

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Nehemiah 11-13: The Restoration of the Nation

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah remind us that God is in the restoration business. He picks up the broken pieces of individual lives and whole communities of his people and puts them back together... because that's the kind of God he is. Ezra and Nehemiah have told a positive story overall. There have been struggles along the way, but the temple has been restored, the walls have been rebuilt, the people have heard the word of God, and committed themselves to keeping the covenant. Chapters 11 and 12 continue on this positive track.

1. Repopulating Jerusalem (11:1-36)

There's no point having a city rebuilt if there's no-one living in it, so chapter 11 describes the repopulation of Jerusalem.

(a) Occupying the city (11:1-24)

This was carried out by casting lots: one out of every ten were chosen to move to Jerusalem (11:1-2). 11:3-24 lists the leaders who settled in Jerusalem with their families.

(b) Settling the land (11:25-36)

Beyond Jerusalem were villages in the land which needed settling too, and these are named in 11:25-36.

2. Identifying leaders (12:1-26)

We are faced here with yet another list of names which – though it might appear tedious to us – would have been extremely important for the first audience. The names record two generations of priests and Levites – the generation of those who returned first of all (described in Ezra 1-2), and those from the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. This shows true worship of God continuing from generation to generation; there's a continuity in leadership from the

first return of God's people to the time being described. It's one thing for the city to be restored and repopulated, but the people need continuity and purity in leadership as well.

So far, so good. And the next part continues on this positive note...

3. Dedicating walls (12:27-13:3)

This section describes the dedication of the walls; and it has some valuable lessons to teach us about worship along the way...

(a) Preparation (12:27-30)

First of all, *preparation*. The appropriate people arrived and purified themselves (12:27-30).

(b) Participation (12:31-43)

Then comes the actual dedication itself. There are two groups, each with a choir, leaders, priests with trumpets, and other musicians. One group goes anti-clockwise around the wall, and the other goes clockwise (12:31, 38a), encircling the city with the praises of God, and they come together at the temple (12:40). They make a loud noise, celebrating and giving thanks to God (12:43).

Even at this stage we can see an important pattern emerging: the people *prepare* for worship and they *participate* in worship. It's not always easy to prepare for worship, though it could be important to do so – to set aside a time for reflection, reading, or prayer before coming to church, maybe even on a Saturday evening. And then participation too. Worship isn't something we observe, it's something we *do*. We don't attend church on Sundays to watch what's going on, to be inspired in some way; we take part, we sing, we praise, we listen, we pray, we respond. But there's more...

(c) Provision (12:44-47)

These verses describe how they would make sure that worship would continue, through provisions for the ongoing need of those who served in the temple (12:44, 47). Enjoying the highs and celebrations is one thing, but worship also has to do with the routine, with ongoing obedience, with making sure day-to-day provision is made.

(d) Purification (13:1-3)

And here's another important aspect of worship – *purification*. The issue of separation from surrounding nations is addressed again. Here the people obey the law (see Deuteronomy 23:3-6), trying to make sure that *purity* as well as praise would mark them out as God's people.

What a great way to end the book! The walls have been rebuilt; the people have been restored; everything is in its proper place! The people are back in fellowship with God and in the place where he had promised to dwell with them; they have reclaimed the land of promise; they have been established as a separate community, conformed to the word of God. And yet... that's not where the book ends. We have the rest of chapter 13 to go, and – to be honest – things fall apart. We love a happy ending, don't we?! And there's every opportunity to finish on a high note – revival, rededication, rejoicing! But Hollywood won't be making a film about Ezra and Nehemiah any time soon, not unless they change the ending – because it's decidedly downbeat. Let's have a look at it...

4. Restoring holiness (13:4-31)

Although the exact order of events is not completely clear, it does appear that Nehemiah had returned to the king who had originally sent him (13:6-7a). We don't know how long he was away, but when he came back, all the old problems had resurfaced.

When the people had recommitted themselves to the Lord in chapter 10, they specified particular things: they made a commitment not to intermarry, not to

dishonour the sabbath, and not to neglect the house of God. There are three main sections in this part of the chapter, each of which concludes with a prayer, which begins with the word 'Remember' (13:14, 22b, 29), and each of the sections describes something Nehemiah discovered when he returned – that every commitment made in chapter 10 had now been broken. The people *still* need restoration.

(a) Of the temple (13:4-14)

A priest called Eliashib had been given responsibility for the storerooms in the temple, and he had allowed Tobiah, Nehemiah's sworn enemy, to use one of the rooms (13:4-5). This meant that the storeroom wasn't being used appropriately, and Tobiah was a gentile who shouldn't have been allowed in that part of the temple anyway! Here is compromise right at the centre of worship of God. When Nehemiah gets back, he acts decisively (13:8-9). He slaps an immediate eviction order on Tobiah, and turfs all his stuff out! He cleanses the room and restocks it.

But the temple itself had also been neglected (13:10-11). The Levites were to live on tithes, but these had not been given, so they had gone back to their fields to make a living. And yet the people had pledged (in 10:39) that they would not neglect the house of God. Nehemiah calls them to task, reinstates temple staff, and appoints treasurers known for their integrity (13:12-13). The section ends with a prayer where Nehemiah asks God to remember his acts of faithfulness (13:14).

(b) Of the sabbath (13:15-22)

Because God rested on the seventh day of creation, the people were to stop work on that day; and then, when the Lord freed them from slavery in Egypt, they were commanded to keep the sabbath because it was a sign of freedom not bondage. They weren't slaves anymore, and everyone was to enjoy the rest that comes with ceasing normal work activities.

But Nehemiah sees people dishonouring the sabbath (13:15). He reminds them that their ancestors had disobeyed the law about the sabbath (13:17-18; see Jeremiah 17:19-27), and had brought judgment on themselves, and now here they are doing the same things all over again. Jerusalem on the sabbath had become not a place of rest and worship, but a place of retail and work. They had even made a promise not to break the sabbath (in 10:31), but were doing exactly that!

So, Nehemiah commands the gates to be shut on the sabbath (13:19). Some merchants set up their markets outside the gates until Nehemiah threatens them with physical violence (13:20-21). The Levites were cleansed and commissioned to guard the gates (13:22a). And once again, he prays, asking for God's mercy (13:22b).

For Christians, of course, Sunday isn't the equivalent of the Jewish sabbath. Sunday is the first day of the week, the day of resurrection. So far as we can tell, early believers weren't required to keep the Sunday as a sabbath (see Acts 15:19-20; Romans 14:5-6; Colossians 2:16). But that doesn't mean there isn't a *principle* of sabbath, which is important for individuals and society, where we are wise to have a rhythm of work and rest, to keep a day free from demands of work so we have time for friends, family, and God. It's a way of saying that we will not worship work, or commercialism, and that we will give ourselves and others a break from that daily routine.

(c) Of the people (13:23-29)

Once again, the people had failed to guard against mixed marriages, which had compromised families and confused children (13:23-24). Even Solomon, great and wise though he was, was led astray this way and became unfaithful to God as a result (13:26). Once again, Nehemiah acts robustly, because intermarriage threatened the religious integrity of the people.

The final verses summarise his efforts to bring about holiness in Israel (13:30-31). His

final prayer is simple: 'Remember me with favour, O my God' – a reminder that his ministry is judged not by the failure of the people but by his own faithfulness.

•••

And so the book comes to an end – with a bit of a whimper, truth be told. Reformation had come about, but had come to an end; enthusiasm had been there, but had been short-lived; promises had been made, but had been broken. Final reforms have taken place, but there's no reason to hope they're going to last any longer than the others.

But not just the book ends here, the *Old Testament* ends here too. This is how the story of the Old Testament finishes. That's significant, because it points beyond itself. It's left hanging, and we're left wondering when the promises will be fulfilled; we're left looking forward to the time when there will be true and genuine restoration.

From a Christian perspective, it points forward to one who would finally break the power of sin; one who would bring to an end rituals and sacrifices; one who would provide access to God by the sacrifice of himself; one who would fulfil God's promise to Abraham to bring blessing to all nations; one who would be great David's greater Son; one who provide entry not into a physical land but a place of rest in heaven; one who would initiate a new covenant in his blood; one who would create a new people of God, a people who would be given new hearts, in whom God's own Spirit would live; one who would not build a temple but would *be* the temple; one who would not build the walls of Jerusalem but would build a *people* to be the new Jerusalem, the place where God lives.

The book of Nehemiah points beyond itself to a time when there will be no more sin or sorrow or pain, with its true fulfilment in Jesus and his fully restored people dwelling in the new heavens and new earth, the hope of all those who belong to him. Amen.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 17 December 2006