

When the rot sets in

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[0 : 0 0] So this morning's reading is Nehemiah chapter 13, which can be found on page 488 in the Church Bibles. Nehemiah chapter 13.

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.

Now before this, 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.

[1 : 3 0] 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.

[2 : 4 2] And as their assistant, Hanun the son of Zachar, son of Mataniah. 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 which I have done for the house of my God, and for his service. 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, 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.

[4 : 16] 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 water? 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.

In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and 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 swear 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.

[5 : 33] 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 Sanballat, 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 firstfruits.

Remember me, O my God, for good. In 1975, the rock band Queen, Produced their world-famous hit, Bohemian Rhapsody, And it's estimated to be the third best-selling single in the UK of all time, Selling over two and a half million copies.

[6 : 58] I'm sure many of you here would have, If not all of you, would have heard of it. It starts by asking, Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy? Caught in a landslide, No escape from reality.

But it concludes by saying that nothing really matters. Anyone can see, Nothing really matters. Nothing really matters to me. That may have been written in the 1970s, But the idea that nothing really matters, Was nothing new.

The French existentialist philosopher Albert Camus, Had taught that life was absurd, And so everything was meaningless. The German philosopher, Frédéric Nietzsche, Had taught that there was no God. It didn't really matter how we lived.

And in popular culture more recently, The Dutch singer Mr. Probs, Has recently released a song called, Nothing Really Matters. In the lead up to the American presidential election, Donald Trump had been heavily criticized, For how he'd lived in the past.

And yet, The American people still voted for him. In an age of post-truth and alternative facts, People begin to wonder, Does it really matter, How we live after all?

[8 : 14] But the good news of the Bible, Is that you do matter. How you live matters, A great deal, Because God created you for a relationship with himself. You have profound significance, And so how you live does matter.

As Russell Crowe says in Gladiator, A bit of an old film now, But he says, What we do in this life, Echoes in eternity. How we live now, Has eternal significance.

And living for God is freedom, Not slavery. It's what we were created to be. God calls all people everywhere, To be restored to himself. Now if you've been here the last few weeks, You'll know that we've been working our way, Through the book of Nehemiah in the Bible.

And we're finishing our series today, In chapter 13. After God's people had been exiled, All over Babylon, He'd brought them back, And Nehemiah had helped them to rebuild, The city walls of Jerusalem.

And we saw last week, That God had made a covenant, With his people. I will be your God, And you will be my people. And he'd given them rest, They could enjoy the relationship with God, That they were created for.

[9 : 25] And the people affirm their desire, To turn back to God, And they rejoice. But the question remains, Does it really matter, How they live?

I mean after all, God had restored them to Jerusalem, He rebuilt their temple, They've got city walls. I mean what is there left to do, Apart from celebrate? Well if you were here last week, You'll remember, Trying to imagine yourself, Being in a car on the M4, Driving towards Bristol, But needing to get back to London.

And in that situation, The way to get back to London, Is to turn around. See no amount of, Wishing you could be back in London, Kind of on the way to Bristol, But imagining yourself there, Getting excited about being there, Can get you back to London.

You have to turn around. And being restored to God, Involves a change of direction. It involves turning around, Rather than living with ourselves as king, It lives with God as king.

It's what the Bible calls, Repentance. Turning back to God. And so, How we live, Matters profoundly, Because it's going to determine, Our eternal destination. See if you drive towards Bristol, You will never get to London.

[10 : 39] And if you, If you don't turn back to God, You can't enjoy the relationship with him, That you were created for. I guess it's obvious in everyday life, Isn't it? If you have an argument with your friend, Or a child, Or a parent, And you kind of walk away from each other, You can't enjoy your relationship.

Perhaps that's happened to you already this morning. And perhaps it's something that's happened, That you need to be restored, To that other person. Adrian's already mentioned, The Protestant reformer Martin Luther, Who nailed his 95 theses, To a church door in Wittenberg, 500 years ago.

And what he wrote then, Is as important then, As it is now. He started with this statement, He said, When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, Repent, He intended that the entire life of believers, Should be one of repentance.

See turning back to God, It's not a kind of thing you do once, And then forget about it. It's something we do everyday, It's the direction of our lives. That's why we're going to have a time of confession, A bit later in the service.

Not because we want to beat ourselves up, But because we want to be restored to the God, Who made us. It's wonderful news, That even though we turn our back on God, And walk away, He invites us, To turn back to him.

[11 : 58] So have a look at Nehemiah chapter 13, In your Bibles, At the passage that we read. Nehemiah chapter 13, Is all about the need for God's people, To turn back to him.

Now, You might be slightly puzzled, So why Nehemiah finishes this way? Partly because some of the events in chapter 13, Seem to have happened, In the past, Even before chapter 12.

So have a look at chapter 13, Verse 4. Chapter 13, Verse 4, It says, Now before this, Or verse 6, While this was taking place, I was not in Jerusalem.

It possibly suggests that, That this was taking place, Back in chapter 2, When Nehemiah had kind of, Gone to the king, And then gone to, Explore Jerusalem, While he was inspecting, The walls.

So why has the author, Placed some of these events, At the end of the book of Nehemiah, Instead of before? I mean, Wouldn't it make sense, To do it chronologically? So, They end with, A city wall rebuilt, Rejoicing, And then kind of, Walking off into the sunset.

[13 : 07] That would make more sense, Wouldn't it? I think chapter 13, Is here, To show us that, Repentance, Is not easy. Repentance doesn't come, To any of us, Naturally.

All of us naturally, Go our own way. Why is the company, Apple, So successful? Why did their, iPhone 7, Sell so well, Over Christmas, Apparently.

Well partly, Because it's all about me. The eye in iPhone, Reminds me, That I can live, How I want. Turning back to God, Is hard. So you might think, That after the celebrations, Of chapter 12, That it would all be, Plain sailing from them.

But in ending, With chapter 13, Nehemiah shows, That the wall, Was not enough. The people's hearts, Needed changing. And our hearts, Need changing, Too.

So there are two things, I want us to see, From this passage. And the first, And main point, Is that God, Demands, Real repentance. And within this point, You'll have it on the, On the back of the sheet, If you'd like.

[14 : 12] Within this point, We'll look at repentance, In his church, In our priorities, And in marriage, And family life. So repentance, In his church.

And that's from verses 1 to 14. Have a look with me, At chapter 13, Verse 1. On that day, They read from the book of Moses, In the hearing of the people, And it was found written, That no Amorite, 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 the blessing. As soon as the people, Heard the law, They separated from Israel, All those, Of foreign descent.

The people read, From the book of Deuteronomy, Chapter 20, Verse 3 to 5, And they realized, That they'd been disobeying God, They'd been turning away, They'd been going their own way, They'd been marrying, And accepting people, From the Moabites, And the Amorites, Who worshipped, Pagan gods, And these were enemies, Of God's people.

We'll think a bit more, About intermarriage, In verse 23, A bit later, But remember what we said, Last week, If you were here, It's not that God, Was racist, Or kind of, Very insular, And not very outward looking, It's that the Amorites, And the Moabites, Worship pagan gods, Far from helping, God's people, To turn back to him, They would have led them, Astray, And we get an example, Of that, Of leading God's people, Astray, In verse 4 to 14, Elijah, The priest, The priest, Was related to Tobiah, Who was, An Amorite, And you might remember him, From chapter 2, And chapter 4, With Sam Ballot, He was one of the people, That opposed, The rebuilding of the walls, And this guy Tobiah, He uses his position, Perhaps in the family, In relationships, To get himself, A large chamber, In verse 5, Which used to be, Used to house, All the temple offerings, Imagine that, All the grain, And the frankincense, Wine,

[16 : 18] And oil, Are all stored, In order to make offerings, At the temple, And Tobiah comes along, And says, Turning back to God, It's not important, Doesn't really matter, I'll have all of those, Thanks very much, And I'm going to just move in here, I'll put my bed in here, I'll put my wardrobe in here, I'll just set up home here, That'll be fine, Thanks very much, No wonder Nehemiah, Is angry in verse 8, He throws Tobiah, And all of his furniture, Out of the temple, Perhaps a bit like Jesus, Driving the money lenders, Out of the temple, In John chapter 2, And Nehemiah, Confronts the officials, In verse 11, He says, Why is the house of God forsaken, Why have you stopped, Worship, Why have the offerings stopped, Why have you allowed Tobiah, To push all of the Levites, And singers, Out to the fields, And he dedicated responsibility, To people, He could trust, Verse 13, He appointed treasurers, People who are reliable, See,

Nehemiah doesn't beat around the bush, He doesn't hear their excuses, He doesn't say, Don't worry, This is the 5th century BC, Nothing really matters, Live how you want, He calls them to turn back, To God, And he makes sure, They do, And we've said before last week, That since Jesus has come, The place that God dwells, Is not a temple, Or a physical place, But rather it's in us, His church, The people, And God tells us in the New Testament, To care about the local church, To give financially, To give of our time, And energy, To get rid of corrupt leaders, To appoint reliable people, Who will make sure that as a church, We're turning back to God, Nehemiah isn't kind of embarrassed, About appointing treasurers, In verse 13, To make sure that God's people, Are able to worship him, God's not after our money, He owns it already, He's after our hearts, He wants us to turn back to him,

In our attitude towards the local church, So I wonder what you think, Of Grace Church Dulwich, Is it just a social club, A quaint tradition, Something that can kind of get pushed out, When our diaries get too full, Well obviously God knows, How much time each of us has here, But the local church, Is the primary way, That we're going to keep going, As Christians, The way that we encourage other people, Hear from God's word, And enjoy the relationship with God, That we're created for, In community, And because repentance is hard, We need each other, We can't do the Christian life, Alone, So God demands, Real repentance in his church, Secondly, God demands, Real repentance, In our priorities, And that's from verses 15 to 22, We touched on the Sabbath last week, But in chapter 13, We get a greater sense, Of some of the temptations,

Of God's people, Just to be like the nations, Around them, Have a look at verse 15, People are treading grapes, Trading grain, Figs, And wine, And bringing it into Jerusalem, On the Sabbath, Remember God's people, Were supposed to be different, From the nations around them, People were supposed to look at them, And saying, What, Why would you not make money, On the Sabbath, What, What could possibly be, More important for this Sabbath of yours, Than making money, What could possibly be more important, Than getting the best deal, On my freshly picked grapes, Or figs, And the people, God's people would talk about creation, How God had made them, For a relationship with himself, They talk about the exodus, How God had rescued them, From slavery in Egypt, And they talk about the Sabbath, And how it pointed forward, To the new creation, The internal rest, That God had promised, That was what was supposed to happen, But instead, God's people in Nehemiah's day,

That they want to know, Whether they should switch, Supermarkets from Tesco to Sainsbury's, Whether getting food delivered to their homes, Is as good as choosing it from the market, And Nehemiah says, Look, Your priorities are completely wrong, It was exactly this sort of attitude, That led to the exile in Babylon, In the first place, So have a look at verse 17, Nehemiah confronts the officials again, And he says, What is this evil thing you were doing?

[20 : 50] It wasn't an arbitrary law, The Sabbath showed their priorities, It showed what was important, And for Nehemiah, Turning back to God was everything, It really did matter, So in verse 19, He gives orders for the city gates to be shut, The whole of the Sabbath, In verse 20, Some merchants lodge outside the city walls, And he threatens to remove them, If they don't leave, As he did to Tobiah, Kicked him out the temple, They don't need much persuasion, Such as Nehemiah's zeal, Verse 21, From that time on, They did not come on the Sabbath, Nehemiah's determined, That people turn back to God, And we said last week, Didn't we, That Sabbaths in the Old Testament, Are not the same as Sundays, In our day, Jesus fulfills the Sabbath, And although Christians, Disagree about how Sundays should be used, They're really about our priorities,

Is your stomach, More important to you, Than your relationship with God, Does your bank balance, Determine how you spend your time, Do you look and think and act, Just like the people around you, God calls us to real repentance, In our priorities, Thirdly, God calls us to real repentance, In marriage, And family life, And this is from verse 23, To 31, Have a look down with me, At verse 23, In those days, I saw the Jews, Who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, And 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, We saw last week, That God had specifically, Commanded his people, Not to get married, In Exodus chapter 34, In Deuteronomy 7, Not to get married,

To the foreign nations around them, Who worshipped pagan gods, Again, This wasn't, It wasn't because God was racist, Or he was not very outward looking, I mean, His whole plan had been, For his people, To be a light to the nations, For the nations around, To see how good he was, So that they would come to know him, But it was, So that the nations, Wouldn't lead God's people astray, And Nehemiah is furious with them, And he explains in verse 26, Verse 26, Did not Solomon, King of Israel, Sin on account of such women?

Among the many nations, There was no king like him, He was beloved by God, And God made him king over all Israel, Nevertheless, Foreign women made even him to sin, And the point is, If Solomon was led astray, How much more, You and I, I mean, Do we think, We're greater than Solomon?

One of the ways in which, Intermarrying in Nehemiah's day, Was so destructive, Was the problem of language, As he says in verse 24, If you couldn't speak Hebrew, If you couldn't read Hebrew, You couldn't read the Hebrew Bible, And therefore, You couldn't hear God's word, It meant a whole generation, Of your children, Who spoke pagan languages, Rather than Hebrew, Would be cut off, From the relationship with God, That they were created for, It really did matter, Not just about getting married, But also for their children, Now obviously today, The problem of language, Is not the same, But marrying someone, Who's not a Christian, Can cause problems, And the New Testament, Does say that, We should only marry someone, Who is already a Christian, Now as we said last week, When we touched on this, It's a very difficult, And sensitive topic, And importantly, It doesn't apply to you, If you're already married, So God says, That we should stay married,

[24 : 51] So if you're married, To someone who's not a Christian, Brilliant, Stay married, God says, To use opportunities, To point people to him, But if you're thinking, About who to marry in the future, Remember driving on the motorway, One person's driving to Bristol, One person's driving to London, You can't be in the same car, Living with ourselves as king, Or living with God as king, Is to go in two, Very different directions, But it's not just about, Who you marry, It's also about, What you teach your children, The children, Who spoke the language of Ashdod, I mean they got the impression, That the God of the Bible, Didn't really matter very much, Because no one ever taught them Hebrew, I wonder what impression, Your children get from you, Do you teach them about Jesus, Do you make it clear to them, That the God of the Bible, Matters a great deal, And that living for him, Is what we were created for, Well perhaps you're sitting here,

And you can't quite believe, What you're hearing, I mean turning back to God, Kind of makes sense, If you want to have a relationship with him, But all this seems so extreme, Giving financially to church, Caring more about God, Than our bank balance, And even choosing who to marry, Or what to teach your children, Based on what God says, I mean who does God think he is, To tell me how to live, Perhaps I don't mind changing, Some things in my life, But this is way too much, Well if that's how you feel, Then you're in good company, You're not alone, Everyone who's ever lived, Has found repentance, Really hard, Everyone who's ever been, Heard God's call, To be restored to him, Through Jesus, Has found it really difficult, From Solomon, To Nietzsche, From the rock band queen, To Mr. Probs, We all want to say, How I live, Doesn't really matter, Something inside of us,

Is determined to live life, Our way, It's what the Bible calls, Sin, My life, In my hands, But God calls us, To put our lives, In his hands, To be restored to the God, Who made us, And God is so determined, To do this, That he helps us do, What we couldn't do, On our own, So we've seen firstly, That God demands, Real repentance, In church, In priorities, And family life, But secondly, And more briefly, We should pray for God's help, To change hearts, That's from verses 14, Verse 22, And verse 31, Have a look down with me, At verse 14, Nehemiah, Prays, Just as he has done, In chapter 1, Verse 8, Chapter 5, Verse 19, Chapter 6, Verse 14, And here again, In chapter 13, Verse 14, We hear Nehemiah, Coming before God, Remember me, Oh my God,

Concerning this, And do not wipe out the deeds, That I've done, For the house of God, And for his service, Turn forward to verse 22, Remember this, Also in favour, Oh my God, And spare me, According to the greatness, Of your steadfast love, Verse 31, Remember me, Oh my God, For good, See, Throughout Nehemiah's life, He depends, Entirely on God, Even as he urges people, To turn, Back to God, Because he, He knows, That however good, His security at the gates is, However much, He keeps telling people, To turn back to God, He can't change their hearts, Although he commits his work to God, He asks in verse 22, To be spared, According to the greatness, Of your steadfast love, This is God's covenant love, The covenant that the people affirmed, In chapter 10, And the good news is, It doesn't depend entirely on us, See, God is faithful,

Even when we are unfaithful, God promises a new covenant, Where he would change people's hearts, Now imagine, That you've been smoking, Eating unhealthily, And doing very, Very little exercise, For the past few decades, Hope that that doesn't apply, To anyone here, But imagine that's the case, And eventually, You have a heart attack, And you go into hospital, And it turns out, That your heart is failing, It's not pumping, Nearly anywhere, As good as it should be, And you're eventually discharged, And you're told to kind of, Stop smoking, Do some exercise, And eat healthily, But, But change is really hard, I mean, Cigarette cravings, They're so strong, Those sugary snacks, Taste so good, And walking is just such an effort, And your breathing is difficult, And you just think, This is way too much, So you carry on as before, Until you have another heart attack, And this one's even more serious, But you survive, And it turns out, You need a heart transplant, And miraculously, One is available in the next few days,

[29 : 58] And after the heart transplant, You're discharged from hospital, You're told to stop smoking, To eat healthily, To do some exercise, And walking, It's a lot easier, You can change the direction, Of your life, But you've got a choice, You've been given a new heart, You've been told to turn around, And go a different way, What are you going to choose?

You're going to choose, To live differently, And God, Through his spirit, Has given us new hearts, He says in Ezekiel 36, Verse 26, He promises a new heart, And a new spirit, I will remove the heart of stone, And give you a heart of flesh, The Old Testament, The Old Testament, The Old Testament, The Old Testament, Was pointing forward to the day, When God's people, Would be able to turn back to him, In repentance, Because God would put his spirit, In their hearts, In John chapter 14, Jesus promises the Holy Spirit, To his disciples, To help them, Turn back to God, To live, His way, Perhaps you're here, And you've never really turned back, To God, You've always lived by the mantra, Nothing really matters, Not in terms of my relationship, With God anyway, Perhaps you know, That you need to be restored, To the God who made you, But you're not really sure, If you can, You're not really sure, Where to start, Well start by praying,

That God, Would give you his spirit, So that you'd actually want, To turn around, So that you would stop, Putting your life, In your own hands, And instead put your life, In God's hands, Or perhaps you're here, And you've been a Christian, For a while, You've turned back to God, In the past, But over the last few months, Or the last few years, You've just been, Been kind of pretending, Going through the motions, You've lost the joy, Of being restored, To God, There are areas of your life, That you know, You haven't turned back to him, In, Well remember that living for God, Is freedom, Not slavery, It's what we were created for, Choose to go his way, Turn around, He's given you a new heart, By his spirit, The American Christian pastor, A.W. Tozer, Is famously reported as saying, That if Christ, That if Christ is not Lord of all, He's not Lord at all, To follow Jesus with only some, Of your heart,

Only some of your priorities, Only some of your life, Is not ultimately, To follow him at all, He doesn't call us, He doesn't call us to be perfect, But he calls us to change direction, To come back to him, With all of our heart, With all of our priorities, All of our life, Let's pray shall we, Father thank you, That you created us, For a relationship with yourself, Thank you that even when we turn away from you, You call us back to yourself, Through Jesus, Thank you that real repentance is freedom, Not slavery, Help us to turn back to you, In every area of your life, By your spirit at work, In us, In Jesus name, Amen.