

# Nehemiah 13:1-31

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] To be seated and turn to Nehemiah 13, and we'll read the rest of the chapter. Just to say, tomorrow night is the second in the session-wide business matter to God, and! it's looking at the divine imperative of wealth creation. So it should be a really excellent evening. It's a thought-provoking title, isn't it? Somebody said to me once that the only thing that churches speak about money is they tell you just to give it away. And I don't think that's the only thing the Bible has got to say about money. And so come tomorrow night and be provoked and be encouraged. It's at 7.30, and it should be done by 8.45. And then just on Wednesday, we're going to do an overview of Luke on Zoom. I'll do that, and in preparation for starting in House Group. So if you're not in a House Group and would like to join one, now is a really good time to be joining them. Nehemiah 13, verse 15.

In those days I saw in Judah people treading wine presses 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 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. And then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, why 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? And 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. And 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. In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, Moab, 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. 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. 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. Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women? And one of the sons of Jehoiada, the son of Eliashib, the high priest, was the son-in-law of Sambalat, the Horonite.

Therefore I chased him from me. Remember them, O my God, because they have desecrated the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites. Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work, and I provided for the wood offering at appointed times and for the first fruits.

Remember me, O my God, for good. The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever. And so we're at the end of our journey in the book of Nehemiah. It's done me good, I hope it's done you good.

[ 3 : 5 8 ] How he was used to rebuild the walls of the city of God and to rebuild the people of God at a time of great discouragement. But I think the chapter that we're looking at tonight is something of

a damp squib.

It's a bit discouraging. Because what you find in Nehemiah 13 is the people of God whom Nehemiah has devoted so much time to have lost touch with God.

And they've lost touch with God. You say, Donny, you see someone you've had good fun in the conversation and you say to your friends we really must keep in touch.

Have you said that? And how rarely have you done it? Meet someone you once knew you haven't seen them for many years. And as you talk with them you remember just how good friends you are and how much they mean to you.

And you say to them it's such a shame that we don't get together more. We really do have to keep in touch. And then we know what happens. Some of your best friends on earth some of my best friends on earth how often do you see them?

[ 5 : 11 ] Well at the moment you don't see them at all but normal times once a year at funerals at weddings we really must keep in touch.

It's a shame isn't it? Life is so busy. And we make our promises and again we drift apart. And I think Nehemiah 13 teaches us that the same thing can happen in our relationship with God.

We can lose touch with God. How is that? You know that wayside pulpit they're normally very corny aren't they and very unhelpful. But there's a kind of wayside pulpit is in a poster and it says when God seems far away who moved?

That is quite helpful isn't it? Because it's we who move. It is we who lose touch with God. And that's how Nehemiah ends. Surprisingly sadly are people losing touch with God.

And so three points and they get briefer. And so I want us to look at the backsliding people. The backsliding people. Chapter 12 is such a success.

[ 6 : 18 ] Isn't it? The walls have been completed. It's a great party. There's blessing. There's worship. There's devotion. There's people walking around the walls singing praise to God.

The work is happily completed. It's reinforced here isn't it? In the first three verses of chapter 13. There's obedience. There's commitment.

There's dedication. What a happy ending to the book of Nehemiah but that isn't the ending. And Nehemiah leaves the city. He's been there about 12 years.

He goes back to his job in the court of Artaxerxes. He's buried in the civil service back there. And when Nehemiah leaves the people suffer a loss of commitment.

They wander away from God. There seems to be some form of moral collapse. And the trouble seems to have stemmed from the high priest don't they?

[ 7 : 19 ] This guy Eliashib and his family. He's a religious leader. We don't really know what's going on here. Perhaps his nose has been put out of joint by Nehemiah.

He'd been the number one and he'd not been doing his job very well. And Nehemiah has come in and he's changed things. Well at any rate soon after Nehemiah leaves Eliashib moves back into the position of leadership.

And as we read between the lines in this chapter it seems to have been suggesting that Nehemiah good man though he was he'd been a little bit too extreme. A little bit too dogmatic. A little bit too strict.

And he suggests to the people that now is the time for moderation. Now is the time for reasonableness. What they need to do is to compromise just a little bit.

Shave off the hard edges. And we can get along a lot better in life if we just slightly tone it down. Don't say certain things.

[ 8 : 24 ] So with the surrounding nations let's not be so standoffish. Let's not be so separatist. It would make good commercial sense for the people of Israel.

It would bolster their relationship with the heathen around and about the city. There's no need to be too strict. No need to draw the line.

No need to be clear on the issues. So what does the high priest do? Well you remember Tobiah the Ammonite? We've seen him before haven't we?

He's a thorn in Nehemiah's flesh. He's an enemy of the work. He's an enemy of God's people. He's somebody who tried to disrupt the building of the walls. And what does Eliashib do?

He provides Eliashib. Eliashib provides Tobiah with a large room in the temple. In the very center of Jerusalem. Some versions say he's closely associated with Tobiah.

[ 9 : 24 ] I think the ESV is right. He's related at the end of verse 4 to Tobiah. Joined with him in marriage. And so the room that was used for collecting the tithes is emptied and is given to this heathen man.

And so that means the tithes were no longer collected. The tithes for the Levites, the tithes for the singer in the temple, the collections, the offerings to carry on the work of the temple. There was nowhere to store them and so they're no longer collected.

The Levites are no longer paid. The singers no longer paid and so they have to leave their work. It says they go back to their fields, they go back to the farms and their own villages.

And so the whole structure of the worship of the temple collapses and falls to pieces. And so much for the leadership of Eliashib. And then we find the Sabbath day, don't we?

that great marker of the people of God to remember the day of rest to keep it holy is desecrated.

[ 10 : 35 ] Trading begins. Farmers come into Jerusalem and they turn it into a Sabbath day market. And the people of Jerusalem come along and they buy and they sell and they sell and they buy on the Lord's holy day.

no different to the rest of the world. And then we find the heathen marrying the men of Judah.

The men of Judah intermarrying with other nations. Unbelieving nations. Unbelieving women who didn't know the people of God, didn't know the God of Israel and weren't interested in him.

And we find that they had children. It's obviously a lengthy passage of time. And we find their children of the men of Judah and the heathen woman, they actually do not worship their father's God.

It's interesting. And in fact, they don't even understand their father's language. And that shows, doesn't it, the influence that their unbelieving mothers were having on them.

[ 11 : 42 ] So we read in verse 24, they speak the language of Ashdod. And they could not speak the language of Judah, but only the language of each people.

And that's really sad, isn't it? That as soon as Nehemiah leaves, things just start going downhill at a rate. A heathen enemy, an enemy of God, has a room in God's temple.

The holy day of God, the Sabbath, is being ignored and treated like any other day. And the people are intermarrying with the heathen, and their children don't even know God.

They can't read God's word. They can't even speak the language of their Jewish fathers. And so the very existence of the nation is under threat. And if nothing has changed in 30 years, there won't be any Israel.

There won't be any people of God. God's And so the compromise of a single generation can undo the work of centuries.

[ 12 : 55 ] Do you get that? The compromise of a single generation can undo the work of centuries. And here's a tragic fall, isn't it?

So look at chapter 10 and verse 39. I hope that's the right reference. Look at chapter 10 verse 39. Here's the big promise. The big promise, chapter 10 verse 39, we will not neglect the house of our God.

That is the binding covenant. That is the solemn pledge. That is the oath that the people make in God's presence that we will not neglect the house of God. They've got a chapter 13 and verse 11. So I confronted the officials and said, why is the house of God forsaken? Why is the house of God neglected? It's a backsliding people, isn't it?

And that's the biblical principle. But through the Bible, we see that there is a constant tendency in God's people to drift. There's a constant tendency in the people of God to drift away and to lose touch with God.

[ 14 : 12 ] To compromise with the world, to lose the keen edge of commitment. And so you read the history of Israel in the Old Testament and they're always doing it. No sooner does God deliver them than they start falling away again.

And you see the same pattern in the New Testament. It hasn't really changed. The day of Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the churches that are founded by the apostles, founded in the best possible way, built by the best church builders.

And in less than a generation, Paul is writing to churches that are full of heresy and immorality and quarreling and division with problems of every kind. And sometimes people say, don't they, all we need to do is go back to the days of the early church.

And if you read the New Testament, there are certain early churches that I wouldn't be keen to be a part of and neither would you if you knew them. there's a tendency in the people of God to drift. We see that through history, don't we, again and again and again. There's reformation and for a generation or two the church is strong and vibrant and the gospel advances and you think everything is going to be wonderful.

[ 15 : 34 ] And 50 years later there's deadness and there's decay. we'll be reading about the covenanters in Scotland. 1710, 1720, Scotland is a land of utter spiritual barrenness and deadness.

25 years after the great men and women of the covenanters had lived and died for Jesus. A generation later than those great people who had given their lives for King Jesus, a generation later the gospel is almost distinguished.

A backsliding people and that means that you and I tonight at the end of Nehemiah can't assume that somehow I'm exempt from this. And it's something that you and I have to think about isn't it? It's possible for this stage to come in your Christian life. To become cold and to become hard and to become careless and disobedient.

cynical. And it's happened to others and it could happen to you and it could happen to me. I could end up a cold-hearted minister saying words that I don't really believe but I say them each Sunday because it's my job.

[ 16 : 56 ] And it's happened to other men, better men than me. And it could happen to this congregation. and so the day could come when this congregation could be half full of unconverted people.

It's happened to other churches isn't it? There's no immunity that's granted to IPC. the day could come when this congregation couldn't care less about the truths that our church stands for.

It could happen to our denomination. And just because it's happened in the past and we can see it happening doesn't mean that it won't happen in the future. But it couldn't happen in the future.

And there are many faithful churches that declined and have fallen away. And we're not better than anyone else. And so we need to be aware of this possibility.

And so Nehemiah 13 is actually a really helpful chapter. It is a sad chapter. And it is a sobering chapter. But it is helpful because it reminds you and I of something that is possible.

[ 18 : 02 ] And so we guard against it. And we pray against it. And we be vigilant and we say, Lord, look how these people, more gifted people than you and I, look how they have fallen away and look how they've declined.

I don't want that to happen to me. I don't want that to happen to our church. And so I say to myself, I don't want it to be an liarship.

I don't want to be a false destructive compromising leader. Doing harm to the people whom God has put under our care. And we say, don't we say, we don't want that for ourselves and we don't want that for our children.

We don't want that for our congregation and we don't want that for our denomination. And it could happen. And so it leads us to pray and to be earnest and to be vigilant and to be watchful.

Because we could backslide. Second thing we have is we have backsliding people and then we secondly have a reforming leader. leader. We have a reforming leader. It's really funny isn't it?

[ 19 : 09 ] Leadership is so popular today. You go into a bookshop and you see books on leadership. There are so so many aren't there? And yet on the other hand leadership isn't popular today actually in reality.

We live in a pretty anti-authoritarian age. Where everybody is pulled down to the same level. It's like the book of Judges isn't it?

There was no king in Israel but every man did what was right in his own eyes. And I think that phrase could describe many churches in the UK.

Because this plague of egalitarianism has kind of infected the church in our country. I was speaking with an older minister a couple of weeks ago who's now retired and he said to me that the minister is a much harder calling than it was.

That people are harder to lead now. I don't know if that's right. But I do know that ministers are stressed and strained and breaking down. And good men, many good men are breaking down.

[ 20 : 20 ] And they're breaking down not through over work. That's a myth. And they are breaking down because they are discouraged and people are hard to lead.

the priesthood of believers which is a glorious doctrine is taken totally out of context. And yet look here what happens in Jerusalem when the leader leaves his catastrophe.

And we've seen it again and again in the history of the church. So you look in the history of London, you look at C.H. Spurgeon in the 19th century, you go to Elephant Castle and you come up just by the shopping centre and you look there's this magnificent facade.

Still the building is there. And in the 19th century, C.H. Spurgeon built one of the mightiest and greatest gospel churches in the world. It's remarkable his influence. But a few years after he died, it was nowhere.

Some of you, not many of you now, but went to Westminster Chapel in the centre of London where Martin Lloyd Jones preached for many years. It's known throughout the years, wasn't it, throughout the world as a centre, of reformed truth where the word of God was clearly taught.

[ 21 : 35 ] Well, I'll be 40, 50 years on, a message is preached from that pulpit which is tragically different from what Dr. Lloyd-Jones preached. God's chief means for keeping his people from backsliding is godly leaders.

It's not his only means. I wouldn't all say that. It's not his only means, but it is his chief means. He raises up godly leaders to keep the church in true parts.

That's the story of the book of Judges, isn't it? People are raised up, a succession of leaders are raised up, and when they come they deliver God's people, and God's people are led in right paths. God's people are going to do it. So let's look. What characteristics of leadership did Nehemiah demonstrate? I think there's two things amongst others. I think the first thing that we see in Nehemiah 13 is we see he's a man of conviction.

I think Nehemiah at this point, he's a pretty elderly man. He was a grown man, he was at the top of his career. He traveled to Jerusalem, he spent 12 years there, then he's gone back to Babylon, children have grown up, and after a period of about 10 years he's returned again.

[ 22 : 59 ] In this stage he must have been in late middle age, I think. Had he begun to ease up? Had he begun to lose something of his edge? Not in the least.

Nehemiah is still as direct as he, still as blunt, still as passionate for God, still as committed to God's truth. The flame of devotion in his heart burns as brightly as it did.

He's not eased off, he's not begun to take it easy, he's not said to himself, I'll just leave that issue for the next man. My pension is coming soon. I'll coast for the next few years, have more of an itinerant ministry.

I'll seek an easier charge. No, he still stands by the teaching of the word. He still longs for the people to be conformed to God's word.

He's still willing to take difficult decisions. There's no compromise in every area of his people's sins. He calls them back to the word. And he's still passionately committed.

[ 24 : 05 ] He's a man of absolute burning and ceasing conviction. And I want to ask you, that is what you need to pray for the leaders in this church, and in our denomination, for ministers and analysts, that we would be men of conviction.

That our leaders would know what they believe and be sure of what they believe, and they will stand by it come what may. They will live and die for it. And I think we live in an age, don't we, of paucity, of poverty, of Christian leadership.

Winston Churchill was not a Christian, a great Second World War leader. He rallied the people in a time of crisis in the Second World War. If you watch *The Darkest Hour*, if you read the history books, he was a man who had many, many faults, but he was a man of total conviction in that we will never surrender.

We will never surrender. And by that conviction, he was able to enthuse, wasn't he, his conviction. If you read the history of the period, there weren't many politicians saying that.

It was in the *Telegraph* magazine yesterday. And there weren't many politicians who were urging compromise with Hitler, surrender to Hitler. And many of the upper class in the United Kingdom wanted accommodation with Nazi Germany.

[ 25 : 31 ] And the British nation was very, very wobbly at that time. But Churchill turned them round, didn't he? And of God. by the blazing power of his conviction.

We'll never surrender. Now, there were lots of faults with Churchill. But in that point of conviction, those are the kind of leaders that the Christian church needs today.

In a very dangerous and a threatening time, men who know what is right and who are committed to what is right, come what may, and are deeply convinced of the relevance for all.

And Nehemiah had conviction but he also had courage. No coward can be a leader and Nehemiah wasn't a weakling. So let's just look at the chapter. So look at verse 8. I was very angry.

I threw out all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber. I'd have loved to have seen it. You know those scenes in films where the husband comes back and everything has been thrown out the window onto the front lawn.

[ 26 : 37 ] Well, Tobiah comes out from being at the shops and suddenly all his furniture has been thrown out. I was greatly displeased.

What a visual aid that is. Look at verse 11. verse 11. So I confronted the officials. I confronted the officials and I said to them, why is the house of God forsaken?

He leans in to confrontation. Verse 17. Then I confronted or I rebuked the nobles of Judah and I said to them, what is this evil thing that you are doing profaning the Sabbath day?

They're wealthy, aren't they? Verse 17. They are the wealthy people. They're the powerful men. They're the givers in the congregation.

But I rebuke them. And then verse 21, the heathen traders try to sneak into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day to do business. and Nehemiah in verse 21, he warns them.

[ 27 : 46 ] And he says to them, 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. That's not ordination. That's not separation of service.

I will lay hands on you. What is he threatening there? Verse 25. And I confronted them and I cursed them and I beat some of them and pulled out their hair.

So as elders, you go on your shepherding visits, when you're allowed to and you go round and they've not been in church for a few weeks, throw them to the ground, yank out their hair, that'll sort it, isn't it?

Of course not. But it's strong, isn't it? Look at verse 28. And one of the sons of Jehida, the son of Elijah, the high priest, son-in-law, and therefore, look at him, I chased him from me.

You can imagine it, can't you? So just notice, here is a man who acts directly, strongly, forcefully, with real courage. Now I need to take a moment to qualify that.

[ 29 : 07 ] The Christian leader is never to be a bully. Christian leader is never to be a kind of little Hitler or a tyrant. Nehemiah was in an unusual position as a civil leader.

We're not civil leaders as leaders. And I said earlier, didn't I, that some congregations can cause trouble for their ministers, and that is true, but it's also true that some ministers cause trouble for their congregations because they're foolish and they're tactless and they're dumb.

And the fault in many cases is not the people's. The fault sometimes is the minister, the elders. We have to look at each situation on its merits, but I do want us to see here is a leader of courage.

And some churches don't want a leader, they want a waiter who will jump up to serve every whim. I told you before tonight, Alistair beg that great advice where he says to his elders, I will be your servant but you will never be my master.

That's really helpful. Many congregations want a nice man who will get on well with everybody, a marshmallow with a tie or a dog collar, and he can be formed into whatever shape the congregation wants him to be in.

[ 30 : 29 ] But look at Nehemiah, he leads these people with courage. Look at the areas of life where he exercises leadership. What does he talk to them about? He talks to them about their giving. That's a bit near the bone, isn't it?

He talks about their business. He talks to them about the way that they observe the Sabbath day. He talks about their relationships, who they marry. He talks to them about how they bring up their children.

He didn't regard these as personal and private matters. He didn't say, these things are not for me to go into. That's your business. No, Nehemiah brought the word of God to bear on every aspect of the life of his people.

I wonder how you would react if one of the elders said to you, your children seem to be struggling a little bit at the minute. How would you react?

if I came to you and said, listen, I'm concerned you're spending just a little bit too much time at work and it's becoming too important and your family could possibly be neglected, how would you take

that?

[ 31 : 37 ] You might be angry, you might say, let me tell you what you might say, you might say, it's none of your business, how dare you? Nehemiah brings the word of God to bear in every part of the people's lives because he loves them and he cares about them.

And he wants to know God's will and we should pray for leaders with courage. Now, you will be aware at the moment there is a little bit of a leadership crisis.

If you get evangelicals now, I think this month, you'll see that there's a kind of expose of Ravi Zacharias who's turned out to be a snake and a kind of false prophet who was living a double life for years.

There's other allegations of other leaders who've acted in wrong ways and allegations of bullying and anti-Semitism and all sorts of things about quite prominent Christian leaders.

We don't want to excuse that at all. But I think my fear in that is it makes leaders pull back. And so leaders don't lead with courage and conviction.

[ 32 : 47 ] Leaders who can't be bought by people's smiles and won't be intimidated by people's frowns. Leaders who really fear God and because they fear God and they love their people enough will tell God's word whether people like it or not.

And so here is safety for God's people. Here is safety for you. Nice, bland, weak, wimpish, ineffective leaders are no good. No good for you. They won't keep you safe.

They certainly won't keep your children safe. And they won't keep the church safe. Backsliding people, a reforming leader, and just one word in closing, an ultimate fulfillment.

So there's no happy ending in the book of Nehemiah, I don't think. I think Nehemiah ends on a rather bleak and sad note. And Gordon McConville writes this, he says, we sense a certain desperation in Nehemiah's last efforts to put the house of Israel in order.

There's a tiredness about the need yet again to bring back the wandering sheep, a feeling that this reform will be no more successful than any other. And again and again, I don't know if you picked it up, Nehemiah prays, doesn't he, in this last chapter, Lord, remember me, remember me, remember me.

[ 34 : 08 ] John White calls these prayers, pain-soaked cries from a lonely man. Pain-soaked cries from a lonely man.

This isn't a happy ending. And that's disturbing, but it's realistic. I don't know who said it, but there is a quote, isn't there, that goes, every political career ends in failure.

That's the story of all human leadership. It always ends in failure. And in a sense, that is true of all human leadership. It always ends in failure. It's always incomplete.

The work is never done. The people are never finally safe. Sin is never finally destroyed. The leaders of Christ's church can never sit down and retire and rest.

And we have to remember that this is an Old Testament book. And it would be wrong if it ended in success. Because it points you forward. one comment says the sadness of this chapter points us forward to Christ.

[ 35 : 16 ] It leads us to look for the true leader. And it leads us to turn away from every other human leader. Because the fact is he now is present in his city and he is now present amongst his people.

And unlike every human leader, he's never going to leave. And he's never going to go away. And that is our hope and he is our hope. Not in any man or men.

Because we do not trust in princes who cannot save. But we trust in the saviour who abides among his people forever.

And he will keep us. And he will reserve us and he will bring us at last to stability in love and obedience. Let's pray.