

Problems, Passion and Jesus

Nehemiah 13:4-31

Nehemiah has been absent from Jerusalem for a number of years. When he returns he finds things in a bad way. Whilst he was old enough to retire, instead he throws himself back into the fight.

Nehemiah's problems

All the promises that the people had previously made lay broken and Nehemiah's arch-enemy, Tobiah had been given a room in the Temple. Whilst Nehemiah had gone away his enemies hadn't. It is an example that the enemies of our souls – those things that discourage us and bring us down never give up.

The people had stopped giving their tithes – this created the space in the temple storerooms that Tobiah filled. It's a reminder, that if we don't allow God to fill our hearts, something else will take his place. And because the Levites, who taught the Bible, depended on the tithe, there was no one to teach the Bible, and the Sabbath was ignored. When the word of God ceases to shape public life, materialism becomes the new god.

But this moral disintegration extended to the heart of family life as well. Men had married foreign wives and their children could not understand the word of God. Within a generation the people would be assimilated into pagan culture.

The situation was all the more tragic given the promises they had made before. And the same kind of thing can happen to us. The people had succumbed to the pressure to conform to those around them. We face the same thing, and it can be hard to resist.

Nehemiah's Passion

Nehemiah did not negotiate: for him holiness was non-negotiable. He was angry at sin. Sometimes, sin does not bother us enough, and change will not come in our lives until it does. It was the honour of God's name and the wellbeing of the people, and especially of the next generation, that drove Nehemiah's passion.

But what will happen when Nehemiah is no longer there? We know what happened, as this is the last book of the Old Testament: religion became a thing of rules and regulations. What the people needed, what we all need, is not rules imposed from the outside but a new heart on the inside.

Nehemiah's Master

Jesus came as the one greater than the temple and the Sabbath. He also cleansed the temple. Instead of beating others, he gave himself to be beaten and his beard was pulled out, as he gave himself willingly in our place. We fail to love God, but at the cross God loves us to the full extent, and Jesus turned away God's wrath (the thing Nehemiah feared coming on the people) from us, and took it on himself.

If you know you need a fresh start, look to Jesus, and be joined to him by faith. When you do, Paul tells us we become a new creation. If you see areas in your life where you've given sin room in your heart, do the same. It's as we look to Jesus and understand his love for us, that our love for him will grow. And then, like Nehemiah we'll live with a passion for God's glory and for the good of his people.