

Nehemiah - Diary Of A Disaster.

Phil Campbell introduces a four part sermon series on the book of Nehemiah and argues that it's not the happy story we've come to expect...

NEHEMIAH IS A BOOK with a strong popular interpretative tradition.

For example. it's usually the first port of call for any preacher who wants to goad his congregation into a building program. There's no doubt about it - Nehemiah gathered together a hopeless group of stragglers and rebuilt the Jerusalem walls. But is that what the book is about? Typically, too, the book is seen as a case study in leadership. Bricks and mortar aside, Nehemiah's achievements as a leader and motivator are obvious - as long as you don't read right to the end of the book.

And that's exactly the problem with the popular interpretative traditions... they simply don't do justice to the book as a whole. The fact is, if you read Nehemiah right through in a single sitting, and if you read it through the eyes of a first time reader, you'll be struck by the sense of despair and helplessness with which the book comes to an end. It's an absolute disaster - all Nehemiah's efforts have been in vain. Sin, the rebellion against God that originally brought the nation undone, seems to reign victorious. The resettlement of Jerusalem that seemed to be going so well 'has been brought undone by the unfaithfulness of the people. And that spells disaster.

THE HISTORICAL SETTING

Arriving at a precise dating for the book of Nehemiah is difficult, particularly in relation to the book of Ezra.

However, there's enough clear data in the book itself to make such details unnecessary. It's obvious that Nehemiah is set in the era of "return from exile." Here's the story so far... God promised Abraham a land, descendants, and blessing. All that he required in return was faithfulness. "I'll be your God... you'll be my people."

Faithfulness involved a certain lifestyle, and that was spelled out years later by Moses at Mount Sinai. as the people were about to enter the promised land. A clear warning is sounded in Deuteronomy 29 and 30. If the Israelites are unfaithful, if they chase after other gods, if they mingle with the nations around them, they'll be sent into exile. And that's exactly what happens. After the glorious reign of King David, Solomon makes the ultimate mistake - he takes: wives from all the nations around Israel, and begins to worship their gods. The black snowball of sin is on the way. And ultimately, the nation of Israel is decimated by the Babylonians. The city of Jerusalem is destroyed, and the people are taken into exile in Babylonia.

Time passes Persia over-runs Babylon, and the edict of Cyrus, King of Persia sets the Israelites free. However, the return to the land of Israel is far from enthusiastic. Many Israelites choose to remain in Babylon. Those who return are half hearted - they don't even bother re building the city walls.

Enter Nehemiah, cupbearer to the King. A faithful Jew, for some reason Nehemiah hadn't been part of the earlier return. But when he hears reports about the sad state of affairs in Jerusalem, he's prompted into action. Nehemiah knows that the warnings in Deuteronomy 29 were matched by a promise in Deuteronomy 30 - if the exiled people turned back to God with all their hearts, he'd restore them to the promised land. The blessing would return - and Nehemiah's goal is to bring that about. The question in the mind of any reader of the Biblical narrative to this point is... "Will he succeed?" The track record of the Israelites is far from good - in fact, the Old Testament to this point has been a litany of failure (well summarised in Nehemiah chapter 10, as the Israelites confess the sins of the past.) It's helpful to read Nehemiah with this question in mind, as the writer seems to tantalise us with positive cues, only to leave our hopes dashed at the end.

WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA?

My goal in preaching through Nehemiah was to do justice to the book as a whole. From the beginning, I sought to raise key questions that the book would answer at the end. In order to keep the narrative structure to the forefront, I chose to deal with the book in four large sections.

Application was difficult. Traditional approaches, such as idealising Nehemiah's leadership, tend to fall a little flat when you realise his efforts ultimately failed. Similarly, the prototypical church building project, though successful, was clearly futile. (By the end of the book, the enemies of Israel who were meant to be kept out by the wall, have been invited in by the people!) And even the great repentance of the people in chapter 9 and 10 is brought into question by their immediate unfaithfulness.

What the book does do, though, is highlight the need for a New Covenant. As the last of the historical narratives in the Old Testament, Nehemiah leaves the reader up in the air. Once again, the people of Israel have failed to be faithful to God. The covenant is in tatters, and we're left with the question, "What now?"

The answer, of course, is the New Covenant in Jesus. The promise of Deuteronomy 30 (it's worth a read!) calls for a wholehearted obedience as the people of Israel return to Jerusalem; and this will be followed by a dramatic action by God, who promises he will "circumcise the hearts of the people," so they'll actually WANT TO obey him. Nehemiah achieved a "return to Jerusalem," but failed in bringing a "return to God." In the end, it's this that Jesus brings about. His total obedience, and his fateful "return" journey to Jerusalem take on a new significance - because where Nehemiah failed in creating a new Israel, Jesus succeeded. As detailed in Hebrews 8, the Old Covenant was done away with because of the inability of the people to keep it - and now WE are the new Israel, called to be faithful, called to be distinctive, and better still, enabled by the Holy Spirit to do it.

BREAKING IT UP

In dividing the book for preaching, my main aim was to highlight the "climactic failure." This is demonstrated most clearly in the clear contrast between chapters 10 and 13, ' with a threefold promise of faithfulness in chapter 10 (we won't intermarry, we'll keep the sabbath, we won't neglect the temple) echoed by a threefold failure in chapter 13 (they intermarry, they break the sabbath, they neglect the temple.) Here's how the series panned out...

SERMON 1 - Back to the Promised Land (Nehemiah 1-4)

Setting the scene historically, with a focus on God's promise of restoration. "Faith" is defined as "confidence in God's promises." We can't apply this sort of "faith" to our own building projects unless we have a clear promise from God. What we CAN rely on is that God will take us home to a promised land in heaven.

SERMON 2 - So Who's A True Blue Jew (Nehemiah 5-7)

Being a True Jew means more than having the right family tree! It means FAITHFULNESS as well. Nehemiah fights off attacks from outside the wall - but the biggest danger comes from those INSIDE, who don't want to be faithful. We are invited to be part of the people of God - but again, faithfulness is required.

SERMON '3 - A Fresh Start (Nehemiah 8-9)

The people gather to hear the word of God - and they're deeply moved. In chapter 9, they confess their sins and the sins of their fathers. This passage is a great picture of repentance... or is it? We need to keep reading to see if they produce FRUITS IN KEEPING with REPENTANCE. Rather than leave the passage on a high note, I concluded with a challenge... will they prove faithful? Repentance is more than just feeling sorry. It's turning around. Have YOU proven faithful, producing fruits in keeping with repentance?

SERMON 4. - Three Strikes and They're Out (Nehemiah 10-13)

Having confessed their sins, the Israelites are confident enough to make a written contract with God. They promise three things - they won't intermarry with the nations round about them, they'll keep the Sabbath, and they won't neglect the temple. Nehemiah slips off for a quick visit to Babylon, and by the time he gets back, three things have happened! The temple is neglected (with a room rented out to Tobiah, Nehemiah's long time enemy), the Sabbath is ignored, and intermarriage is rife (with the daughter of Sanballat, Nehemiah's other long time enemy, married

to the High Priest's grandson.) All the sins of Solomon are being repeated. The book concludes with Nehemiah asking for God's mercy - he's done the best he can, and failed. It's time for a new covenant, and a new Israel!

OUTLINES AND ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Back to the promised land - Nehemiah 1-4

1. Introduction

OPENING ILLUSTRATION: I began by dramatically announcing that the Committee of Management had decided to extend the church. "I know we don't have the money, and the Council won't approve the plans... but have faith!" Trouble is, faith in WHAT? Nehemiah's faith was in the fact that God would keep his clearly stated promise in Deuteronomy 30.

1. A City In Ruins (1:1-3)

Nehemiah hears the bad news of Jerusalem, and is moved to tears. Illustrate with references to modern day Sarejevo.

3. A Prayer and A Promise (1:5-11)

Nehemiah recalls God's promise of restoration, and calls on God to honour it.

4. Approaching the King (2:1-8)

Trembling, Nehemiah asks the king for the things he needs to solve Jerusalem's problems.

5. A Labour of Love (2:9-4:6)

The people get stuck into the job with real enthusiasm.
It's a huge working bee.

6. Facing Opposition (4: 1-6)

Nehemiah and the Israelites face opposition from Sanballat and Tobiah. But they won't prevail because...

7. Caution - God at Work

God is keeping his promises. And right through this passage, that's evident. eg:-

- ♦ 2:8,18 The gracious hand of God
- ♦ 2:20 God will give us success
- ♦ 4: 20 Our God will fight for us
- ♦ 8. Conclusion - Nehemiah and us

We're not called to have "faith" that God will help us with whatever building projects we dream up. Rather, we're called to trust fully in the things he HAS promised. Just as he promised Israel a land, he promises US a sure place in heaven if we trust Jesus. Faith means trusting in the promises of God.

2. So Who's a True Blue Jew? - Nehemiah 5-7

1. Don't judge by appearances!

If you live in the country and you've shopped at "Fair Dinkum Bargains", you'll have learned the hard lesson that things aren't always what they seem! You buy a good looking screwdriver, and you find that the blade bends the first time you try to turn a screw. In the end, it's better to have a fair-dinkum screwdriver than a fair-dinkum bargain. It's no good just LOOKING THE PART - the reality has got to go deeper. And it's exactly like that with the Israelites. It's not enough just to ~ be BORN one. The reality has to go deeper.

2. Review...

The people of Israel have been exiled in Babylon because of their unfaithfulness to God. Now they have returned to the promised land, and they're rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

3. What happens next?

- ◆ Outside opposition (ch4)
- ◆ Inside opposition (ch5)
- ◆ A trap (ch6)

4. So Who's the True Jew?

The right family Tree (ch7) - certainly a prerequisite, as shown by the two examples of those who miss out on "citizenship" because they can't prove their ancestry. 5. Living like the people of God (ch5)

Being a True Jew runs deeper though - and there's no room for those who don't "fear God." The powerful landholders were treating their Jewish brothers as no more than slaves. They are exacting usury and ignoring God's law delivered through-Moses. They have no FEAR OF GOD. Notice the selection of the gatekeeper as one who exemplifies "fearing God." The "fear of God" is a repeated motif in the passage.

6. The True Blue NEW Jew.

Romans 3:21-24 invites us all to become "righteous" in God's eyes and become part of the Net Israel. Jesus was the ONLY true blue Jew, and as we join with him, we're counted as the people of God. But naturally, it has to go more than skin deep! We can fake it too, just like the Israelites. We too should FEAR GOD in a way that makes our relationship with God determine the way we live and treat others.

3.A Fresh Start? - Nehemiah 8 and 9

1. Repentance - True and False

Two recent court cases: a 23 year old man charged with manslaughter and culpable driving. The judge comments favourably about his GENUINE REMORSE. It's clearly evident. Case 2: A driver travelling a 190km/h, found to have a blood alcohol level of three times the limit. Arrested, released on bail. Four hours later, pulled over and charged with exactly the same offences again. There's NO REMORSE, and NO REPENTANCE. God requires both remorse (feeling sorry) and genuine repentance (demonstrated by change.) The Israelites are clearly remorseful. But will we see evidence of change?

2. A Fresh Start for Israel

- ◆ a united people
- ◆ listening to the Word of God (chapter 8)
- ◆ confessing their sins (chapter 9)

3. Repentance - True or False?

The catholic view of "confession" misses the point. So does ours if we think we can simply confess our sins and then repeat them! Is there any evidence of your repentance? Next week we'll see if the Israelites were genuine!

4.Three Strikes and they're out! - Nehemiah 10 -13

1. A surprise ending

Sarafina is a new release video movie that promises to be "uplifting." The previews show black South African children singing and dancing in the streets. However, these are but brief glimpses of the movie taken out of context. Sarafina is in fact traumatic viewing, a heartwrenching story of racial violence and persecution. If you take just a few scenes out of context, you can end up missing the point! And that's what so many readers have done with Nehemiah. We need to look at

the BIG PICTURE. The book is actually a tragic story of failure!

2. *Three promises of things to come... (Chapter 10)*

The people confidently make a deal with God:

- ◆ we won't intermarry
- ◆ we won't trade on the Sabbath
- ◆ we won't neglect the temple

3. *Nehemiah's final failure (Chapter 13)*

Nehemiah returns briefly to Babylon. When he gets back he finds:

- ◆ they've neglected the temple
- ◆ they're trading on the Sabbath
- ◆ they've intermarried with the tribes around them

4. *A New Covenant - For US*

The Old Covenant has been proven a failure. Because of sin, the people constantly turned away from God. Nehemiah has failed - but Jesus has brought a new covenant. Our sin is forgiven - and better still, the Holy Spirit changes us from within so that we now CAN live God's way. Like Israel, we're called to DEMONSTRATE THAT WE'RE DIFFERENT. And the good news is, we can do it!

CONCLUSION

This four week series on Nehemiah really worked, even in our evening youth services. Nehemiah's story is dynamic in itself... but better still, many people gained a real appreciation of the frustrating rebellion of the Israelites, and God's great mercy in accepting us!