Happy and sad endings. What's better?

Nehemiah 13:1-31

Would you prefer a film or a book to have a happy or a sad ending?

As we start thinking about Nehemiah chapter 13, I want to show you a short clip from a Disney film called Frozen. Many of you will already have seen it. You'll know all the main characters. Elsa, Anna, Kristoff, Olaf and even the nasty Prince Hans. However, even if you haven't seen it you can still enjoy this clip from near the end of the movie where Prince Hans is trying to kill Elsa.

Let's watch the clip.

The clip we've just seen has a brilliant happy ending. Elsa is saved and Anna doesn't remain frozen forever. She thaws out and the two sisters live on.

How would you have felt if the ending was completely different? Suppose that after Anna's brave sacrifice to protect her sister, she stayed frozen forever. Suppose that instead of thawing out, the final scene was a tearful Elsa clinging on to her dead sister? Can you imagine the carnage in the cinema? The tears of the youngsters. It would be awful.

We love happy endings. We want the story to end on a high. We want the baddies defeated, the suffering gone and love to last forever.

Or maybe it's more complicated.

Have you noticed that over the last few years an increasing number of films and TV dramas don't finish with clear cut happy endings? No, they are more gritty and sad and less finished. They leave unanswered questions and not everybody lives to see another day.

These films are popular because of their realism. We definitely want the fairy tale ending. The happily ever after story. But we know that most of our regular days don't end like this. Instead we finish a typical week with lots of loose ends, lots of unresolved issues and lots of uncertainty. As a result, I think we also like the films with sad and complicated endings because they connect with our experience in a deep way.

Here's my question What kind of story does the Bible give us? The answer is both!

The final pages of the Bible are the happy ending that we all yearn for in our hearts. Sin is gone. Suffering is gone. And relationships are perfect. It's the promise of what will happen when Jesus will visible return and transform our current world into something truly breathtaking.

This is a promise for every sinner who has turned to Jesus. It's not an automatic right for every human being. It's a free ticket, paid for by Jesus, and it's offered to everyone. But each of us must personally believe in Jesus as King and Saviour.

Friends, this is no fairy tale. It's not a fantasy that will never happen. It's not a made up story designed to get us through our short meaningless lives. No, it's a promise from God himself. It's what we all want and one day it will be a reality.

I'm not sure what drives your life. For some life is all about having the most fun. For others it's creating the best network of friends. Or making sure our family is the happiest it can be. Please don't misunderstand me. I care for all these things. But I'm not ultimately driven by them. No, I'm driven by the prospect of the final pages of the Bible. The sure and certain hope of a new resurrection body, lived in a newly restored universe. And all this forever in the presence of God and all the people who have been saved by Jesus.
However, as well as this truly magnificent happy ending, the Bible also provides us with a number of sad and complicated endings. These are important because they connect with our current experience. **Christians are people of hope but we are not escapists who fly above the stormy clouds of life.**

This morning I want to show us **one of these sadder endings** from the book of Nehemiah.

We’re in Nehemiah chapter 13 and **to be frank** it’s not a pretty end to the story we’ve been learning about over these last few weeks. **According to verse 6** all the events in this chapter happen after the 32nd year of King Artaxerxes. This is 12 years after Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem for the grand designs rebuilding of the walls project. It’s what we would call the year **434BC**.

What we read about in this chapter is **shocking, sobering and sad.**

I guess most of us would have preferred the writer to end at **chapter 12**. Remember the scene last week? A huge crowd led by choirs and musicians who were singing their hearts out and who were filled with joy. It seemed like such a happy ending. After all the pain and all the threats and all the hard work it seemed that here was a people in love with God and determined to live under his good instructions.

And then we get a taste of reality. The writer hits **the fast forward button** and we see what the people of God are like 12 years later. Bizarrely even though what we are presented with is **dark and depressing** it can still encourage us as we wait for the true happy ending at the end of time.

Let me **walk you through** what happens and then we’ll see what all this means for us.

**First, let me show us the people’s attitude towards the temple (Vs 1-14)**

Look at verse 1. **Read verses 1 to 3.**

The good thing is that the people responded as they heard what God’s book said. The bad thing is that they had got themselves into such a situation because they had neglected to read and practice God’s word.

**What's all this about being excluded from the gathering of God’s people?** It seems to jar with **our everybody is included culture** and the popular belief that says it doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you believe it sincerely. **How are we to make sense of this deliberate exclusion of foreigners from the gathering of God’s people?** The Old Testament made it clear that everyone was welcome to follow the God of Israel but they couldn’t do this without repenting of their false religion and embracing what God had revealed in the Bible. Until that day they were not allowed to gather in worship at the temple with God’s people. **The distinction was real.** Not everyone was automatically one of God’s friends. God wanted to be a friend to all but **friendship was on his terms but ours.**

**How we work this out in church today is very different.** We don’t ban non-Christians from coming to our services. In fact, it’s quite the reverse. We welcome everyone with open arms to come and discover the life changing message of the Jesus Christ. However, we must be careful not to blur the truth that there is a difference between attending a church and belonging to Jesus. Our great desire is that everyone finds a home with Jesus as Saviour but this isn’t something we’ve all naturally got. No, it’s something we get when we put our faith in him.
Let me show you a few more problems at the temple. It didn’t stop at who came to the services.

Look at verse 7. **Read verses 7 to 9.**

**Can you imagine what had happened?** Tobiah was one of the enemies of God’s people who had tried to stop the rebuilding work. But here he was with his own luxury apartment in the heart of the temple. Well at least he did until Nehemiah came back and threw out his possessions on the street!

It gets worse. Look at verse 10. **Read verses 10 and 11.**

You might remember that way back in Nehemiah chapter 10 the people of God had committed themselves to looking after the temple and everything that happened in it.

Well, look at them now. Fast forward 12 years and their promises are in ruins.

**Second, let me show you their attitude towards the Sabbath (Vs 15-22)**

Listen to verse 15. **Read verse 15.**

Nehemiah didn’t just warn them. He took practical action.

Look at verse 19. **Read verses 19 to 22.**

You might remember that one of the other commitments made by the people back in chapter 10 was to keep the Sabbath commands. But here we are again. Fast forward 12 years and their promises are in tatters.

Let me assure you that there is encouragement in these verses but before we get to this let me show you one more bad attitude from chapter 13.

**Third, their attitude towards relationships (Vs 23-31)**

Look at verse 23. **Read verses 23 to 25.**

I’m sure you won’t be surprised to hear that one of the other promises made by God’s people back in chapter 10 was in this whole area of relationships.

They promised for the sake of their faith not to marry people who believed in a different god.

But here they are 12 years later in a complete mess.

At this point you might be asking yourself a few questions. **What are we to make of this?** What does it mean for us? And how can we possibly find encouragement in a chapter full of broken promises?

Let me suggest two big lessons.

**First of all,** this chapter reminds us that **sin will be present in the church.**

We look forward to a day when sin will be removed once and for all.

A day when sin will be removed from within our hearts and between our relationships.

A day when God’s will as it is done in heaven will be done on earth.

However, before Jesus returns we will see sin in church life.
This has **two implications**.

**First**, it means there will always be a disconnect between the life of Jesus and the life of his people.

Jesus is perfectly beautiful. His church will be perfect one day but we’re not perfect yet.

This means **don’t right off Christianity because of the behaviour of Christians**. Keep on looking to Jesus and put your faith in him!

I am so sorry if you have been hurt by belonging to a church before. If you have let me say two things. **First**, look to Jesus as a first priority. **Then** pray for the ability to find a church again. It is not right to life in spiritual isolation until you get to heaven.

**Second**, it means that when you discover sin in your life it doesn’t mean you are not a Christian.

**It’s not like when supermarkets recall one of their products because a dangerous ingredient gets found in it.** I’m sure you know what happens. The products are found and then chucked in the bin before they do any harm.

This is not what being a Christian is like. It’s not one strike and you’re out. It’s not instant elimination when sin is discovered.

Christians will sin. Sadly. And we will feel very bad about it as the Holy Spirit works in our hearts. But we are not crushed because we have a God of grace and we are accepted because God is love not because we are pure.

**Second big lesson**, this chapter reminds us that **sin must be dealt with in the church**.

Nehemiah doesn’t just say, “Oh well, we’re only human. Sad times but at least Jesus is coming back and sin will be gone forever.”

No, in the here and now Nehemiah addresses the sin of the people.

He **points it out** and he takes **practical action**.

This is where I want to ask for your prayers.

I don’t think anybody likes to point sin out and I don’t think anybody likes to take practical action.

But if we are to be a church that genuinely loves God, genuinely loves each other and genuinely loves those still enslaved in the world, then **we will need to be a church that doesn’t bury sin under the carpet**.

So let me ask us to pray. To pray that God in his grace will make us a tender and compassion church that helps each other make godly steps as we await the happy ending that is promised to us.

**Let’s pray.**