

NEHEMIAH 13

After the excitement of the first 12 chapters of Nehemiah – the re-building of the wall, the attentive listening to God's word, the radical repentance, the re-population of the city, things end on a sour note with this final chapter. Nehemiah has been away from the city, and when he returns he finds that the people have returned to turning their back on God. Despite the covenant they signed in chapter 10, they are sinning in all 3 of those areas mentioned (inter-marriage, the Sabbath, the temple).

Why is this the end of the book? It's here because although Nehemiah achieved a lot, he was not the answer to the sin problem in the people of God. Remember the prayer of confession the people prayed in chapter 9 – how they re-counted God's dealing with them through their history and pointed out the cycle of God's rescue, God's law, their sin and God's rescue. Well it begins again here. Great though Nehemiah was, he was not the one who would break that cycle. They need a greater leader to come. Nehemiah 13 is in the book because it clearly shows up our need for Jesus.

There is other application for us here though. It is a warning that the people of God should not rely on past religious experiences or revivals to sustain them. Sin creeps in. We need to be constantly repentant. The sins that Nehemiah finds when he returns probably started slowly, and were justified easily.

There is an interesting debate to be had over what we are to learn from Nehemiah himself in this chapter. The prayerful refrain "remember me" becomes more frequent in this chapter. His response to the sin in God's people seems very violent – look at what he does to the men who marry foreign women in verse 25. We need to be careful not to immediately dismiss his responses – he is showing right hatred of sin, and he truly grasps the serious harm it does to God's people, and yet I don't think it is wrong to question his response. How he reacts in this chapter does stand in contrast to how he responded to the opposition in chapters 4, 5, and 6. There is no careful thought or prayerfulness recorded in this chapter. Compare 13:23-25 with 5:6-8.

Is Nehemiah showing the impatience leaders are so often tempted to show with their people? Might it be that the increased frequency of the "remember me" prayers come from exasperation with the work, rather than dependence on the Lord for reward? Don't spend all your time in the studies discussing this, but remember, just because something is recorded as happening in Biblical narrative, it doesn't necessarily mean it is right and we should defend it.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Verses 1 – 9 PURIFYING THE PEOPLE

What positive step did the people take (verses 1-3)? Why did they do this? What was the purpose of that law?

Look at verses 4 and 5. Who was Tobiah? (read 2:10, 4:6-7)?

Why was Eliashib treating him so well? What is the warning to us?

How does Nehemiah respond? What was the danger of having Tobiah at the heart of the temple?

Verses 10-14 PROVIDING FOR THE TEMPLE

Remind yourselves of the promises the people had made before God in chapter 10. In which 3 areas were they particularly repentant?

Go back to Nehemiah 10 - What did the people actually do? What does that tell us about the limitations of human resolutions to deal with sin?

Verses 15-22 RESTORING THE SABBATH

What does Nehemiah see going on in Judah (verses 15-18)? How does this compare with what they promised in 10:31)?

How does Nehemiah deal with this (verses 19-22)?

Why is this such a big issue? What are the people saying about their priorities when they are prepared to buy and sell on the Sabbath?

Verses 23-29 DEALING WITH MIXED MARRIAGES

What has been going on within the people of God here? How deep does the problem go (verse 29!)

How does Nehemiah react? What is right about his reaction? Do you think there is anything wrong with his reaction (compare his reaction to sin in 5:6-7)?

CONCLUSION

Remind yourselves of the prayer the people prayed when they went back over their history in chapter 9. What was the cycle they went through?

At the end of Nehemiah 9, where are the people of God in the cycle? Has Nehemiah dealt with their sin? What does that tell us about the promises of God?