

Mt Albert Baptist Church 23 April 2017
Nehemiah 11-13

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So we've been away from this series for a few weeks not the least because last week was the celebration what is not only the most important event in the Christian calendar, but actually the most important event in world history – although not everyone recognises that, as they hoe into their Easter eggs.

But now we return to the final events of the story of Nehemiah.

I'd just like to give us a broad-brush recap of events to give us a context and setting of this story:

This is going back a bit before Nehemiah to set the scene:

Israel has finally gone too far in their unfaithfulness, and they get conquered by king Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. Nebuchadnezzar destroys Jerusalem, and more importantly, destroys the temple. He kills lots of them, as well as exiling a whole lot of them to Babylon.

Babylon is in turn conquered by the Persians, whose kings are a bit more accommodating of the Israelites and their faith practices. The Persian king allows the temple to be rebuilt under Ezra and Zerubbabel.

Finally we get to Nehemiah, who is a high ranking servant of Artaxerxes, the Persian king. Apparently, Nehemiah is an *important* servant, because when he's looking sad, the King actually notices, takes interest and asks him what's wrong.

Artaxerxes allows Nehemiah time off to go back to Jerusalem, and help rebuild the city wall – because it's just not a proper city if it doesn't have a wall around it right? At least that's how things were in those days.

The people face significant opposition, but despite this, Nehemiah inspires the people to get stuck in and they rebuild the city wall in record time, although they did need to keep a sword in one hand while they worked, in case they were attacked by those trying to stop them.

This building project had an important side effect – it was also the catalyst that created a greater sense of community, and sparked a revival of faith and commitment to God.

Towards the end of the story, Nehemiah runs out of annual leave, and has to return to Susa City, where king Artaxerxes lives. (Actually, it's really after Nehemiah had spent 12 years as governor in Jerusalem).

After spending some time in Susa, Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem, only to find that the people had fallen back into their old ways. They were neglecting the temple, treating parts of it disrespectfully, the priests weren't getting paid, the musicians had gone back to being farmers instead of fulfilling their duties leading worship in the temple, people were breaking the Sabbath trading prohibition, and they had been inter-marrying with women from different races.

So this is what Nehemiah does, in his own words:

"I gave orders to purify the rooms [in the temple], and then I put back into them the equipment of the house of God, with the grain offerings and the incense.

I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them, and that all the Levites and musicians responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields. So I rebuked the officials and asked them, "Why is the house of God neglected?" Then I called them together and stationed them at their posts.

All Judah brought the tithes of grain, new wine and olive oil into the storerooms. I put Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and a Levite named Pedaiah in charge of the

storerooms and made Hanan son of Zakkur, the son of Mattaniah, their assistant, because they were considered trustworthy. They were made responsible for distributing the supplies to their fellow Levites."

Then regarding those trading on the Sabbath: *"When evening shadows fell on the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I ordered the doors to be shut and not opened until the Sabbath was over. I stationed some of my own men at the gates so that no load could be brought in on the Sabbath day. Once or twice the merchants and sellers of all kinds of goods spent the night outside Jerusalem. But I warned them and said, "Why do you spend the night by the wall? If you do this again, I will arrest you." From that time on they no longer came on the Sabbath. Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and go and guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy.*

Remember me for this also, my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love."

Then there's also the matter of the men of Judah intermarrying with foreign women:

"I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. I made them take an oath in God's name and said: "You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves."

I'd like to deal with this matter first, because it risks being a bit of a distraction from the main message I'd like to bring out of this passage. Because for us reading this today, this is a bit awkward: Many if not most of us in NZ are the product of inter-racial marriages – I know I am – and we could well see this event in Nehemiah as contrary to how we read the Gospel of Christ.

Here's a picture of my Grandparents on their wedding day: In the village of Neiafu, on the Island of Vava'u, in the kingdom of Tonga – 21 May 1931.

She was of Tongan Danish and German decent, he was pure pom – from Wolverhampton in the midlands of England.

So what's the message here: Is it wrong for devout believers to marry outside their race? And if so, is there any hope for me, as a product of inter-racial marriage?

This highlights the danger of reading this ancient text, from a completely different time and culture, filtered through our western 21st C. understanding.

We need to read this, and all of Scripture with an eye for the important *principles* that are illustrated by the historical account, rather than with slavish, unthinking adherence to the literal passage. In other words, what is this passage saying to us here and now?

Because if we only read Scripture as *pre-scriptive* rather than *de-scriptive*, we can justify all sorts of things including slavery, incest, polygamy, genocide and child sacrifice.

The reason intermarriage was prohibited in the OT, was because inevitably it would cause the people to compromise their faith.

Nehemiah uses an example from Israel's history when he says: *"Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned? Among the many nations there was no king like him. He was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel, but even he was led into sin by foreign women"*.

In this day and age, the issue is not race, but world-view. Because the Gospel of Christ has spread to every race and country on earth. There are believers of all races.

So when we're looking at a Biblical criteria for how we choose marriage partners, the important takeaway principle here is not necessarily that we seek someone of the same race and ethnicity, rather that we seek someone who is going to enhance our relationship with God, not compromise it.

Obviously if you're already married, then it's a bit late to be having this conversation, but for those who aren't this is something important to consider: Marrying someone who will draw us closer to God, not drag us away.

This principle also goes deeper than just who we marry; what are the other things that may compromise our commitment to God? Money? Status? Materialism? It'll be different for every person.

So now let's look at this situation where the people of Judah have experienced a great revival, but then once the person who has been instrumental in this revival is removed, they drift back into their old ways. There's a familiar theme here – this same thing happens in a number of other places in Scripture.

In Exodus 32: *"When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, 'Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.'"*

Aaron answered them, 'Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.' So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, 'These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.'"

Throughout the OT there's a theme of prophets calling the people back to faith in God, the people responding, but eventually drifting away from devotion, and embracing the pagan gods of those around them.

It seems to me that with people in general, there is a place of cultural equilibrium. There are ways of doing things that are natural and normative. From time to time people come along who change our practices, but when that change agent is removed for whatever reason, we inevitably revert back to "normal".

I've seen this in the work place, I've seen this in churches, and I've seen it very much in church worship teams.

I've led worship teams in 3 different churches, in 2 different denominations. I've done it as a volunteer, and I've done it as a paid staff member. This is something that I've observed: When a new leader or change motivator comes into a situation, they can change the practices of that group of people, but unless they change the underlying culture of the group, once the change agent is removed, the group reverts to "normal".

But when it comes to instigating change in communities of people, all too often we focus on the practice, and not on the culture. On what we do rather than on who we are.

Back in the 80's, my Dad worked for the Bank of New Zealand. One of the things he was involved in was setting up the computerisation of banking. At one stage, he travelled around the upper North Island, visiting branches, setting up computer terminals and training people how to use them.

This was long before the internet, and before most homes had a computer. One of the things Dad found was that some people embraced the new technology, whereas others resisted. They expected that this computer fad would die out, and they'd go back to "normal", doing banking by balance sheets and ledgers.

I suspect there are some people here this morning who have no idea what a ledger is... it's kind of like a hand-written excel spreadsheet, that doesn't do the calculations for you...

Others here will remember the days before online banking and ATMs, where you had to stand in a queue at the bank for any and every transaction.

The reality is, banking never did go back to “normal” did it? In fact, it established a new normal, based on computers.

This is what’s needed if a great move of God is to be sustained beyond the time of the person or people whom God has used to instigate that move: We need a “new normal”.

Throughout history, and even within my lifetime, there have been a number of amazing, miraculous moves of God. Sometimes these moves of God have been hijacked by people, who try to outrun God and His purposes.

Usually when that happens, they don’t last. But I believe that one of the hallmarks of a true move of God, is that it results in a “new normal”. God changes more than just our practices; He changes our culture, and He changes our very hearts. And this change endures long after the departure of the person or people God has used as a change agent.

Merely changing our practices - or even worse, our rules - doesn’t result in a new normal. It doesn’t result in changed hearts.

The apostle Paul wrote about this in Romans 8 when he said: “...*what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires*”.

Righteous *behaviour* is usually the *product* or consequence of people getting their lives right with God, rather than the other way ‘round.

In my adult lifetime, there have been a number of high profile moral and ethical legislative reforms that many in the Christian community have vigorously protested against:

The first one I remember was homosexual law reform in the ‘80’s. Since then there’s been lowering the drinking age, Prostitution law reform, civil unions bill, the smacking bill, and same-sex marriage.

I’m not commenting here about where I stand on any these issues – that’s another topic, so let’s not get sidetracked. And I’m not criticising the *motives* of the people who protested against these things. But I am questioning the *means*.

Of those law reforms I’ve listed, how many of them were the Christian community successful in heading off by protest action and petitions?

Not one of them. If we want to see righteousness in our land, it won’t come about from marches on Parliament, or protest banners, or petitions. It won’t come from rules or law. The people of Israel tried that over hundreds of years, and failed.

It will come about as people recognise the sovereignty of God, the love of Jesus, and willingly decide to submit their will to the will of God – the catch cry of the Welsh revival: “Oh Lord, Bend us to your will, not ours”.

A revival in the hearts of people can’t be imposed, any more than righteousness can be attained by an act of Parliament. Because anything that is imposed, people resist. When people genuinely choose to get their lives right with God, you don’t have to follow them around with a big stick to make sure they’re staying righteous.

We can’t legislate righteousness. Righteousness or right behaviour is a product of getting ourselves right with God.

That doesn't mean we don't take interest in the affairs of state and where our country is going. It's important that we have a voice in politics. We need to be active in matters of justice. But we can't express it in the terminology of revival, because that's not where revival starts. Revival starts in the hearts of men and women who are putting God on the highest place of their lives.

Are you concerned with moral decline in New Zealand? I think Alpha has a far greater chance of addressing it than marches on Parliament. If we work to change the hearts of individuals, then we will change this nation. In the words of an old worship song we used to sing: It's a loving revelation not a violent revolution, for peace can only come through Calvary.

The late Brian Hathaway – former principle of what is now Laidlaw college wrote a book called “Beyond Renewal”. I think that title poses a great question: After renewal revival, what next? I believe God sends revival for a purpose – to empower and motivate us to a purpose.

Mike Fish was a community chaplain in Whangarei, and he reckoned the authenticity of whether a revival can be called a revival or not is measured by the effect it has on the poor in the local community.

True revival is not just an indulgent, inward event, it also results in outward action, particularly aimed at the most vulnerable.

Revivals don't last forever. Possibly the longest lasting one started in 1727 when the Moravian Community in Saxony, commenced a round-the-clock “prayer watch” that continued nonstop for over a hundred years. Amazing, but it still ended.

A few weeks back Steve talked to us about the Welsh revival of the early 20th C, which had amazing results.

The Welsh revival isn't still going to day. When conducting an evangelistic mission in Wales, the evangelist Luis Palau stated that “God has no Grandchildren”. Each of us has to come to God afresh, without riding on the coat tails of our parents. Because a faith that isn't our own won't stand up under trial.

The Welsh revival started in 1904. But what happened 10 years after that? WWI started. When there is a great move of God, there is also usually a great move of opposition. Many of the key figures in the Welsh revival were killed in WWI.

This is a Biblical principle. The classic example is of course the temptation of Jesus in Luke 4.

Previously in Luke 3, *“...When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”* That's a fairly significant experience. I'd call that a bit of a revival eh?

But straight after that, Jesus was led into the wilderness, where he had a serious encounter with the devil.

This is possibly a pertinent reminder for those who encountered God in a powerful way at Easter camp. Coming back to normal life can have its challenges, but I believe God allows this in part so we can verify that we've had a genuine encounter with Him, rather than just a hyped up experience.

Revivals are often associated with a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit. I came to faith at a time when the church was going through what was known as the Charismatic Renewal, where there was this great emphasis on being filled with the Spirit.

As a young man I wondered how you know if you are filled with the Holy Spirit. Pentecostals would say you speak in tongues. Evangelicals would insist that you are filled with the Spirit at conversion.

The British Bible teacher David Pawson once said: “The surest sign that you’re filled with the Holy Spirit, is trouble”.

If we’re going to get serious with God, we are trampling on the toes of the forces of darkness, who really don’t want us to go there. Rules and legislation aren’t going to see us through that sort of opposition. Deep convictions, and a personal relationship with the living God can.

In the face of that trouble, what the Holy Spirit gives us are the fruits of His presence, listed in Galatians 5: *“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”*.

We need a New Normal:

Quite a few years ago I needed to talk to Trevor Donnel about something – Trevor was the senior pastor here, in the early 90’s. I went to the manse, and found Trevor out the back behind the garage, where he was tending a most elaborate hydroponics setup. I asked Trevor why he was growing his tomatoes this way instead of in the soil. He said it was because the soil was full of rocks from the eruption of Mt Albert, and was too shallow to effectively allow the roots to go down deep.

I can testify that this is true, because some years later I found myself on the other side of a petrol powered post-hole borer with Gus Sampaio, drilling holes for fence posts on the very same spot. Operating one of those things with an enthusiastic Brazilian is an experience, believe me!

Trevor was growing his tomatoes artificially, because something that was intrinsic to growing them naturally was missing.

We can come up with all sorts of artificial means to grow God’s kingdom, but the only reason for doing that, is because something is missing that should be naturally present.

If that’s the case, then we need to dig out the rocks in our lives that are stopping God from growing his fruit in us. We need to fertilise the soil with the Spirit and the Word of God, and with prayer, and we need to build up the topsoil of a relationship with Him.

A few years ago I called up a mate of mine, and asked how he was doing. He said he was feeling low, because he was waiting for God to send revival, but God was slow in sending it. It got me thinking: Is our faith dependant on revival?

Revival’s are great – don’t get me wrong. But in the broad sweep of Christian history, revivals are the exception, rather than the norm. And if we are to survive as followers of Jesus, we need to cultivate a faith that isn’t dependant on revival, and isn’t dependant on any one *person* as the change agent.

We need to allow God to establish a New Normal.