

Déjà vu All Over Again
Nehemiah 13:1-22
March 16, 2014

Introduction – Disturbing Endings

Have you ever seen a movie whose ending really disturbed you? You know - the kind that you sit in the theatre seat while the credits roll trying to sort it out... *Saving Private Ryan* was like that for me. I was moved by the great loss of life and sacrifice of war. *Schindler's List*, *The Pianist*, and the less sublime like the second *Star Wars* movie where Hans Solo is frozen and taken who knows where and Luke Skywalker learns that Darth Vader is his father. Not everyone is this way, but movies have a way of drawing me in like I'm really in the story. Sometimes those provocative endings had me pondering for days.

The most disturbing “dramatic hangover” I ever experienced wasn't a movie. In the early 1990's Diane and I lived in Southern California. We were given tickets to see *The Phantom of the Opera* in Los Angeles. It turned out that the performance for which we were given tickets was during the last week of Michael Crawford's appearance in the title role. He had already won the Tony Award for Best Actor in the role. The value of our tickets went from \$50 to nearly ten times the face value after his departure was announced. The practical part of me said sell them for a huge profit, but the better part asked how I could do that when the tickets were a gift. The artist in me agreed. This was a once in a lifetime opportunity that was nearly priceless. Though Diane, who grew up as the daughter of a CPA, objected, we kept the tickets and went to see the performance.

We were not disappointed. The movie does not even come close to capturing what we experienced that night. Michael Crawford's *Phantom* elicited both deeply felt sympathy and terror at the same time. Here was a guy who experienced a horrible disfigurement through none of his own doing. He was shunned by society but had given himself to mentoring a young soprano in the opera company. He had poured his expertise into her and she was to become the *prima dona* of the opera company – that's “top dog” in the opera world. Broken and lonely, he was desperately reaching out for love. But at the same time, he was a powerful manipulator who inspired fear in everyone. He was destructive and murderous. An old story line but a great one.

I saw the same show a year later with Robert Guillaume in the title role and I've seen the movie. No one could play the *Phantom* like Michael Crawford. He could be vulnerable and tender like a wounded adolescent in one scene and turn around and be maliciously vengeful in the next. The drama was so intense and compelling I found myself irritated by the audience because they were interrupting the story with their applause.. I was really into it. But what really compounded my "dramatic hangover" was the fact that he didn't die at the end. And he didn't win, either. He's terribly jilted, rejected by the one he loves and he has no one left in the world. To my anguish, the ending of the musical was very ambiguous. You don't know if he continues in his state of misery or finally makes peace with life and himself.

I bought the cassette set of the complete musical with him singing the role and listened to it over and over and over again for the next week. Many times I sat in my car and wept. (I know; I'm crazy. That's the artsy part of me, I suppose.) I just had to resolve it in my mind but I couldn't for days. Curiously, after days of listening to the music, pondering the meaning of suffering in life and the sad plight of the *Phantom* I came to a resolution. It just came to me. To this day, I don't remember what it was. But I put the cassettes away and never listened to the music again. True story.

Nehemiah is kind of like that. The ending is very disturbing. What a glorious story this has been! A seemingly impossible project was miraculously accomplished. More than that, the people repented and experienced life-changing revival. The nation and city emerged out of shame into the place where God's name once again gloriously dwelt. Chapter 12 is a massive party – a celebration of what God has done through his people.

Should have stopped there. But life's not like that. The final chapter of Nehemiah is no fairy-tale ending. It's honest...and deeply sobering.

Nehemiah 13:1-3 – Prologue to Trouble

On that day they read from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the people. And in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, for they did not

meet the people of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them—yet our God turned the curse into a blessing. As soon as the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent.

Reflections

The phrase, “on that day” does not mean the exact same day as the happenings in the previous chapter but rather ‘in the same period of time.’ “That day” was a season of realignment with God’s Word. It comes at this point in Nehemiah 13 as a prelude and stark contrast to the episode that follows. They had read and reviewed their history with the Moabites and Ammonites along with the wicked prophet Balaam. You can find the whole story – which includes a talking donkey – in Numbers 22-25. God had commanded Israel to exclude the Moabites and Ammonites from their assembly because of their refusal to be hospitable when God’s people were in need and their infectious idolatry.

I love Andre Cobbs. Here is a young man who gets it. He loves history. In fact, Andre maintains that it is essential for Christians to know their history. It is history, he says, along with the Word of God that informs us why we believe what we believe. I couldn’t agree more. When God’s people in Nehemiah reviewed their story with the Ammonites and the Moabites they immediately (they didn’t wait for a committee meeting to deliberate) obeyed the Word of God and put them out of their assembly.

The House of God Neglected and Defiled – vs. 4-14

Now before this, [“this” refers to the story that follows, not Israel’s obedience in putting the foreigners out of their assembly] Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, and who was related to Tobiah, prepared for Tobiah a large chamber where they had previously put the grain offering, the frankincense, the vessels, and the tithes of grain, wine, and oil, which were given by commandment to the Levites, singers, and gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests. While this was taking place, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I went to the king. And after some time I asked leave of the king and came to Jerusalem, and I then discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, preparing for him a chamber in the courts of the house of God. And I was very angry,

and I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber. Then I gave orders, and they cleansed the chambers, and I brought back there the vessels of the house of God, with the grain offering and the frankincense.

I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them, so that the Levites and the singers, who did the work, had fled each to his field. So I confronted the officials and said, “Why is the house of God forsaken?” And I gathered them together and set them in their stations. Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses. And I appointed as treasurers over the storehouses Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and Pedaiah of the Levites, and as their assistant Hanan the son of Zaccur, son of Mattaniah, for they were considered reliable, and their duty was to distribute to their brothers. Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God and for his service.

Reflections

This episode is a different time period. Nehemiah, as he promised, had returned to Susa, the Persian capitol. We really don't know how long he was there. Warren Wiersbe suggests that he could have been gone for just a year. But it could have been significantly longer. We just don't know. He was granted leave by the king to return, most likely again as governor in light of the authoritative actions he takes throughout this chapter.

You almost have to read this section backwards to get a chronological sense of what had happened. Evidently, in Nehemiah's absence, the flow of tithes and offerings for the Temple service had subsided to the place that it severely impacted the ministry there. Without the support, the Temple musicians and Levites, who had been amply supported as described in Chapter 10, went back to work in the fields to support themselves. This development is in stark contrast to the people's promise to not neglect the house of God in Nehemiah 10:39. When Nehemiah found out about the neglect he confronted the leaders of the people and restored the tithes and offerings, along with, presumably, proper Temple worship.

But the event that led to Nehemiah's discovery of the Temple's neglect was his run-in with his old enemy, Tobiah. With the lack of tithes and offerings coming to the Temple, the storerooms had become empty. Tobiah the Ammonite, simply set up an apartment in one of the storerooms, facilitated by a friendly priest – who was actually a relative! Do you understand the outrage of this? Ammonites were to be excluded from the assembly of God's people. Tobiah was a sworn enemy of the people. He had mocked and threatened them and had done everything he could to sabotage the building of the wall. And now...now he was living in the Temple! The very place where heaven and earth were to meet when the people worshipped Yahweh. It was to be the nucleus of God's glory on earth. Outrageous! And a priest of God facilitated the whole thing. Excuse me for being crass and dramatic, but that would be akin to the youth pastor running an abortion clinic in the youth center! And no one thought anything of it!

Nehemiah went ballistic and threw Tobiah and his stuff out in the courtyard. And then he had the whole place fumigated and ceremoniously cleansed. In this, he foreshadowed Christ's cleansing of the Temple in the New Testament. Nehemiah adds a significant prayer in the text as he tells the story. His cry to be remembered for his "good deeds" is better translated "his deeds of faithfulness." In that, he is contrasting himself against the faithlessness of the people.

The Sabbath Violated – vs. 15-22

In those days I saw in Judah people treading winepresses on the Sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on donkeys, and also wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of loads, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them on the day when they sold food. Tyrians also, who lived in the city, brought in fish and all kinds of goods and sold them on the Sabbath to the people of Judah, in Jerusalem itself! Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day? Did not your fathers act in this way, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Now you are bringing more wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath."

As soon as it began to grow dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and gave orders that they should not be opened until after the Sabbath. And I stationed some of my servants at the gates, that no load might be brought in on the Sabbath

day. Then the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice. But I warned them and said to them, “Why do you lodge outside the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you.” From that time on they did not come on the Sabbath. Then I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come and guard the gates, to keep the Sabbath day holy. Remember this also in my favor, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love.

Reflections

The violation of the Sabbath is just adding insult to injury. (Wait till we get to next week...it gets even worse!) Here they are: just a year or two after weeping and repenting over their disobedience...and then promising to never again break the Sabbath...they're breaking their promise again! And, as Nehemiah reminded them, their disobedience to the Covenant is what brought all the shame and misery of the last 150 years upon them. And here they are...just a year or so later, breaking the Covenant. Unbelievable! Or is it?

Isn't that just like us? We get in a jam. We pray to God to deliver us. We say we'll be good. We'll follow Him. We'll go to church. God intervenes. Life stabilizes. And then we forget our past misery and tempt God by going back into the same old sin patterns that got us in trouble in the first place.

The Catholic perspective is right on this. We are sinful people. *Kyrie eleison*. Lord, have mercy on us. God's Spirit will not always strive with us.

Nehemiah's prayer –“spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love: - is a reminder of God's grace towards us. He identifies with his people. Nehemiah needs God's mercy and grace as well. He prays to be remembered for good, not on the basis of his faithfulness – but on the basis of God's faithfulness toward us. In every reprimand, every rebuke that comes from God, there is always an invitation to return to him and the mercy that flows from the throne of grace.

Reflection – It's Up to You

The ending to *The Phantom of the Opera* really threw me for a loop. Same with the ending to the Book of Nehemiah. It has disturbed me all week long. And next week – I want to tell you now – will be very important. We'll discuss the issue of marriage. And in the context of marriage, I am going to be very frank with you regarding the issue of sexuality. It is a message and word that is very important today. Unlike the finger-pointing and condemnation you might expect in that kind of message, I want to elevate our vision of sexuality in light of God's Word.

Nehemiah's prayer, "Remember me..." informs us that there is an individual choice to be made. The Book of Nehemiah is profoundly corporate.... But in the end, it is up to the individual to respond. It is up to you to determine what path you will take: the path of life and blessing in following God, or to walk away from him, ultimately leading to destruction and death.

Every spiritual leader can relate to Nehemiah. You work hard at leading people toward God. You preach the Word. You confront. You lead. Many people respond. But when you're not looking, some turn back. And it takes the wind right out of your sails... Paul experienced this as well as he encouraged Timothy and Titus to remain faithful and carefully lead their wayward congregations.

I feel this exasperation as well. Week in and week out, I preach repentance, encouraging people to realign their lives with God's purposes. But I see broken lives and outright disobedience. There's always gossip and posturing. Entrenched stubbornness seems to be our patron saint. And O, we're just so selfish!

But I also see signs of awakening – signs that God is doing a fresh new work among us. You heard Jay Kusler's initiative to serve the community today. That's one of many. I think of a widow who never stops serving – never stops giving, even though her health is beginning to diminish. I see light beginning to flicker in the eyes of a young couple that is beginning to discover what a Christian marriage could be. Each week I hear of people venturing into ministries that they've never done before and finding real fulfillment because they are doing

something that aligns with their spiritual gifts in obedience to the Spirit's promptings. I hear mature spiritual leaders share their deepest yearnings to intentionally pursue and follow God's purposes for this church. I have followed, with great excitement, reports from a new small group that has formed and from the women's Bible study where new women from outside of our congregation are joining in an intensive and intentional pursuit of God and his Word. I see a youth group, growing and fired up about going on a mission trip to that most awful of cities – Chicago! (That's just my opinion.) People are stepping up and taking real leadership, implementing what they believe God would have them do rather than just fulfilling the pastor's bidding.

In any church, there is always a mixture of those who are following hard after God and those who aren't. I'll tell you the truth – straight from my heart. I would love to have a remodeled building that is beautiful and welcoming, with all the state of the art design and technology that we could afford. I'm human. I'd like to see this place packed every Sunday. I so much want to break the 300 attendance barrier. I'd love to see vital and exciting ministries in every area of our church and across the age spectrum. But all of that is nothing if lives aren't being changed. I really don't care. If lives aren't being changed to be more like Jesus, we might as well close the doors and sell the property.

But lives are being changed. It is happening. God is here!

The sobering closing of Nehemiah reminds us that we all have a choice. We are all accountable before God. What will you choose today? Will you choose to take up your cross daily and follow Jesus in obedience? That's when your life will change! Or are you content in your own ways and your own misery and refuse to follow him. There is no other choice but those two. But the choice is yours. What will you do?