

25.6.08 Nehemiah 10-13 midweekchurch Nehemiah 6 (mid)

I heard about this man who bought a parrot. It was a beautiful parrot but he had one problem, it always spoke in really foul language. Which just drove him crazy with embarrassment. So he tried to reason with the bird asking it to clean up his language. The parrot promised to change but nothing happened. In fact, it got worse. Then the guy got really mad and locked him in a kitchen cupboard. That really aggravated the bird and he started clawing and scratching and making all kinds of a racket. When the guy finally let him out, the parrot let loose with a stream of swear words that made the man blush.

At that point, the guy was so ticked off that he threw him into the freezer. For the first few seconds the bird squawked and screamed and thrashed around. And then there was silence. At first the guy just waited, but then he started to wonder if the bird was hurt. After a couple more moments of not hearing anything, he was so worried that he opened the freezer door. The bird calmly climbed onto the man's outstretched arm and said, "I'm really sorry about the language. I'll make a promise and vow to clean up my language from now on."

The man was astounded. He couldn't believe the transformation that had come over the parrot as a result of being in the freezer for only a couple of moments. The parrot then turned to the man and said, "I just have one question...what did the chicken do?"

Well when we turn to Nehemiah 10, we see that the Israelites, like the parrot have decided to change their ways. They have seen God at work in the building of the walls. They have seen the example of Nehemiah pointing them back to a true faith in God. They have heard from God's word, they have worshipped God as a community, they have spent time in prayer & now they decide to promise to make changes.

1. A new set of promises. And to do that they made four vows, four oaths, four promises, that reflected all of their lives. For they knew that if God had saved their lives, they had to give back to him all of their lives. They had to live for him and him alone.

So the first promise they made was in verses 10:28 & 29. They promised to obey God's word. To follow "*the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the command, regulations and decrees of the Lord your God*".

This is always where the people of God have to start, obedience. John says in his letter that if we really love God, we will obey his commands. Its not that we have to, we want to. And that's what happened here, the people pledged themselves to obey God's commands. They weren't forced to. They didn't only sign up because they were locked in a freezer. They wanted to.

That's their first promise and their second promise was they promised to keep pure God's family. In verse 30 they promised they would not marry outside of the faith. They knew that if they married people from other nations who didn't share their beliefs, then their faith may become diluted. They might turn away again from the true and living God. They might be like Solomon who married foreign women and bit by bit they turned his heart away from the Lord.

So they made a promise about God's word, about their families and thirdly in verse 31 they promised to keep special God's day. They knew that the issue of work and rest was a huge one in their lives. They knew that their faith in God must affect their business practices. So they promised they would work six days and rest one. They would keep the Sabbath for worship. And they would allow their land to take a Sabbatical every 7 years, so it wasn't worked out as well.

Lastly they made a promise about worship. So in verse 32 to 39 they promised to give to God's work. They had been reminded of how important worship was, so they were to provide for the wood, the sacrifices, and the offerings to keep it going. They understood they needed priests, people to act as a go between, between them and God. So they agreed to supply them with everything they needed to live. They had appreciated the work of the Levites as they had taught them God's word and so they wanted to allow the Levites time in which to study and teach them that word.

So they made these four promises. One to do with self, I will obey God's word. One to do with family, we will not marry outside of the faith. One to do with work and play, I will keep special God's day. And one to do worship, I will give to God's work. They promised their faith would affect all of their lives.

William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army was once asked what his secret was to his incredible ministry. This is what he said, *"God has had all that there was of me. There have been men with greater brains than I...but from the day I got the poor of London on my heart and caught a vision of what Jesus Christ could do with me and them, on that day I made up my mind that God should have all of William Booth that there was."*

So do you think that you could make a similar set of affirmations to God? Have you been coming along to midweek church and been reminded of God's salvation, enjoyed God's family, encouraged by God's word and supported by God's Church? Would you then be willing to stand up and make a similar set of promises?

Could you say, I agree to obey God's word. Not just when I like what it says. Not just when I have time to read it. Not because I have to, but because I want to. Because I know this is God's will for my life. Could you say, I agree to keep pure God's family. I won't let any

influences into my family that would take my wife, my husband, my children's faith away from God. I declare that if I am not already married that I will only marry a Christian. And if I am married, I will do whatever I can to ensure all my family knows about Jesus?

Could you say, I agree to keep God's day special. I promise to work six days, rest one day. I agree I will set aside a time each week to worship, to pray, to be taught and to teach others about the Lord.

Could you say I promise to give to God's work. For our worship services to happen, we as a Church need to support the work of ministry here in this place. For Scripture classes to be taught, kids clubs to be run, youth groups, study groups, hospitals and nursing homes visits, counselling and welfare to be given, I understand that will involve some sacrificial giving on my part, both my time and my money. And I promise not just to give my leftovers but my best.

Here's another way to look at it. If you could look at a person's friendships, their calendar, their family and their budget, you could determine whether or not they are fully submitted to God and completely committed to His cause. You could tell whether I have given my life to God or not.

So the Israelites make a new set of promises to God; and in the last chapter of this book we find out how they go. Read Chapter 13...

2. A fresh set of failures Now even just a cursory look at that chapter shows that it didn't take them all that long before they let the fox back in the hen house. It didn't take that long for them to break their oaths and to fall from their promises. You see what seems to have happened is that after 12 years as their governor, Nehemiah returned back to the Persian King and took up his old responsibilities there. But a few years later, he comes back and finds the spiritual state of his people in an absolute mess.

He finds that the book of the Law hasn't been regularly read, that's strike one. He finds the Israelites have been marrying outside of the faith, why some of the kids don't even know the Hebrew language and so they can't even learn about the Hebrew God or participate in worship. That's strike two.

He finds that people have stopped their giving to the work of the Temple and to the Levites. So the Levites have not been able to live and so have left their teaching role and gone back to farming. Strike 3.

And then we see the people are now treating the Sabbath, God's day like any other day. They are buying & selling like any other day & the witness to those outside the community that everything stops because of God, has gone to the dogs. That's strike 4. And if you are out after three strikes, then you're well and truly in trouble after four. Quite

simply, God's people have let God down again. He has given them things time & time and time again, but they once again have failed to fill their side of the bargain.

I'm reminded of a story that American author Tony Campolo tells of his experience in a Church of a more Pentecostal bent. He tells of a man who, in the throes of spiritual dedication, began to call out in a loud voice, "Fill me, Lord! Fill me, Fill me, Lord!" To which finally an older woman in the congregation, who could control herself no longer replied, in loud voice, "Don't do it, Lord; he leaks!"

Well the Israelites also leak, don't they? But before we get too carried away, isn't it also true for all of us: we leak. We make our promises to God and so often our lives don't change one iota. We show remorse but no repentance. So in the last chapters of this book, there is a new set of promises, a fresh set of failures

3. And One last ditch effort by Nehemiah, to turn it all around. He comes back again to Jerusalem, sees the mess the people are in and he rolls up his sleeves once more and does something about it, four things about it.

a) *He faces the problem head on.* He doesn't deal with it half heartedly, he does something about Tobiah, the one who all along has tried to stop God's work from happening, and he kicks him out of the Temple. He re employs the Levites and he puts the people's giving back on track. He faces the problems head on. And really things don't change until you do that, do they? If you have a problem, it doesn't get solved by worrying about it or skirting the issue or blaming someone else. It only goes away when you face it head on.

b) *He then deals with the wrong severely.* He gets angry doesn't he? He throws Tobiah's things out onto the street. He kicks the fish mongers out of the city and says don't come back on the Sabbath. He appoints guards to lock the gates. He even throws down curses on some men and pulls out their beards. Ouch.

Now I admit some of his tactics wouldn't work in today's society. I would even go to say maybe he went overboard. But he dealt with sin severely. He made a stand. He did something about it. And in a way it reminded me a bit of Jesus going into the Temple, overturning the tables and getting rid of the merchants. His anger was all done to protect his people from wrongdoing - it was righteous anger.

But he didn't just decisively get rid of the old way he thirdly *made steps to implement the right way.* He hired trusted leaders and made good plans to fix things up long term. And lastly *he backed it all up with prayer* - and so we see that four times within this last chapter are Nehemiah's prayers for help in fixing up this terrible situation.

Ludwig van Beethoven was one of the great composers of all times, but during his twenties he began to lose his hearing. His fingers became thick, he wrote on one occasion. He couldn't feel the music he once had. As he got older the problem got worse and when he reached his fifties he was stone deaf. On one occasion, in this part of his life, Beethoven was overheard shouting at the top of his voice as he slammed both fists on the keyboard, "I will take life by the throat"

That's what I think Nehemiah is doing here. He is taking life by the throat, he is determined like Beethoven to make something great out of the difficult circumstances that are facing him. He is refusing to take a backward step. He knows what God wants him to do, and he will keep working towards that goal, no matter what others around him think and do. And yet the book of Nehemiah ends with him in prayer. It ends, as it begun, in him asking for God's favour, for God's blessing despite the situations. It ends with him pleading to God, to show mercy according to His great unfailing love.

4. It ends with A need for God's mercy and favour You see despite everything good that has been done, God's people still desperately need God's mercy. Because of their failures they need again God's love, his favour. The book of Nehemiah then is not a book about the success of God's people or even of Nehemiah himself, it is about their need for God's mercy.

And you can see this because if you like stories with happy endings you will not like Chapter 13 of Nehemiah. You will probably feel that the writer should have quit with the great celebration, recorded in Chapter 12, of the dedication of the rebuilt walls of Jerusalem. For this closing chapter is really the story of a backward slide on the part of these people while Nehemiah was gone for awhile.

And that is why the book of Nehemiah is part of a bigger collection of books called the Old Testament. And the Old Testament highlights our failure throughout the generations and so looks forward to God doing something gracious, something merciful, something which will show the world what love is really all about.

He will send his son Jesus into the world. The old covenant has been a failure, because the people have stayed in their sin, so God will bring in a new covenant. The old leaders, like Abraham and Moses and David and Nehemiah only brought spiritual renewal while they were alive, so God will bring in a new leader Jesus, who will never leave us or forsake us. The old way couldn't bring about change in the people of God, but the new way involves God himself taking up residence within us and giving us the grace to say no to ungodliness and worldly passion and yes to living self controlled, upright and godly lives.

So friends the book of Nehemiah points us again to Jesus. Nehemiah is a great leader, but Jesus is greater. Nehemiah did some good things,

but Jesus is perfect. Nehemiah can point people in the right direction, Jesus can help take them there. So friends, we too should look to Jesus. Sure we can make our promises, our vows to God but more important is that we ask God for help so that we can stand on his promises. And then with Him beside us we take life by the scruff of the neck and seek to make the most of it, to the honour and glory of our great Saviour Jesus.

No Matter What You Do!

2 People: Mum and his son (Little Stevie).

Stevie: No matter what you do (no matter what you do)
God always cares for you. (God always cares for you)
So tell him that you're sorry (Tell him that you're sorry)
God will forgive you. So true!

That puppet show was so good!
Imagine that guy dropping the yoghurt into the toilet!
And isn't it good that God will forgive me no matter what I
do

So I can steal Jemma's scarf! And God will forgive me.
I can poke a face at Jack. And God will forgive me.
I can.. I can..

Mum: Stevie. Little Stevie. Come in for dinner.

Stevie: I can ignore Mum. I can disobey Mum. I can do what ever I
want and God will still forgive me.

(Stevie hides from Mum...)

Mum: Stevie, where is that Stevie? He hasn't done his homework.
He hasn't cleaned his room. He isn't coming when I call him for
dinner. What's got into that kid? Stevie where are you? Has anyone
here seen Stevie?

Kids: *He's over there.*

Mum: Stevie why didn't you come when I called?

Stevie: Because I didn't want to! I don't have to listen to you. I don't
have to obey you. I can do whatever I want to do!

Mum: No you can't. You live in our house, not your own house. We
are your parents and the Bible says you need to obey us. And
besides if you want to be a follower of Jesus, then one way
you can do that is to look at your father and I at how we seek to
follow Jesus and follow us.

Stevie: Look Mum, that's not true. I saw a puppet play last week that
told me no matter what I do, God will forgive you.

Mum: Yes and what was the rest of that song?

Stevie: Um. Ah.. So tell him that you're sorry.

Mum: Yes, you have to be sorry. You have to want to do what God
says first of all. You need to try to do what God wants you to
do. But if you can't then you say you are sorry. And sorry means
you then do a U turn. You go in the other direction. You stop doing
the wrong thing and start doing the right thing.

But if this is just a game between you and God, God will see
that and you won't be forgiven!

Stevie: Not forgiven! Then I wouldn't be God's friend any more. I
don't want that.

Mum: Neither would I! So are you going to come and clean your
room?

Stevie: Do I have to?

Mum: Yes.

Stevie: Alright... And Mum, I'm sorry for disobeying you.

Mum: That's OK. For no matter what you do I will forgive you as
well. Like God, I do love you. And I want you to love me

to. But I don't want really want you to obey me because you have to. I want you to obey me, because you want to. For that shows me that you love me too! Now hurry up and clean your room.

Dinner will be in 5 minutes.

Stevie: (Cleaning his room). Can anyone sing that song with me.. No matter what you do!