

After Darkness Light

*the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light,
and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.
(Matthew 4:16 ESV)*

*And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare
his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the
tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in
darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”
(Luke 1:76–79 ESV)*

Why Is It So Hard To Obey The Lord?

December 18th, 2016

Nehemiah 13:23-31

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Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to Nehemiah 13:1; that’s on page 408 in your pew Bibles. If you are looking for that in your own Bible and you can’t find it, look for Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job – all of that is right before the Psalms and right after the section with 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles. We don’t go here very often but we are going here this morning.

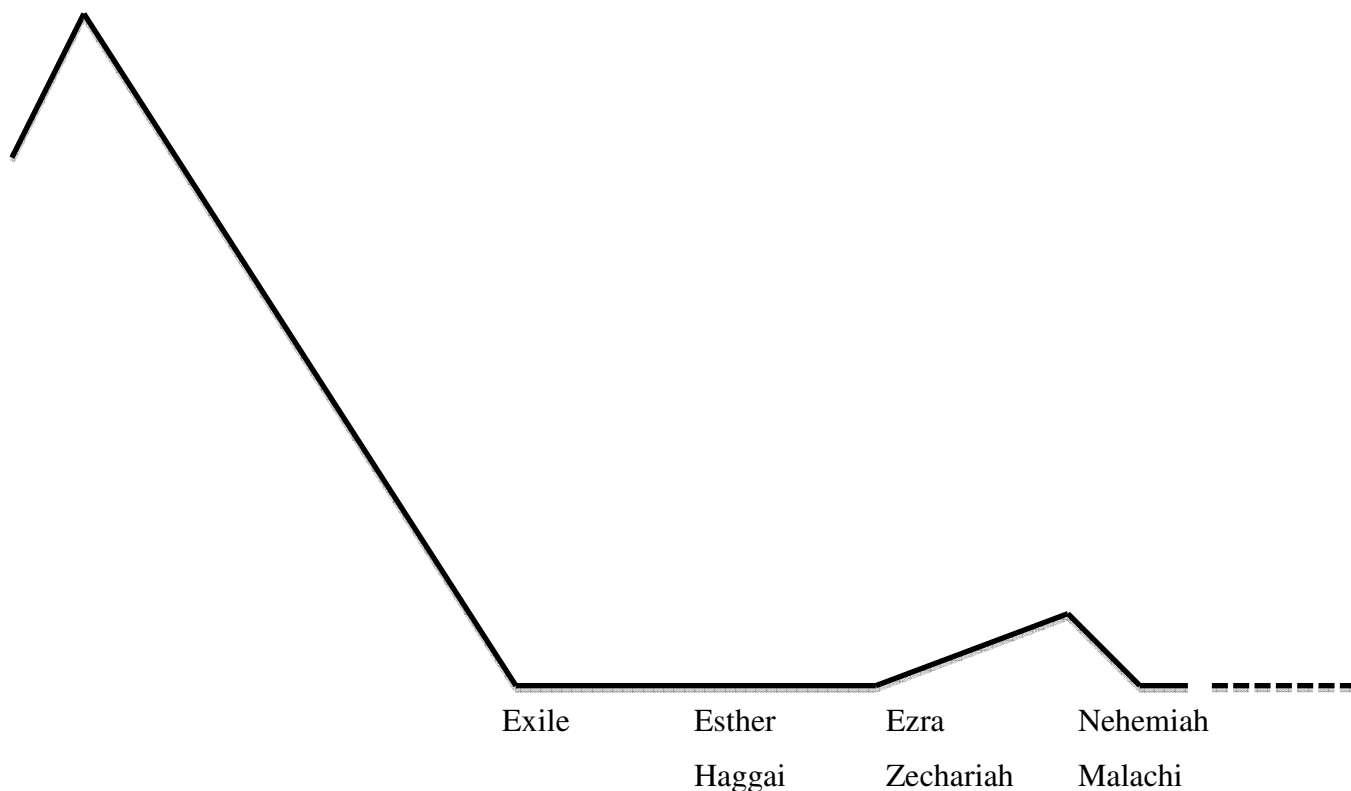
This is our last week in our little mini-series called “After Darkness Light”. Matthew 4:16 says:

the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned. (Matthew 4:16 ESV)

Jesus comes as light and hope into a particular backstory of darkness and despair. You have to understand that story in order to appreciate the true meaning of Christmas. So we are spending some time in the dark in order to better appreciate the light.

This story that we are going to read this morning represents the chronological end of the Old Testament narrative. One of the confusing things about reading the Bible is that the books of the Old Testament are not arranged chronologically – they are arranged by genre and type. So all the prophetic books are at the end, all the law books are at the beginning and all the wisdom and poetry books are in the middle and reading the Bible that way is just about the most confusing

thing I can imagine and you wouldn't be the first person to wonder how in the world these books all relate to one another in terms of the flow of the story. Let me see if I can draw this out for you just to help you get up to speed and to help you understand where we are in terms of the arc of the Biblical story. (I'll draw this on the flip chart and when I get to the end you can just display this graphic zooming in on the piece of the story we are dealing with today)



So we are at the end of the end of the Old Testament story. Nehemiah 13 provides a brief account of Nehemiah's second term as Governor of Judea. In his first term as governor, over about 12 years, Nehemiah built the wall and reorganized the people of Israel into an actual nation with the word of God and the worship of God at their very heart and centre. It was a monumental achievement. Then he was recalled to the capital city and to the service of the Persian Emperor. He tells us that in Nehemiah 13:6. However after some time – we don't know how much time – he is able to get himself reappointed as the Governor of Judea. So he goes back and what he finds blows his mind. Almost everything that had been achieved in his first term has been wiped away. He had set up the priesthood and organized the finances so that the Levites and the priests could serve in the temple and provide worship for the people of God and he had secured pledges from everyone that they would tithe so that this could happen and everyone said they would, but then

he got back he found out that nobody did and so all the priests and Levites have left the ministry and become farmers. The temple itself has become a warehouse for one of their former enemies, Tobiah – we met him back in Nehemiah 4. He was one of the knuckleheads trying to oppose the construction of the wall and threatening to kill all those who were working on it. Now, here in Nehemiah 13 he has been given a base of operations INSIDE the house of the Lord. He was the reason we built the wall and now his head office is INSIDE the temple compound. Nehemiah literally THROWS HIM OUT; those stories are found in verses 4-14.

Then a couple days later on the Sabbath he notices that the gates are open and merchants are coming in to sell stuff and people instead of going to Temple are going to the market to buy stuff. What is going on? At the end of his first term everybody got together and made big promises about being the people of God. Flip back in your Bible to Nehemiah 10:28. Look what everybody said:

“The rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have knowledge and understanding, 29 join with their brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s Law that was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord and his rules and his statutes. 30 We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons. 31 And if the peoples of the land bring in goods or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on a holy day. (Nehemiah 10:28–31 ESV)

We promise to be God’s people and to be distinct and to set aside the time and the money to do this thing – WE PROMISE. So Nehemiah says, “Ok, we’re all on the same page – we’re where we need to be. Things have come together. Now I’m just going to go over here for a few minutes – but you’re going to be ok right? You’re on board right?” And everyone says “Oh yes, we’re on board”. So Nehemiah goes over there for a few minutes and then he comes back and everything has gone to seed. The Sabbath has been abandoned, the tithes haven’t come into the barn, the priests and Levites have become farmers and then look at this – look at verses 23-31. We’re going to read this section in full. Hear now the Word of the Lord.

In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. 24 And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but only the language of each people. 25 And I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. And I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, “You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. 26 Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin. 27 Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?”

28 And one of the sons of Jehoiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite. Therefore I chased him from me. 29 Remember them, O my God, because they have desecrated the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.

30 Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work; 31 and I provided for the wood offering at appointed times, and for the firstfruits. Remember me, O my God, for good. (Nehemiah 13:23–31 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

That is depressing. It is meant to be. This is literally THE END of the Old Testament story and it is an ending that intends to make a very important point and the point is this – it is REALLY HARD for FALLEN PEOPLE to OBEY a HOLY GOD.

Its hard to miss that point isn't it? Right because last week we watched God give his people a bare bum spank. We read the story of the total defeat and destruction of the nation of Israel. We read the story of them being carted off to jail – LITERALLY. And we all agreed that God is a good dad; he is letting his people experience the consequences of their actions. That's what a good dad does. A good dad doesn't lie to the school when his kids get caught skipping class. A good dad doesn't bail his kid out of jail when she gets arrested the third time for drinking and driving. You need to sit in your stupid and learn you lesson. That's what God did and we said that maybe now there is hope for God's people. Maybe now they are ready to be saved.

And what does this story do? It says: "Nope. We are still that stupid." That's how this story functions in the narrative. It gives you hope that maybe with a fresh start and an aggressive leader – maybe now the people can keep it together. Maybe now they can worship God and attend to his word and be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. But apparently they cannot. There is something DEEPER – there is some DEEP, foundational BROKENNESS in us that is not addressed by merely external improvements. That is the conclusion we are forced to at the end of the Old Testament story – that is the darkness into which Jesus comes as long awaited light.

Now, we will get to the light that is Jesus next week. You heard that right – we will be here on Christmas morning talking about how Jesus is the Savior that we need. You probably don't want to miss that. But today I want to sit in this absolute dark and ask the question I believe we are supposed to ask and that question is this:

Why Is It So Hard For Human Beings To Obey The Lord?

Why can't we do this? The world is not complicated – God said obey me and I will bless you and you will enjoy me forever. Or be a god unto yourself, make up your own rules, do things your own way and when you die you go to hell forever. Those are stark choices – we should not be confused about which path is BETTER. So why can't we walk the path that leads to life? We know the options, we know the outcomes and STILL we choose the stupid. Why? That is the question and I think having made it to the end of the story we are ready to suggest some answers. I think first of all that it is really hard to obey the Lord because:

1. We desperately want things that we shouldn't

At the end of the day people do what they WANT. We all do! We all “follow our hearts”, we are all captive to our desires but the problem is that our desires are corrupted. The Bible says:

“The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, And desperately wicked; Who can know it? (Jeremiah 17:9 NKJV)

The NIV translates that as:

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? (Jeremiah 17:9 NIV11)

Our desires are not working for us they are working against us! They are deceiving us and teaching us to love things that will eventually destroy us. That's not good. But that's what happens. We read about how Solomon – at the peak of his powers – was led astray into horrible acts of idolatry and perversion because he loved foreign women. Solomon was led by his love into ruin.

The New Testament says the same thing:

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? (James 4:1 ESV)

What's the root of all your troubles, James asks. Is it not that your passions are at war within you? If you think about that, I think you will agree that it is true. At the end of the day, the root of

our troubles is that we love and desire wrongly. That is the root flaw in fallen human nature and it goes right back to the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve had free access to God and to EVERY TREE IN THE GARDEN except one. So, what do you think they wanted? They wanted the one. Ever since then that has been our story.

The second thing I think we can say now is that it is really difficult to obey the Lord because:

2. We live hard, short, busy lives

You can see that in the Sabbath story and in the story of the Levites and Priests abandoning their ministry in order to go back to the land to make a living for their families. You know, life is hard. People have to eat. You can't wait too long for your paycheque right – your kids have to eat three times a day so you can't dilly dally, you have to work. So ministry is abandoned. And to a certain extent we can understand why people found the Sabbath day to be a burden. Its hard to make a living in 7 days a week, let alone 6. And its hard to get by on 100% of what you make – let alone 90%. So worship is neglected – I totally get that, but the Bible says it is a huge mistake.

We'll come back to this theme on January 1st but for now, just flip in your Bibles to Haggai chapter 1, that's on page 791 in the pew Bibles. This is from the same time period and Haggai addresses the people who have neglected the worship of God in order to get on with their hard, short, busy lives. And he says, you've been working so hard to make a living and it seems almost impossible to make ends meet doesn't it? Do you want to know why? God tells us in verse 9:

You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? declares the LORD of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house. Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. (Haggai 1:9-10 ESV)

Wow! God says, "I will not let you live a life without worship. If you try I will fight you at work and in the field. I will cut a hole in your purse and spill your gold upon the ground. Do you dare to rob me of the worship I am due? I made you for this so I will not LET you live for anything else."

That's in the Bible.

God knows that we live hard, short, busy lives – he knows, but he also knows what he made us for, so you can do it his way, or you can do it the hard way. He says, worship first, and then I will meet you and help you in everything that comes next. You will not be allowed to go it alone – but this story reminds us – that we will always want to try.

The third thing I think we can say is that it is really hard to obey the Lord because:

3. We have very short memories and we do not learn from our mistakes

Look at what Nehemiah says in verse 26:

Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin. (Nehemiah 13:26 ESV)

How could we do this, Nehemiah asks. We've been here and we've done that and we saw, first hand what happened. How can we not learn from the mistakes of the past – and yet we don't. If history teaches us anything it is that history does not teach us anything. We don't learn from the past – the distant past or the recent past. This actually isn't even the first time that the post exilic community made this same mistake. Flip back in your Bibles to Ezra 9:1-3. This is not ancient history, this is 25 years ago – from Nehemiah's perspective. 25 years ago this is what happened:

After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. 2 For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost." 3 As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled. (Ezra 9:1-3 ESV)

By the way notice the different reactions. The first time the people repeated the mistake of Solomon the leader pulled his hair out. The second time they repeated the mistake of Solomon the leader pulls THEIR HAIR OUT! Because, oh my goodness, how in the world could we be doing this again? This is crazy, but this is human nature.

We leak. We remember things, we make commitments, we make pledges, we make progress and

then we forget. We do not learn from past mistakes.

The fourth thing I think we can say is that it is really hard to obey the Lord because:

4. We are easily influenced by our friends and neighbours

Look at verses 23 and 24 of Nehemiah 13 again:

In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. 24 And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but only the language of each people. (Nehemiah 13:23–24 ESV)

In one generation – in less than that – in whatever amount of time Nehemiah has been away in Persia – the people have begun to lose their distinctiveness. They are starting to forget their own language. They sound like the neighbours, they look like the neighbours – they are the neighbours! How in the world did that happen?

Derek Kidner says it so well in his commentary on this passage. He says:

The babble of languages among the children (24) was not only a symptom but a threat: it meant a steady erosion of Israelite identity at the level of all thinking and expression, and a loss of access to the Word of God, which would effectively paganize them. A single generation's compromise could undo the work of centuries.¹

They were getting to the point where they were so like the neighbours that they couldn't even read their own Bible. That's what happens! When we spend more time watching TV than we spend reading the Bible. The Bible starts seeming so foreign and strange to us. God seems like an alien, he does not sound like Santa at all – what has happened to God? Nothing, the real question is, what has happened to us? Can we even speak our own language anymore? Do we even remember what we are supposed to believe?

This is why it says in the New Testament:

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord (2 Corinthians 6:14–17 ESV)

¹Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12 of Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 144.

Its not rocket science is it? When you stick white gloves in mud, the mud doesn't get glovey, the gloves get muddy.

Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals." (1 Corinthians 15:33 ESV)

That's why it is SO HARD to obey the Lord. Because we're sinners and we live among a sinful people. God help us!

Response:

Now, we can't quite leave it there can we? That's pretty depressing but that is the backstory for the greatest story ever told – that is the prologue for the Good News of what God has done in Christ to secure our salvation – if you don't know that then you won't respond to Jesus as you should. So let's end this morning by talking about how this whole narrative should affect us and how we should respond to what we have learned about the human condition in this story.

Let me suggest first of all that:

1. If you are an unbeliever this story should convince you of your need for Jesus Christ

If nothing else this story should get you to question whether or not you are capable of running your own life. Because if you've been tracking with us over the last 3 weeks then you should have realized that your desires are contradictory, your instincts are unreliable and your community is thoroughly corrupt – therefore you are working without a map and you are walking into ruin. You need Jesus.

You need Jesus to do for you what you have never done for yourself. You need Jesus to do for you what you never will do for yourself. And you need Jesus to pay for what you have done to God, to other people and to yourself. You need a Saviour.

And let me suggest that if you are hearing all of this as a Christian this morning, then:

2. If you are a believer this story should serve as a call to action and a sober warning

Christians are set free from the penalty of sin IMMEDIATELY but they are set free from the POWER OF SIN only progressively. You know this, because we quote this verse every week:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18 ESV)

So what does that mean? It means that there are two great forces at work in every Christian. There is the power of remaining sin and there is the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit. You need to be aware of that; you need to be fighting against sin and working with the Holy Spirit. Don't ever forget that! Don't ever let go and let God – keep fighting! The Gospel does not say that as soon as you become a Christian your battle with sin is over – we don't sing that in our Gospel songs – what do we sing? We sing:

*He breaks the power of canceled sin,
He sets the prisoner free²*

Listen to those words carefully. Is brother Wesley saying that we don't have to fight against remaining sin? NO! He is saying that God breaks the arm of our enemy – he knocks the sword out of his hand and he shatters the teeth in his mouth. But now, son, now daughter, you need to get in the ring and finish the job. You need to understand that you are not a slave anymore. You are back in the Garden now, before the fall: able to sin, able not to sin – just like our original Mom and Dad. You've got the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God – you've got POWER and you are FREE. Now fight like a true born child of God!

Don't be deceived. Beware the company that you keep. Beware the content that you consume. Beware the voices in your heart. Beware the lessons of history, beware of laziness and of fear. You know who you are and you know who you were. You know what God has done in Christ to secure your redemption. Now live like who you are.

This is the power of the Gospel, this is what you were made for and this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God, let's pray together.

² O For A Thousand Tongues To Sing – Charles Wesley.