it was.

Now don't say "well this is a "no-brainer", Tobiah had a room in the temple – anyone could see that was a problem. And the priest's grandchildren were married to Ashdodites, obviously that's a problem." If it was so obvious, why hadn't the other leaders dealt with it?

You see, seeing sin for what it is isn't as simple as it seems. The wisdom to do this comes from God. And that's because when you are in the middle of a situation you get blind to what's going on. And nobody can see their blind spots.

So if you are single, and interested in getting into a relationship, before you make up your mind ask someone godly whether it's a good idea. Don't trust your emotions because they will lie to you. And don't think this is only for young people, old people can make this mistake too. Love is one of those things that blinds us and blindness can cause us to use our money, our time and our bodies in a way that doesn't honour God. Don't do this.

So friends, hear the hope³ in Nehemiah's message – even sinners can come back. And choose to surround yourself with godly counsel and pursue the kind of vision Nehemiah had. Nehemiah was a man who saw God move and so was able to participate with what He was doing, and he was able to see through the deceptiveness of sin. And because of these two gifts he was able to encourage those who struggled beside him to honour God with what they had been given.

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If you are here today, chances are you care about living your life to the glory of God. But heed the warning and encouragement of Nehemiah. Just because you want to honour God doesn't mean it will happen. The default for people is to backslide.

So know yourself, know your weakness. But more importantly train your eyes to see God. Cling to His grace, participate with what He offers you opportunity to do, see sin and fight it, and give yourself to using the money and time and body He has entrusted you with to bring Him glory.