

Work In Progress

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 November 2025

Preacher: Donald Smith

- [0:00] I wonder, have you ever been let down by an ending?! If you hadn't before, maybe you have been now.
- ! Last week we were in chapter 12 of Nehemiah, and things were great, weren't they? The book began with ruined walls and a rebellious people, but by chapter 12, that the walls had been rebuilt, the people have rededicated themselves to God, and so rightly there was, as we saw last week, one big celebration.
- A celebration of what God had done through them and for them. Everything seemed to be good, everything seemed to be as it should be. As one commentator put it, we hope that chapter 13 will be one verse long, and that that verse would simply read, and they lived happily ever after.
- But that is not what we just read, is it? Chapter 13 is much longer than one verse, and those verses are not a story of happily ever after.
- Back in chapter 12, we saw there was a great need for renewal.
- [1:36] Both the walls of Jerusalem and the people of God needed to be restored, renewed. In chapter 12, we celebrated that the work on the walls had been finished.
- In chapter 13, we learn that the renewal amongst the people is still in progress. The renewal of God's people is a work in progress.
- It has started, but we are not back where we began. Good work has been done. The work of renewal has not failed, but it has faltered.
- I'm sure we're all familiar with the fourth rail bridge, that kind of hulking mass of steel that spans the Firth of Forth, just north of Edinburgh. It used to be said that painting the fourth rail bridge was a never-ending task.
- Now, apparently, that was never quite true in the way that I imagined it, where there's just kind of one team of painters that seamlessly worked one way or the other, and I went back to the start and across again. It didn't quite work like that, but it was true that there was almost always people painting some parts of the bridge.
- [2:47] Because for all the good work that was done painting it, as time passed, as the bridge was exposed to the elements, blemishes would appear. Cracks in the paint.
- Chips would come out. And so there was always a part of the bridge that needed a fresh coat of paint. Now, those blemishes, those cracks, did not mean that the work before was not done well, nor did they make the previous paint job redundant.
- With the previous work of restoration not done, the bridge would have been in a far worse state. Rust would have set in, the steel work would have corroded. Soon enough, the bridge would have been unusable.
- Nehemiah 13 is the paint fading, that the blemishes appearing. It is not taking us back to square one, but it is telling us that when it comes to renewal of God's people, until that last day that we were thinking about earlier, the work is always in progress.

It is never finished. And if you sit back and think the job is done, cracks will appear. Chapter 13 is Nehemiah spotting those cracks and dealing with them at the earliest opportunity.

[4:09] We've only really got one point this morning, and that is that renewal is still needed. Renewal is still needed. We'll run through the chapter quickly and see what the kind of cracks are before just pulling back and spending most of our time this morning thinking about three implications for us today in light of this chapter.

So let's just see the ways in which renewal is still needed. Things seem to begin there on a fairly positive note. The people in verses 1 to 3 are once again listening to God's words.

Deuteronomy 23 calls for the exclusion of Moabites and Ammonites. They had refused to help God's people, and their reward was a refusal of entry amongst God's people.

We might squirm at the lack of kind of inclusivity, but this was primarily a religious consideration rather than an ethic one. Ruth the Moabite was welcomed openly into God's people, not because she changed the color of her passport, but because she changed the God who she worshiped.

Those who worshiped other gods were not welcome amongst God's people because they would and did lead God's people to worship other gods. In verse 3, the people hear this and respond in obedience.

[5:29] Maybe this is happily ever after, but things very quickly take a downward turn because a certain man called Tobiah arrives in the scene.

We've had a few Tobiah-free chapters now, haven't we? But if you've been with us throughout this series, Tobiah is no doubt a name you'll recognize.

From the earliest chapters, Tobiah was a vocal opponent of Nehemiah. He derided him. He mocked him. He tried to terrify him into stopping the good work that he was doing.

He declared himself openly as an enemy, an opponent of God's people and the work of restoration that they were doing. But we also learned in chapter 2 and 4 that Tobiah was an Ammonite.

I think verses 1 to 3 are there to set up the contrast of what is coming. Tobiah is not just an enemy he's been let in. He's an Ammonite who the people have just declared to keep out.

[6:35] And yet here he is. Here he is. And where is he? He's not just in a tent outside Jerusalem, is he? He's not made it just inside the city gates. No, one of Tobiah's relatives was a priest and he had cleared some space and a temple chamber so that Tobiah could move in.

He's not just in Jerusalem. Someone who should have been excluded from God's people is living in the temple. There's the first kind of crack, the first chip in the paintwork.

The opponents of God's people are being brought in rather than kept out. The second is related because the room where Tobiah had set up camp was supposed to be full of provision for the priests, the Levites.

But we see there in verse 10 that the portions had not been coming in. Now, it's hard to know which way around this happened, whether the portions hadn't been coming in so there was an empty room so Tobiah could move in or whether Tobiah had moved in and so there was nowhere for the portions to go.

Either way, it is not good. The Levites have been forced to forsake the house of God and go and work in their fields. Second, chip in the paintwork.

[7:46] Because people have not been giving as they should have been. Thirdly, that the Sabbath is being neglected. Verse 15, Nehemiah sees the people are treading wine presses, carting goods into Jerusalem, welcoming traders in.

All in the Sabbath that three chapters ago they had promised to keep holy. There's crack number three. And then fourthly and finally, verse 23, God's people were marrying outside of the covenant community.

Again, the problem is religion, not race. The danger is evident there in verse 24. God's word had been given to them in one language.

Now their offspring are speaking a different language. They were one generation away from a people of God who cannot understand the word of God. And just to top it all off in verse 28, one of those marriages outwith the covenant community is one of the sons of the high priest.

And as if that's not bad enough, that's a bad start, isn't it? He was married to the daughter of Sanballat. The Sanballat, Tobias co-conspirator, that's a bad finish.

[9:07] These cracks are not just appearing at kind of the outer extremities. They're not superficial. These cracks are appearing in the very foundations. Renewal is still very much required.

Good work had been done. It had been done well, but more good work is required. The work of renewal is still ongoing. It needs to be happening continually.

And we are no different. Margaret read earlier from Ephesians 4 for us that those of us who have learned Christ, who are in Christ, are constantly, what are we doing?

Putting off the old and putting on the new so that we would be, what do we read there? Renewed. Renewed in the spirit of our minds, being created after the likeness of God.

The need for a constant renewal was not particular to them then. It is the ongoing work of sanctification in every one of our lives, becoming more and more like Jesus, living more and more like Jesus, in full obedience to the word of God, that we might, as we heard right at the start of the service, be presented holy and blameless to God, without blemish.

[10:36] It takes more than a moment of commitment. It takes a lifetime of work, of hard work.

They needed to be continually renewed. We need to be continually renewed. So how does this chapter help us?

Not only to see the need for continual renewal, but to see how we might be, as God's people, continually renewed, remade in the image of his son.

Three things we're going to focus on that flow out of this chapter. Three things that, Lord willing, will help us to be continually renewed in the likeness of Christ. Beginning there with the warning that this chapter gives us against the ever-present danger, the ever-present temptation amongst God's people towards comfortable compromise.

Our first takeaway, if we want to be renewed, we need to watch out for a comfortable compromise. There is a lot that could be said about each of the areas we just ran through.

[11:47] We did run through them, didn't we? But what is true across the board, I think, is that the way in which God's people started straying from God's law was always, I think, towards a more comfortable, less restricting, less uncomfortable way of life.

God had called and still calls his people to be holy. You shall be holy, for I am holy. It is a command given in the Old and New Testaments alike.

What we see happening in chapter 13 is a people straying from obedience towards comfort, from holiness towards compromise.

Elisha, the man who let Tobiah move into the temple, he was a relative of the Ammonites. Was it easier to break off family ties for the sake of purity or give a little ground for the sake of family peace?

The officials watching on didn't do anything about the ties not coming in. Instead, they let the storerooms run empty. Easier to turn a blind eye than uncomfortably confront sin for what it was.

- [13:09] Similarly, life would no doubt have seemed a little more comfortable for the people, perhaps a little more secure if the ties were just held back just a little bit. Marriages with the surrounding people would probably provide more security, less likely to get invaded by neighbor if half of their grandkids are your grandkids.

Just a little bit of compromise for just a little bit more comfort, just a little bit more security. I think every decision here would have been made to make life a little easier, a little more comfortable, by living a little more like the world around them, by living a little more with the world around them.

If we want to be renewed, we must be on guard against the ever-present temptation to just follow the path of least resistance, to just go with the flow, because it is easier to conform to the world than be holy to God.

And if we are not aware of our own tendency, if we're not watching out for it, that tendency to drift towards the easiest path, we will soon find ourselves following it, even unwittingly.

The people in Nehemiah's day, I don't think that they did not wake up one morning and decide today's the day we're going to abandon our pursuit of holiness. Things did not fall apart in the day.

- [14:51] The chronology of this chapter is a little hard to pin down, but one definite date we do have there is verse 6 and 7. Some of, if not all, of what happens in this chapter is 12 years down the line from where we were in chapter 12 last week.

Nehemiah came right at the beginning to Jerusalem in the 20th year of King Artaxerxes. The events of the previous 12 chapters all happened over a few months. Now in the 32nd year of King Artaxerxes, Nehemiah makes a trip to Susa and back again.

And what we have here is what he came back to. Twelve years have passed. But when we repent and commit ourselves anew to live a godly life, things often start well, don't they?

But the passage of time and the presence of sin in our lives often will cause us to stray off course. We need to watch out.

Those temptations can come in any number of ways that they might well align with what we see the people struggle with here. A family member doesn't want you spending so much time with Christians.

- [16:09] A friend wants you to go to a concert with them on a Sunday instead of going to church. A non-Christian colleague who you really like asks you out. You're saving up for a deposit on a house, so maybe you'll just cut back on your giving a little bit.

But those are the kind of categories we see God's people struggle with here. We can struggle with them too, can't we? And so many more besides. You can see the pool, can't you?

You almost certainly have felt the pool yourself. The temptation just to compromise just a little bit. But just on this one occasion, watch out.

Godliness, holiness is never the easy path. And there will always be excuses, won't there, in our minds, going around in our heads, sometimes very convincing, telling us that we should compromise.

You can imagine, can't you, Eliashib? Maybe if I take Tobiah in, maybe if I bring him to the very center of worship, then he'll start worshiping God. That's a great way of evangelizing.

[17:17] Maybe if we just stop giving our tithes now, we'll be able to add a little bit to the personal portfolio and be able to give more later on. Maybe if we just do a little bit more work on the Sabbath, we'll be able to give more too.

Maybe my non-Christian friend will become a Christian if I go out with them and take them along to church. It's so easy, isn't it, to convince ourselves that a little bit of compromise might actually be a good thing, but make no mistake, it is compromise and that is not good.

It is not the life of holiness that God has called his people to live. It is walking in the way in which we once walked that we have been called away from.

We are being renewed not in order to be like the world or of the world, but to be different from the world and more like Jesus. To put off the old self and put on the new self.

To walk, not as the world does, not in malice and anger and jealousy and immorality, but in love and joy and peace and patience. Walking on a different path.

[18:34] So let us watch out for the ever-present temptation to compromise just a little bit. And so forsake the holy living that God has called us to. But God's people in Nehemiah 13, they have compromised.

That had already happened. And there will be, won't there, occasions when we do the same. Maybe you're aware of some of them in your own life right now. Blemishes will appear. There will be cracks, chips in the paint.

So what do we do when we see them? What do we do when we see them? Well, what do we see Nehemiah do? How does he respond?

Second area of application to take from this chapter. Be angry at sin. We read a few times in this chapter that Nehemiah was angry.

And our gut reaction might be that's not good. But what did we read earlier in Ephesians 4? It's maybe not a command we expect to hear in God's word, but Paul was pretty clear, wasn't he?

[19:45] Be angry and do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger. Paul is absolutely not encouraging their people to have fits of rage, to lose their temper.

He is calling people to hate the presence of sin. When we see sin, how do we respond? Do you see it as that big a deal?

Nehemiah certainly did. So much so that at first we might think he's overreacting a little bit. Tobiah's belongings get thrown out into the streets. The officials are confronted.

The Tyrian traders are threatened. Some husbands have their hair pulled out. And Jehoiada is chased away. Has Nehemiah gone too far? Is he overreacting here?

Well, here's what one commentator says of Nehemiah's response to sin. This is Derek Thomas. He writes, Our potential disapproval of Nehemiah's actions is a measure of how far from a biblical view of holiness we are.

[21:02] It sounds less than loving to our ears because we have grown so accustomed to excusing immoral behavior rather than dealing with it. I think there's a lot of truth in that.

Sometimes we will see sin in our own lives or in the lives of those around us and think, is it that big a deal?

Can we not just brush over that one? Let it go a little? Or we maybe will see it as a problem but we'll think it better not to cause any offense.

Just keep quiet so as to not ruffle any feathers and just leave things as they are. as if people's feelings were more important than the purity of their lives.

Let's be absolutely clear, people's feelings are very, very important but not so much so that sin should go left unchallenged in ourselves or in others.

[22 : 25] the presence of sin rightly angers Nehemiah and that is why he responds in the way he does.

For him, holiness is not negotiable. It is absolutely necessary and that is what we heard, isn't it, right at the start of the service.

God has chosen us in Christ that we would be holy, holy and blameless before him. Let me ask you very simply, does sin anger you?

Does sin anger you? When you see sin in your own life, when you see it in the lives of others, what is your reaction? How do you feel?

Paul says, do not let the sun go down in your anger. If we want to be renewed in the image of God, we must hate sin. If we are not angry at sin, we will accommodate sin.

[23 : 40] And that is a serious problem because sin always has serious consequences. Tobiah's bedroom drove the priests out of the fields God's people couldn't worship. Neglect of the Sabbath is what had brought Jerusalem to ruins before.

Even Solomon, the wisest king, had been led into sin by marrying women who worshipped other gods. Now, Aberdeen is not going to burn if we break the Sabbath, but the point is that sin undoes the work of renewal.

it peels away the paint. God wants to make you like Jesus.

Allowing sin to remain in your life will pull you in the other direction. So be angry at sin. Hate its presence. What does that look like for us today?

Please don't pull anyone's hair out after the service. Okay, that is, Nehemiah occupied a particular position at a particular time in a particular context.

[24 : 53] But while we should not, I think, emulate Nehemiah's methods, I think we should adopt his model. Because in every instance, Nehemiah's righteous anger causes him to do two things.

To confront sin head on and then implement safeguards against future failure. Confront sin in your own life and in others.

We love to turn a blind eye, don't we? We love to pretend it's not there or convince ourselves it's not that big a deal. But face it.

Confront it head on. Think about where it is currently present in your life. And if you see it in others, do what Jesus tells you to do.

Matthew 18, if a brother sins against you, go and tell him his faults. Do it gently, do it graciously, do it humbly, but do it. Confront sin and set safeguards against future failure.

[26 : 05] When Nehemiah sees the storerooms are empty, what does he do in verse 12 and 13? Well, he fills the storehouses and then appoints treasurers to make sure everything gets distributed properly. When he sees the Sabbath being prevailed in verse 22, he gets Levites to guard the gates and make sure no traders come in.

When you become aware of the presence of sin, do what you can to safeguard against it going forward. Sometimes, like we see in Nehemiah do here, that means putting really practical things in place.

Get your bank to block payments to gambling websites. Ask a friend to keep you accountable when you start to gossip. Never take your phone into the bedroom.

Not every sin can be stifled through safeguards and safeguards are never enough in and of themselves, but they have their place. It's exactly what Nehemiah does here. If you see it and you can do something to prevent it, do it.

Put it in place. Nehemiah does it and he is ready to do it because he hates sin. He knows the damage it does to a people who need renewed and because he is angry at it, he is ready to do whatever it takes to drive it out.

[27 : 32] And we should be too. So we must watch out for a comfortable compromise. We must be angry at sin and then thirdly and finally, if we want to continue to be renewed, we must pursue God's glory above all else.

Now in one sense, that is what we see Nehemiah doing right through this chapter. He's angry at sin because he wants God to be worshipped more than he wants people to live in comfort. He's ready to safeguard against sin because he knows that people's convenience is of lesser importance than their holiness.

But there are three points this desire of Nehemiah's God-centeredness shines through very brightly. Now verse 14, that end of verse 22 and the end of verse 31, all along similar lines, just look at the end of verse 31 there, remember me, oh my God, for good.

Now in verse reading, that might maybe sound a little self-centered, but it's Nehemiah just in this for himself. But what these three statements show us is that Nehemiah is living for God's approval, not man's approval.

And God's approval comes through a life that is lived for God's glory. Nehemiah is not ashamed too long for God to say to him, well done, good and faithful servants.

[29 : 06] Well done, good and faithful servants. But he knows that for God to say that to him, he must be a faithful servant.

He's not looking for self-promotion. He is pleading that all that he has done would result in the greatest good of all, not people's comfort, but God's glory. That was Nehemiah's motivation from beginning to end, from chapter 1 right through the way here to chapter 13, that at whatever personal cost, God's name would be made great.

And it has come at great personal cost. He left the Persian king's fortress for an exposed and vulnerable Jerusalem.

He was mocked and jeered at for the work he was trying to do. He gave and gave and gave generously out of what he had.

He was threatened time and time and time again. And now, he is probably disliked. I doubt he's on Tobiah's Christmas card list.

[30 : 22] Eliashib is probably a bit unhappy about the way his cousin's been treated. The officials have been confronted. The Tyrians have been hounded out of the city. The workers have been warned. The nobles have been chastised.

Some spouses have had their hair pulled out. Jehoiada has been chased out of the city. How do you think Nehemiah's doing in the popularity polls? Do you think being angry at sin, do you think opposing comfortable compromise won him a host of friends?

Maybe a few? Probably not many. We don't know exactly how the people responded but we do know that Nehemiah was not in it to please them.

He was not in it to be popular with the people. He was in it to please God. He cared far more about what God thought of him than what the world thought of him.

I wonder if we can say the same of our own lives. Nehemiah was prepared to please God by pursuing his glory at whatever personal costs.

[31 : 36] God's love if we want to be continually renewed in the image of God that is what we must hold before us as our motivation, our ultimate goal.

Not for us to be popular with people but for God to be pleased with us. Living a life that is always full of grace, full of gentleness, full of love and mercy just as Jesus was but also angry at sin just as Jesus was, ready to root it out just like Paul was, not walking in the way in which we once walked but being renewed in the likeness of Christ.

We want to be something like what Nehemiah is here but more than that we want to be like the one that Nehemiah is pointing us to and has been pointing us to all along to the one who suffered the greatest personal cost of all, the one who endured shame and derision so that all of God's people everywhere at all times would be renewed, renewed in his image so that his people would be holy and blameless before the one who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, we are a work in progress so let us watch out for comfortable compromise. Let us be angry at sin.

Let us pursue God's glory above all else so that we would be renewed in the image of God's Son for our good but even more so for his glory.

[33 : 27] Let us pray for that as we close. Father, we thank you and praise you once more for the Lord Jesus Christ, for him who gave up all that he had, that we might be redeemed and renewed in his image.

Lord, we pray that that renewal of our spirits, that being remade in his image would be the greatest desire of each and every one of our hearts.

And so that in doing that we would guard against the ever-present temptation to give in to comfortable compromise. Lord, we pray that you would stir in us an anger at sin.

Lord, that when that anger arises we would work it out graciously and gently, humbly and kindly in love. But that we would confront sin in our own lives and in others.

That we would do all that we can to safeguard against it. Above all else, Lord, we pray that we would pursue your glory. That we would not long for the praise of others, but for your smile to be upon us.

[34 : 46] That all glory and honor might be given to you. And to your son in whose name we pray. Amen.