

Messy Church

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[0 : 0 0] I'm going to read now from God's Word, Nehemiah chapter 13. Just read the whole of the chapter, and we'll be finishing today the book of Nehemiah.

Let me read to you the Word of God. Final reforms of Nehemiah. On that day, the book of Moses was read aloud in the hearing of the people, and there it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be admitted into the assembly of God.

Because they had not met the Israelites with food and water, but had hired Balaam to call a curse down on them. Our God, however, turned the curse into a blessing.

When the people heard this law, they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent. Before this, Eliashib the priest had been put in charge of the storerooms of the house of our God.

He was closely associated with Tobiah, and he had provided him with a large room formerly used to store grain offerings and incense and temple articles, and also the tithes of grain, new wine, and olive oil prescribed for the Levites, musicians, and gatekeepers, as well as the contributions for the priests.

[1 : 1 6] But while all this was going on, I was not in Jerusalem. But in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes, king of Babylon, I had returned to the king.

Some time later, I asked his permission and came back to Jerusalem. Here I learned about the evil thing Eliashib had done in providing Tobiah a room in the courts of the house of God.

I was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah's household goods out of the room. I gave orders to purify the rooms, and then I put back into them the equipment of the house of God, with the grain offerings and the incense.

I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them, and that all the Levites and musicians responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields.

So I rebuked the officials and asked them, Why is the house of God neglected? Then I called them together and stationed them at their post. All Judah brought the tithes of grain, new wine, and olive oil into the storerooms.

[2 : 2 1] I put Shalamiah the priest, Zerok the scribe, and a Levite named Pidiah in charge of the storerooms, and made Hanan, son of Zachur, the son of Mataniah, their assistant, because they were considered trustworthy.

They were made responsible for distributing the supplies to their fellow Levites. Remember me for this, my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of God and its services.

In those days I saw people in Judah treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and bringing in grain and loading it on donkeys together with wine, grapes, figs, and all other kinds of loads.

And they were bringing all this into Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Therefore I warned them against selling food on that day. People from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem were bringing in fish and all kinds of merchandise and selling them Jerusalem on the Sabbath to the people of Judah.

I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, What is this wicked thing you are doing, desecrating the Sabbath day? Didn't your ancestors do the same things so that our God brought all this calamity on us and on this city?

[3 : 30] Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath. When evening shadows fell on the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I ordered the doors to be shut and not opened until the Sabbath was over.

I stationed some of my own men at the gates so that no load could be brought in on the Sabbath day. Once or twice the merchants and sellers of all kinds of goods spent the night outside Jerusalem.

But I warned them and said, Why do you spend the night by the wall? If you do this again, I will arrest you. From that time on, they no longer came on the Sabbath. Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and go and guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy.

Remember me for this also, my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love. Moreover, in those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab.

Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples and did not know how to speak the language of Judah. I rebuked them and called curses down on them.

[4 : 35] I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. I made them take an oath in God's name and said, You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves.

Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon, king of Israel, sinned? Among the many nations there was no king like him. He was loved by his God and God made him king over all Israel.

But even he was led into sin by foreign women. Must we hear now that you too are doing all this terrible wickedness and are being unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women?

One of the sons of Joiada, son of Eliashib, the high priest, was son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite, and I drove him away from me. Remember them, my God, because they defiled the priestly office and the covenant of the priesthood and of the Levites.

So I purified the priests and the Levites of everything foreign and assigned them duties, each to his own task. I also made provision for contributions of wood at designated times and for the firstfruits.

[5 : 49] Remember me with favor, my God. Amen. And may God add his blessing to the reading of his holy inspired word. So here we are at the end of our series in Nehemiah.

We've been a few weeks not going through it with Stephanie Staples coming to lead us in a morning concert. And then we had communions with Norman Afrin. And we had the pulpit swap last week.

So I thought it would just be a good way just to round off the series before the summer. We've begun the series on the 29th of January, so we've really been journeying through the whole book. And I wonder what you might have taken away from it as a whole.

I must say that I've really enjoyed studying it on a personal level and thought there's been moments where I thought, wow, that really speaks to us as a church and where we're at and where we're hopefully going. And some of the more challenging aspects of the book, some of the more, did I say, boring chapters?

Can I say that? With a lot of the names and the lists. Boring in the sense of, you know, for us, just how can we connect with a lot of lists of names, though it being God's word. But speaking to us in terms of our role collectively, not just one or two of us or a core group of us, but as a whole church.

[7 : 04] And then the church's role in society, the timing and the rebuilding of God's church and the advancement of his kingdom. We thought about the role of repentance as Christians. We thought about the role of prayer, God's word returning as the heartbeat of God's people.

We've reflected about dealing with our enemies. Thought about the place of spiritual warfare. And whilst we were doing that, we were also doing the prayer question in the evening.

And so that was kind of linking together. We also thought about our care and concern for those who are less fortunate than us. And we thought as well about the role of Nehemiah as a leader and his guiding the people and his inspiring them in the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and him lifting them up to look upwards and outwards to the task that God had called not only him to do, but them as a people.

And recognizing that he was placed at a particular point in time in a difficult situation and sometimes with difficult people around him, but that change was afoot.

And if we were to finish things at the end of Nehemiah chapter 12, it basically says, well, all the portions, all the contributions, they're coming together. People are worshipping nicely.

[8 : 21] And it all ended nicely and happily ever after. So said Walt Disney. But that's not what happens in Nehemiah chapter 13. So what we're thinking about is at the end of chapter 6, the walls have been rebuilt.

And there's the return to scripture. There's the repentance for past sins. There's a fresh commitment to serving the living God. And there's the resolve to make Jerusalem as a city, a holy place, not just one place, not one part of the town, but the whole city.

That the people of God were set apart as God's people to worship God. That their lives were to be quite distinctive so that when they lived ordinary, everyday lives in the places that they worked, in the places that they went, that they would be representing or re-presenting God in a fresh day.

But the Bible and the story of the Bible is often raw and uncut and uncooked for us sometimes. The writers of the Bible don't leave the dodgy stuff out.

And maybe if Nehemiah was in today's world, we might say that cancel culture would cancel Nehemiah and at least some of the aspects that we read in the chapter that are somewhat uncomfortable.

[9 : 37] We might, and we're going to get to that. But chapter 13 reminds us of the overarching reality that Nehemiah, the story there is the rebuilding of the walls, the restoration of the worship of God in the midst of people, but actually the people of God are a flawed brigade full of flaws and sins and shortcomings.

And we reflected previously in one of our other sermons in Nehemiah that the one place where we depart with Nehemiah is that the people of God, they're returning to the way worship was.

They're returning to the way that Moses brought the law of God. That's what they're returning back to. But we don't do that because we are people of the new covenant because Jesus has come and he's brought this new sense of new era, new covenant, new people, new age of God through his death, through his resurrection and through the Holy Spirit being poured out on all people.

Now we don't dismiss the Old Testament. Of course not. We've just been looking through a whole book in the Old Testament. And I love the Old Testament. But we always look to Jesus and we always say in every book of the Bible, where's Jesus here?

How does this point to Jesus? How does this enable us to look and to live to Jesus? Because Jesus is the main guy. He's the main figurehead. He is the author of life. And so here, even as God's people go back and want to go back to the glory days of worship, the harsh awareness of chapter 13 is that various old habits come creeping back and they need dealt with.

[11 : 12] As God's kingdom is advancing, as it is building, there's also setbacks. Revival comes and then pride, arrogance, sin, waywardness, things get in the way.

But even there, even in this, the end of Nehemiah, the book where things aren't so happily ever after, we can find great purpose because we know that God is a covenant-keeping God and that means that when he's made a covenant with us, that binding promise, he's given us that marriage agreement, I do, I do, I'll be faithful with you even when you're not good with me, I'm going to be there with you through sickness and through health, you know, till death do us part.

That's what God has made with us. He's made that covenant and it's binding. He's not going to break it. So when God promises to give us a new heart, we know in the one sense that we are, in the words of the New Testament, we are born again.

You know, you must be born again. But at the same time, there's that process where the new heart is being revealed and being lived out and being walked out as God's people. So we're going to consider three things this morning.

Firstly, the waywardness of God's people, that there are wayward people. Secondly, Nehemiah's prayers to God to remember himself and his prayers to remember his enemies in a very different sense.

[12 : 31] And then thirdly, is it right to ask God for a messy church? That's the title of today's message, Messy Church. Is it right to ask God for a messy church?

So I'm away in that. Time is kind of thrown away this morning, but you're not coming over till one o'clock, so I'm okay. I can go on a little bit more. And I'm away on holiday for two weeks, so it doesn't matter. So anyway, how do God's people go off the boil?

I'm only joking. God's people go off the boil. Nehemiah, he's away when it all happened. We read that. He's in Jerusalem. He's had to go back. We don't know why. We also don't know why Ezra doesn't say more.

Now, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, it's combined together. It's Ezra and Nehemiah. So Ezra is this more introverted character who's restoring the heart of worship and of God's word.

Nehemiah is this more extroverted guy who's just wanting to bring change and renewal. And they do things in different ways. But Ezra's not mentioned here.

[13 : 32] If the people of God are going a bit off, off-ski-wiff, then he's not mentioned. We don't know why. But all we do know is that things are not the way they should be. So let's just look at a few of the things what Nehemiah, on his return, comes to address.

So firstly, is the exclusion of all foreigners. And this is maybe one of the points for us that we think, okay, that's a bit uncomfortable. Excluding foreign people, excluding people.

I mean, this is a busy, seaport. We open the doors to many different nations. So why does the Bible speak about excluding all foreigners? So this is where we read the Bible in its own context, at its time, and not in a 21st century, gobbles from the 21st century.

So, in Deuteronomy 23, Deuteronomy being the fifth book of the Bible, there's the note there about the exclusion specifically of the Ammonite and the Moabite people.

That was what Moses brought. And we're remembering that the law of God has been found. They found it in the midst of the rubble in the ruins of Jerusalem. And Nehemiah and Ezra, they're tasked with restoring the law of God.

[14 : 43] So they're going back to the glory days, or that's what they think that they should be doing. But if we're to read the Old Testament, which they didn't have, remember, they don't have the full Bible back then that we do now.

What about the story of Ruth? I mean, maybe we know the story of Ruth and Boaz. And Ruth, she was a Moabitess. She was welcomed into the community of God's people. And so they're saying here, now, okay, we're going to exclude people, but specifically Ammonites and Moabites.

And so you could make the point and say, well, you've gone too far in the other direction, the people of God here. You've gone too far. You've excluded everyone, all foreigners.

You've thought that actually that's the right thing to do. But God actually, what we read in verse three is, God turns curses into blessings.

God can turn this around too, just as he did back in the time with Balaam. God's people, in trying to be faithful to the word of God and the returning to the prominence of God's word, they have, in essence, forgotten part of their history.

[15 : 53] They've forgotten the story of Ruth. They've forgotten other stories of welcoming strangers and people from different lands. So that's the first topic. Then there's the case of Eliashiv, which we see in verse four onwards.

Eliashiv, perhaps he's the high priest. We at least know he is a priest and who's allowed Tobiah the Ammonite, and you go back to chapters four and others, he's one of Nehemiah's enemies.

He's a bad guy. He's not a good guy. And he's given Tobiah this large room in the temple. It's not good. And why is it not good?

Because he's gone way beyond the bounds of his priestly responsibility. If he's a priest, you're not to do that. That's it. Don't touch that. You do not let people in that area, especially a guy like Tobiah.

He's a prook. Just don't go there. And this is why the reasoning in verse 10 where we read there, the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them and that all the Levites and musicians responsible for the service of God have gone back to their own fields.

[17 : 00] So there's a second point. The priests there, the Levites, they're ministers and they're not getting paid for their duties. And the people of God are neglecting this.

And that's perhaps the reason that Eliashib has caved in to Tobiah, letting them have a room. You can have that room. That will just bring in an extra bit of income because he's not. So it's a whole people of God thing.

The house of God, the servants of God have been neglected. Eliashib, he's buckled. He's done something that Nehemiah describes as evil, something he never should do. So that's the second point.

The third point is God's own people, the Jews, they'd failed to keep the Sabbath. You know that? Remember the Sabbath. Keep it holy. And it may seem a more secondary issue to us today in our 24-7 world.

But it is so important to keep a day of rest to recharge our batteries. And sometimes it's easier said than done. I know that to be true of myself. But it's a holy day unto the Lord.

[17 : 59] See when I get home on a Sunday evening, I then park my bum on my couch after the service. I just go, ah, it's time to rest.

And it's good that we do that. It's time to rest sometimes just to chill out because God has given us that. And the people of God, they were to live distinctively in all ways. It was part of their mission. Verse 19, Nehemiah orders the doors to be shut, not be opened until the Sabbath was over.

He's basically saying to the people of God there, get a church, the lot of you. Get a church and worship the living God. You need it. I need it. Business is done.

And now, do business with the living God. There's problems with the Sabbath. And then lastly, there's the problem of intermarriage. So again, with foreigners, this issue might seem to us a bit of a nun issue.

I'm married to a Brazilian. You know, what's the problem here? Again, we read the Bible in its own context. People of God are being reminded of their history. Nehemiah reminds them of the sins of Solomon, the wisest of all kings.

[19 : 04] But even he was led into sin. He had, what, 700 wives, 300 concubines. Man, that guy, he really let himself go in that area. And it was the marriage of foreign women.

That's what we read. That's what the Bible tells us. And it's all to do with being unfaithful to God and his standards. God says, I've given you standards to live by. That's why the rules are there. Live it out.

And they're not doing that. The word of God, which had returned to prominence in that area. I'll just forget about it. Just put that one behind us. Okay? Wink, wink. So, that's the issues.

And having gone through them, it maybe feels a bit like, oh, God, what are you in this? What is that all about? People of God, they're exiled to Babylon. They return here.

They rebuild the ruins. They remain in the city. They retain a sense of identity. And then they fall back into their bad habits. And it's all too familiar to hear, isn't it?

[20 : 06] You go through good seasons. Oh, it's going good. It's going good. And then, ah, it goes wayward. There's a waywardness in the sense of living. It's looking at this book, Nehemiah, and saying that God's kingdom advances now, but not fully yet.

It's advancing, looking to someone who is to come, but he's not come quite yet. What do we do as the people of God living in the days past, way past Nehemiah?

We look to Jesus, the one who has come. And we keep looking to him. And even when we go off the boil, when we have our moments, we, once again, we come back to the feet of Jesus and say, Jesus, I come, I bring you myself, I bring you my mixed motives and my pride and my sin, my arrogance, and I bring you my worship from this.

I don't come any way else trying to pretend I've got a nice clean slate. I come as I am and I look to the cross because there you dealt with sin.

You did it once and for all and your mercies are new every morning, every morning, every morning. As Peter, one of Jesus' closest disciples said, Lord, to whom shall we go?

[21 : 23] You have the words of eternal life and we have believed and have come to know that you're the Holy One of God. So this is our solid reminder. This is our everlasting heritage. This is the promise God has made with us.

He sent us Jesus and we keep looking to him. So that's Nehemiah dealing with the stuff. As he's dealt with the various sins and transgressions, we can then move on to the words that he uses in prayer.

Two words, remember me. Remember me. Remember what Jesus said on the cross? Lord, remember me when I come into your kingdom. What he said to the people on his, the criminal on the cross, Lord, sorry, the criminal on the cross said, Lord, remember me when you go into your kingdom.

And there's two different ways in which Nehemiah uses the word remember. Firstly, it's in a positive note and then one where he uses negatively. The positive aspect is to do with the prayers of Nehemiah and we know if we're looking through the book of Nehemiah, the role of prayer is really important for him.

Sometimes he prays very intensely. Sometimes he fasts and he waits upon God and then sometimes he prays these brief arrow prayers. There's that moment of silence where he's standing before the king and he prays, God help me and then he speaks to the king.

[22 : 42] Very short prayers. There's all sorts of different types of prayers and here Nehemiah asks God, remember me. He's risked his life for God's people and he's left the city and he's returned to the messy situation and renewal and revival seemed to be on the horizon.

God's kingdom is moving but the frustrations continue to abound and in verses 14, 22 and 31 he prays these prayers. Remember me for this my God. Do not blot out what I have done what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services.

Remember me for this also my God and show mercy to me according to your great love. I also made provision for contributions of wood at designated times and for the first fruits. Remember me with favor my God.

He's not bragging himself up here. He's not saying God remember me look what I've got here. Remember me and my accomplishments. He's saying here redeem the labor of my hands.

Redeem the labor of my hands. Bring good out of what's gone bad. And then when Nehemiah says remember me in the negative sense this is where it gets a bit messy and we've got to address this.

[23 : 56] In verse 25 I rebuked them and I called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. It's not a problem for some of us but it's a problem here in the Old Testament.

Verse 29 remember them my God because they defiled the priestly office and the covenant and the priesthood and the Levites. So here is where Nehemiah is right to be frustrated in that moment to say remember them my God.

He's pleading for God's holiness and righteousness to be the foundation of worshipping him in the temple in the rebuilt walls of Jerusalem that which have been defiled.

But where he gets it wrong Nehemiah curses he beats he pulls the hair. In Ezra chapter 9 there's similar problems about intermarriage but Ezra's a bit more introspective and he didn't react with violence that we read there he said I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and I sat upon.

That's the way Ezra reacts a bit more introspectively Nehemiah and he goes oh just cursing that's what he does it's not so good the people of God are a mixed bag it is the prayer life and the passionate zeal of the worship of God and the dedication to the task which he had God had called him to that's what's admirable about Nehemiah and the same prayer can and should be said of us Lord remember me remember us remember the promises to your children and to your children's children's Lord remember the promises you made that was one of the great prayers of the Lewis revival where the house in the village of Arnold shook physically with the presence of God where that blacksmith Donald Smith stood up and they were praying for about 45 minutes and they were tarrying in prayer to use that old fashioned term which is a beautiful term and he stood up and he was called to pray by Duncan Campbell and he said Lord your reputation is on the line I'm recalling your promises and at that moment the house physically shook with the presence of fear of God and the plates on the cabinet started to shake imagine that happening fear of God you wouldn't dare move and that's what's happening here it's that sense of remember me

[26 : 25] God bring good out of what has gone bad but Nehemiah has taken it too far we're all in a work in progress and again it's just simply this recall of looking to Jesus that God chooses to work in and through us as a result of his grace toward us and the covenant he's made with us but we look to Jesus we want to ask God to remember us in these days the God who is good and merciful and abounds in grace and steadfast love from generation to generation and we want that to continue to the next generation and so just rounding off our reflections this morning is it right to ask God for a messy church think of messy church and think of it as something to do with the kids in the summer if we're to ask God to move here in this church in this community and to reach people who aren't reached at the present moment or who are in the process have been reached or the seeds of hope have been planted then is it right to ask for God to make us a messy church

I've been minister here for so we're 14 months and I was called to bring a sense of fresh vision enthusiasm etc and I can't do that without help of those around me and if I was to say anything to us all together then it would be that we rally our strength we rally our strength and as we look out into our congregation and we're honest and we thought that the average age of our congregation can we first say this is age ever and has age ever been a stumbling block to God moving past and throughout our nation throughout our history again I go to the Lewis revival God moving through two ladies in the 80s who simply prayed and that was that was what they did they prayed and they helped pray that revival and

I wonder what church will look like on the way forward nice and cozy and comfortable it's great to have order and 1 Corinthians speaks of that we know that we need to have order and respectability and that sort of thing but if we're to allow the next generation to come in through these doors and truly be welcomed as I know they will be by you wonderful folks and some of our personal preferences might need to go to the side and we might ask that God remember me but also remember the next generation the remaining years I have left I want to give them to you God I want to give them fully to you I want to rally my strength I want to give the best of what I have left to you God we know that throughout our nation there are many aged prayer warriors who have prayed for decades for God to move in our land and even though if we were to take a look on a very logical level in our country and God moving then it looks very unlikely he would do so we're very small in number there's pockets of hope but they're quite small things aren't the way they used to be people used to attend church by the great number and we thought that's the way that things are good but we've discovered and COVID's helped us that church sometimes is a nice club what we want church to be is a place where God inhabits by his presence and moves among us and does something in the hearts of each and every one of us

I wonder if we could be on the precipice of something wonderful happening and God using people actually who are that little bit older I think that's what gives me great hope in the days that come here in this church that God isn't going to merely use young people it's all about young people and young families although yes amen we want young people and young families but God wants to use those of us who are that little bit older because we're Scottish and if we look to the Tartan army and how well they're doing they are a passionate brigade of all ages hang up the banner we keep the banner lifted high that's actually a Graham Kendrick song Lord keep your banner we lift your banner high so I wonder if you would join together this reality of going forward that church as it is maybe we'll be changing in the days to come a little bit more dysfunction a little bit more uncomfortableness but that we journey together as God's people we go together we can't go back like people in Nehemiah's day to simply go back to the glory days but we cannot also stay still that we walk together in this new day in this new era we embrace it and we say

God I'm going to give you the best we give you the best we rally our strength and we take that final risk are we okay with doing that I wonder are we okay with doing that let's be a people to encourage one another to build one another up as we continue to welcome in people in our community as God has welcomed us that people would hear the good news of Jesus it's the only way forward it needs to be different are we ready for this I'll be totally honest with you even though I'm a young guy youngish and maybe God has given me talents in some areas I don't have a scooby of what this will look like but I'm trusting God that he's given us vision and that we'll continue to see vision going forward

[32 : 44] I'm trusting that he'll go before us and that we'll make mistakes so we'll go for it we'll go together and we'll seek his kingdom come and we'll say Lord would you remember us as you've remembered this nation and these days that have gone by will you remember us will you remember your people would you do something extraordinary in our day in the hearts of people in this community for his kingdom to come and his will to be done in this day Lord remember us Amen Amen