

Faith Walk! - Sermon Discussion

Date : 5 May 2024
Sermon Title : Remembered by God
Speaker : Rev Shannon Chan
Text : Nehemiah 13

INTRODUCTION

The Wailing Wall in Jerusalem (also known as the Western Wall) is what is left of the 2nd Temple that was destroyed in A.D.70 when the Jews revolted against the Romans. This Temple was the centre of Jewish ritual worship. Like Nehemiah who wept at the sight of Jerusalem in ruins, Jews have for years wept at the Wailing Wall or what is left of it, asking God to remember them.

Nehemiah prayed "Remember me with favour, my God" (Nehemiah 13:31b, *NIV*)
Christian writer Janice Smith said, 'To remember' in the Bible is not merely to recall to mind; it is to express concern for someone, to act with loving care for him. When God remembers His people, He does so 'with favour'.

The central theme of Nehemiah 13 is: God remembers with favour those whose heart is completely His.

3 facets of a heart that is remembered by God

1. One who is devoted to following God and obeying His Word (13:1-3)

Nehemiah wanted to do something. He wanted people to turn and return to the primacy of God, so he gathered the whole community and read the Book of Moses to them. The Book of Moses seems likely to be the Pentateuch which is the 5 books of the Hebrew Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). The people could have sat there for hours to listen to all of it being read.

Before the people were brought to justice for breaking God's Law, Nehemiah wanted to make them aware of God's standards of holiness for them. It is no point disciplining people if they do not know what they are being disciplined for and what they have infringed.

- In Deuteronomy 23:3-5 God had declared that no Ammonite or Moabite should enter the assembly of Israel because of the way those nations had treated Israel when they were in the wilderness. Beyond this, God did not want Israel accepting these foreigners into their midst because God knew that they would corrupt Israel from following the Lord alone.
- Nehemiah's knowledge of God's Laws enabled him to see the deviations and the

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admixture of pagan practices. Because Nehemiah was devoted to following God and obeying God fully, he held the people accountable to keep God's Word because they were supposed to be God's people.

Guard against syncretism

Applied to us today, we need to guard against the insidiousness of syncretism.

- Syncretism is when someone combines different forms of beliefs or practices. From a Christian or Biblical perspective, syncretism is when we inappropriately mix a blend of non-Christian religious ideas or practices with the Christian faith.

One syncretistic untruth is the idea that 'there is more than one way to heaven'. To some people, it does not matter which path we walk on as every path will eventually take us to heaven. But this is what the bible says:

- ❖ *Jesus answered, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)*
- ❖ *Salvation is found in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)*

The Bible is crystal clear that there is only one way to salvation and one way to heaven. A person cannot merge this basic truth of Scripture with anything else and come to the same conclusion.

Furthermore, in the times in which we live, people no longer put up with sound doctrine and the truths of Scripture. Therefore, pastors, leaders, preachers of God's Word need to take care that we are not taking a syncretistic approach to the preaching and teaching of God's Word just to be 'culturally relevant'. To be culturally relevant may mean we will be asked, "*Why don't you Christians water down what you are saying?*" or "*Why are you always so hard and you sound so dogmatic about some of the things you say?*" But if we do so, we could end up giving people something that really is not of God. Therefore, guard against syncretism.

2. One who exposes and eradicates sins that corrupt God's work (13:4-13)

When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, he was shocked that Tobiah, one of his main opponents and the opponent of the people of God, was not only living in Jerusalem but in the Temple itself. Everyone knew that Tobiah being an Ammonite should not be there. Tobiah had actually been invited by Eliashib the priest. Eliashib, being a priest, had been endowed with privilege yet he dishonoured God when he cultivated the wrong relationship by closely associating with the Ammonite Tobiah. Tobiah was a dangerous opponent to God's people as he and Sanballat had done bad things to God's people as can be read in the earlier chapters in the Book of Nehemiah.

- Our lives too can be ruined by wrong relationships, by the wrong choice of the people we choose to relate to.

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Then, Eliashib seriously misused his office. There was a large room in the Temple that had been dedicated for spiritual priorities such as storage of Temple gifts (13:5) but in his desire to please Tobiah, Eliashib gave the room to Tobiah to be his lodging.

Throughout history, there are those who are given significant opportunities to further the Lord's work but because of their distorted conduct and choices, they have damaged their personal witness and brought dishonor to the name of God.

- Eliashib also frustrated God's work – The improper use of this big room by the enemy might have disrupted the giving of gifts in support of the Temple personnels such as the Levites and singers, who were compelled to give up their spiritual ministry and work in fields in order to provide for their families.
- Eliashib had become insensitive to the seriousness of sin especially the seriousness of his own sin. He was no longer the obedient servant of the Word that every priest was expected to be, a terrible example that if left unchecked, would cause many others to stumble.

Nehemiah saw Eliashib's actions for what they really were – the bad had to be speedily removed and the good had to be quickly restored. Every Christian needs a greater sensitivity to sin.

When we fail to see sin as the evil thing, left unchecked, it becomes spiritual (even moral, ethical) rot from the inside out

If there is truly a leadership that is loving; that leadership

- is willing to flag sin and wrong-doing.
- is willing to call people out for sin and wrong-doing;
- is willing to say "No" because it is the right thing before God to do even when the other person might come back and say "You have hurt my feelings".

Without expelling evil, good cannot prosper. Without the prospering of good, evil will return.

3. One who acts firmly in light of God's standard (13:15-28)

Nehemiah discovered that he needed to speak sternly and act decisively concerning Sabbath keeping. He confronted the offenders, rebuked the nobles, challenged the merchants, and took immediate steps to block breaches in their Sabbath keeping.

Sabbath – Keeping (13:15-22)

- Instituted to remind of both Creation and Redemption.
- It is the loving gift of God that reminds us of who we are and Whose we are.
- For people of God, Sabbath is a day that calls us back to the centrality of worship, the importance of our witness and the necessity of rest – "*A day that I can rest in You*" (Asidors)

Sabbath should be an immense delight and not an irritating chore, or drudgery.

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Inter-marriages that turn hearts to other Gods (13:23-28)

Nehemiah also had to act decisively concerning inter-marriages as he knew that God's people had been marrying unbelievers from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab.

- Where Israelite men married foreign women, the women who became mothers still maintained allegiance to the gods of Ashdod, Ammon and Moab, taught their children about these native religions and to pray to these gods. The fallout from those inter-marriages was that the children could not speak the language of Judah and thus could not learn about God and His Covenant. When this happens, the covenant community is destined to die because they do not hand-down properly to the next generation.
- The future of Israel's faith demanded their spiritual loyalty and integrity.

For us today,

- If we are truly God's people, we do not choose to forge alliances where our hearts may be turned to other gods.

God remembers with favour those whose heart is completely His

Later in the chapter, we read that Nehemiah, rebuked, beat and called down curses on people who had compromised. Should Nehemiah do that? Although the kingship was not restored in Jerusalem after the exile, Nehemiah as governor functioned like a king and by virtue of his office, he could discipline the people so that he could legitimately publicly beat the people. For us today, that is not something we do because we are not kings, and we are not governors.

Nehemiah's substantial contributions and accomplishments were inspired and prayerfully directed by God because Nehemiah was a man of prayer. Prayer undergirded his decisions and work to the glory of God. Nehemiah in his prayers wanted the people to live for the glory of God. But despite all his reforms, the nation of Israel would still spiral downwards, yet Nehemiah pointed the way forward that we might capture the vision of the Coming One who would excel and surpass him – the One who will bring forth a people after God's heart.

Nehemiah passes away from our sight with that prayer on his lips: "Remember me, O my God, for good." And was the prayer heard? Was Nehemiah remembered? Surely he was, for "the righteous shall be in everlasting remembrance" (Psalm 112:6)

O.F.Walton

CONCLUSION

Nehemiah's heart was completely for God; he was devoted to follow God and obey His Word, exposes and removes sins that corrupt God's work and acts firmly in light of God's standard. May we too not take a syncretistic approach in following God's Word just to be culturally relevant because God remembers those whose heart is completely His.

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A. Review Sermon Application

Purpose: Reflect on how you have been embodying God's truth.

- 1a. How successful have you been in fulfilling what you/your group had committed to do for the last FaithWalk!?
- 1b. What were some challenges you faced and what would you like to celebrate?

- 2a. After hearing this sermon, how successful have you been:
 - (i) in devoting to follow and obey God's Word?
 - (ii) in speaking against sin that corrupts God's work?
 - (iii) in acting firmly in light of God's standard?
- 2b. What are some challenges you faced in 2a. above?

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B. Relate Sermon Content

Purpose: Relate with the Truth and Resolve for Transformation.

- 3a. How sensitive are you to the sin of others and your own sin?
- 3b. What do you think are the consequences of not eradicating sin and restoring goodness in our lives?
- 3c. Are you ready to bear these consequences of not eradicating sin in your life or the lives of your loved ones? If not, what do you intend to do?

- 4a. Why do you think it is not possible for Christians to be culturally relevant most of the time?
- 4b. (i) What are some areas in your life that you face pressure to be culturally relevant or syncretistic?
(ii) What is one thing you can do to maintain spiritual loyalty and integrity in 4b(i) above?
- 4c. How can your group members encourage or help you to achieve 4b(ii) above, in the following week(s), till your next meeting?

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C. Testimonies, Prayers and Action

Purpose: Give glory to God, seek Him and embody His Word.

5. Share your testimony on how the Holy Spirit enabled you to follow God and obey His Word despite the temptation to compromise.

OR

Give thanks to God for His promise that He remembers with favour those whose heart is completely His and for the Lord Jesus who came to bring forth a people after God's heart.

6. Pray individually for a heart that is completely God's – willing to follow Him and obey His Word, expose and eradicate sins that corrupt His work, and act firmly in light of His standard. As a group, seek the Holy Spirit's conviction to have a greater sensitivity to sin and be willing to be accountable to one another. Pray also for our church leaders to have boldness from God to resist syncretism to expel evil so good can prosper.

Optional items:

Suggested worship songs:

1. God of Ages – Hillsong
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xwh67YiMj2w&ab_channel=iltm
2. Hymn of Heaven – Bethel https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-i4VcRjEtY&ab_channel=BethelMusic
3. Be Thou My Vision – Ascend the Hill
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4YmRNTaSao&ab_channel=BryceHeemstra

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