

Bible Overview 16: Return. Nehemiah 1

Do you remember the good old days? The time when you watched a TV series and at the end, it, well, ended? Now-a-days TV series all seem to end on a cliff hanger; Doctor Who fans have to wait for the autumn before we know why the space man/girl/whatever shot the Doctor and how he can be dead – but not. And how will the residents of Wisteria Lane in Desperate housewives cover up the murder of Gabrielle’s abusive stepfather who everyone thought was dead but who turned up alive before he was definitely murdered by Carlos as he attempted to protect his wife – should I be watching these programmes? – we won’t know until next year because all that happened in the last five minutes of this season’s finale!

What happened to finales that were final?

Well, the Bible introduced us to the phrase “nothing new under the sun” and there isn’t, because as we come to the end of the Old Testament today in our Bible overview we find that our “season finale” is going to leave us on a cliff hanger too.

You see we are going to end the first half of our overview in the book of Nehemiah – not the last physical book of the Bible, but the book which chronologically takes us to the end of the Old Testament period. Last week we saw the result of the wilful rebellion of God’s people, that they were led into exile in 586 BC as Babylon attacked Jerusalem. It was God’s clear act of disciplining his people so that they would turn back to him.

Now, after years of exile, God’s people are caught up in another invasion as the Persian empire overthrows the Babylonians, but God uses this regime change because he instructs King Cyrus, the leader of the Persians, to allow the Israelites return home to Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple.

Again the Bible reveals God's love and compassion for humanity even though we consistently and selfishly rebel against his loving rule. In Isaiah 54 God makes it clear that his love is greater than his anger, that he loves to reach out to his people, rather than to discipline them, "For a brief moment I abandoned you," says God, "but with deep compassion I will bring you back. In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you, says the LORD your Redeemer."

And this is the big message of our talk today – that God loves it when we come back. You know there was an accountant in Manchester who earlier this year came out of work to find that her car was facing the wrong way and had freshly painted double yellow lines underneath, how come? It transpired that the council were so keen to paint the yellow lines that they had actually used a crane to lift the parked car up whilst they painted the lines on the road underneath it and then lowered the car back down. And then (and you'll like this) a traffic warden put a parking ticket on the car!

I'd like to say that was an isolated case, but a lady in Lambeth came out of her home to find the same thing had happened to her, except that this time the car was lifted up whilst the lines were painted, then lowered and then towed away because it was on double yellow lines and she was left with an £800 fine!

Now, have you ever suspected that God is like that? Just trying to catch you out? Just wanting to make life difficult? Just waiting for you to turn you back for a second so that he can get you? Then the Bible sets us straight – God's not like that - he longs for us to come home to him, he does everything he can to bring us home, he urges us, he encourages us, he wants us to be free in his grace, not caught and condemned by his righteous judgement.

So Nehemiah's return to Israel paints a picture for us of how we can return to God. Nehemiah himself had grown up in exile – he had never lived in Israel, he hadn't been there when Babylon had invaded, he could have been excused for regarding Israel as a foreign country. In fact he has an important job in the court of king Artaxerxes as cupbearer, that included making sure the king's cup wasn't poisoned – it was a position of great responsibility and trust,. In effect Nehemiah had made it – a second generation foreign exile who was now a respected member of the Persian royal household.

But despite all this Nehemiah, wasn't happy. Why not? Because Nehemiah loved God and he longed for God's people to worship the Lord in Jerusalem – the holy city of his God and so when Nehemiah hears that Jerusalem is still in ruins his heart breaks and he prays to God.

And what does Nehemiah pray? He doesn't pray for action, he doesn't pray for resources, no, Nehemiah begins by praying what any of us desperate to return to God need to pray, he prays for forgiveness; "O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly towards you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses."

Remember that Nehemiah himself wasn't even born when the sins he was asking for forgiveness for were committed and yet he recognises that collectively his people have turned their backs on God and that he is rebellious child of a rebellious people. For there to be reconciliation there needs to be repentance and forgiveness.

Sometimes we need this collective sense of responsibility and contrition, for example, does anyone seriously believe that either Murdoch personally hacked into the phones of bereaved individuals? No, but we want them to personally apologise and make amends for what has gone on amongst their people.

And so sometimes not only as individuals, but as local or national churches, or even communities and nations we need to repent of the actions committed by our people. We live in a society which likes to pass the buck – it's never "my fault", and if something happens that we really don't like we will march around with a placard reading "Not in my name" but I think sometimes we need to do the right thing and take responsibility and pray for forgiveness for ourselves, our Church, our community, our nation.

The striking thing with Nehemiah is that he is not only going through the motions, he is genuinely distressed when he hears of the state of Jerusalem; he weeps and then he spends several days in fasting and mourning – repenting on behalf of his people.

As we come to the end of the Old Testament we see the seriousness of sin, the pain it induces, how it spreads and affects everything around it and the need for heartfelt repentance.

But Nehemiah wasn't just sad, he wanted to do something – he wanted to go back home and that is a picture of what God's people do; they say sorry and go back home. Hosea, the prophet, puts it like this, "Come, let us return to the LORD. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence.

Let us acknowledge the LORD; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth.

Hmmm, on the third day he will restore us, kind of makes me think of something not in the Old Testament. And as we come to the end of this overview into the Old Testament I want us to take away the realisation that we are left with a cliff hanger which leads us into the New Testament.

Although Nehemiah successfully returns to Jerusalem and successfully oversees the rebuilding of the city walls this is not the final chapter; the rebuilt temple is smaller than that which existed during Solomon's reign and the city itself is surrounded by enemies – this is not the fulfilment of the promise that God made to Abraham that his people would live with him in peace for ever and that all nations would be blessed through them.

Yes, God's people have known blessing from God, but human sin has spoiled it. There have been great men and women of faith, but they have never been perfect. There have been wonderful victories and triumphs, but at the same time there have been terrible failures and rebellions, there is no way that the story can be at an end at the conclusion of the Old Testament – we are left with bated breath for 400 years to see what will happen, how the story will conclude.

If you think it's bad having to wait until the autumn or even next year for your favourite TV series to return, just think what it was like for children of Israel enduring silence from God for 400 years until...but I'm getting ahead of myself, that's September's sermon. The reality is that people and laws and religion and physical nations had all failed to bring God's people peace with God and perhaps you've found the same thing.

Without spoiling the end for you, what God's people needed was someone perfect and grace filled who could save them from their sins, the same as we do, some one who could pay the penalty for our rebellion and then rise again after three days to restore us.

The Old Testament shows us that God is the same yesterday, today and forever; just, righteous and holy and so it leaves us realising the hopelessness of our sinful situation but because it also reveals to us that God is loving, gracious, merciful and trustworthy we can also be confident, as we look ahead to the New Testament that God will rescue us and bring us home rejoicing if we will turn back to him with the kind of heartfelt repentance that Nehemiah modelled.

In September we will encounter the promised Saviour who has rescued us from sin and death, we will discover the Church as the fulfilment of the people of God and we will look ahead to Jesus' return in glory to judge the world and usher in the wonderful New Creation. But all that only makes sense because we have built upon the foundations of the Old Testament.

That's why on the Road to Emmaus, after his crucifixion, the risen Lord Jesus joined some dishearted disciples who failed to recognise him "and beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." (Luke 24:27)

One Bible, one God, one message.