

Freedom and Leadership

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[0 : 00] When we lose contact with the Word of God, we lose contact with God Himself.

All it takes to undo the work of generations is just one single generation. Welcome to another Sermon on the Web from St. John's Shaughnessy Anglican Church in Vancouver, Canada.

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The following message is from the July 15, 2001 service at St. John's Shaughnessy. The Rev. David Short delivered his message from the Book of Nehemiah, the 13th chapter, verses 1-31.

The title of the message is Freedom and Leadership. If Hollywood had got a hold of Nehemiah, the Book of Nehemiah, and made it into a movie, it would end at chapter 12, not chapter 13.

[1 : 17] Because chapter 12 is a perfect conclusion with a happy ending. The walls of Jerusalem are rebuilt. The people of God are listening to God's Word. There's a massive celebration of worship and joy, as we heard about last week.

It couldn't have a better ending, could you? It would give us all a happy inward glow. That makes chapter 13 a huge disappointment.

It's 20 years since the singing of chapter 12 has died down. And the work of renewal and joy is in a shambles. 12 years after chapter 12, Nehemiah goes back to Persia, to the capital, for a number of years.

And while he's away, the renewal completely unravels. And if you look at verses 6 and 7 when he comes back, what does he find? He finds what began so well is almost completely decayed.

The city has settled down to a comfortable compromise with paganism. The high priest and the leading families have deserted the renewal. The temple has been desecrated.

[2 : 26] The worship of God and the sacrifices are abandoned. The priests and the Levites and the singers now have day jobs working in the field. Tobiah the Ammonite, the enemy of God, has taken up residence in the temple.

The Sabbath has become an excuse for commerce. And the children of the families of Jerusalem are being raised in the Ammonite religion. That's why this chapter is so very important for us, you see.

Because renewal is not the only force at work in us as the people of God. There is also an opposite force at work. In our lives as individuals and in our life together as God's people, you and I face the reality of compromise, of drifting and of disobedience.

And as God's people we pray week by week here, as many others do. And we work and hope for a time of genuine renewal and refreshing and even revival.

And history tells us that from time to time God sends his spirit in a wonderful way, bringing a great hunger and a desire for spiritual things and a dissatisfaction with anything but the glory of Christ.

[3 : 39] But every single one of those renewals is followed by a time of spiritual decline. There's no one great spiritual revival or renewal that will come and solve all our problems.

We have to contend with degeneration and decay and decline. And we know this to be true in our own lives, don't we? I mean, most of us here, my guess is, have had a remarkable time of renewal from God from time to time in the past.

Where God has given us a hunger for spiritual things. Where prayer comes naturally. Where we love other people. Where we have a clear sight of God's glory and we feel we could be almost consumed by love for God.

But it doesn't take very long to realise that Satan is still very much alive. And we're still prone to the same old weaknesses and temptations. And the obedience that seemed very easy then becomes much more difficult now and much more patchy.

You just can't take God's renewing work and bottle it and preserve it. You can't put it in a box to take it out when you need it. The whole of the book of Nehemiah has been teaching us about the work of God's renewing grace.

[4 : 54] But chapter 13 is very important for us because it shows us that the renewing work of God can be undermined. It's easy for us as a church to fall into lazy compromise with the world round about us.

I want to do two things with us this morning. I want to just fly over the passage and get it in our minds. And then draw out what God is saying so that we can have it in our hearts.

There are three scenes or three areas of concern. And the first is the service of God in verses 4 to 14. We meet Nehemiah's old antagonist, Tobiah the Ammonite.

Do you remember chapter 2? He tried to stop the building of the wall. In chapter 4 he plotted Nehemiah's downfall. But as Nehemiah grew stronger, Tobiah's strategy changed.

He sought to ingratiate himself with the important and influential families through a set of strategic marriage alliances. I want to say to you as a pastor, it's a very worrying thing to see people trying to ingratiate themselves to key members of the congregation.

[6 : 07] Tobiah's strategy is brilliantly successful. He marries himself to one of the daughters of the leading families. He marries one of his children into the family of Eliashiv the high priest himself.

And suddenly he finds himself with a toehold in the very centre of Jerusalem in the temple. Eliashiv the high priest gives Tobiah a huge room for an apartment.

And Tobiah moves in. You can't blame Tobiah for trying. He has no interest in Yahweh the God of Israel. And having a room the size of a small warehouse at the very centre of Jewish life is a great base for his influence.

Now we can't blame Tobiah. But we do blame, and Nehemiah blames Eliashiv the high priest. The very room that he gave to Tobiah was the storeroom for the tithes that were meant to be brought into the temple.

It was the place where the offerings for the sacrifice were kept, and all the food and supplies that were for the Levites and the priests and the singers. Now that's gone.

[7 : 17] And Tobiah's furniture has taken precedence over the tithes and offerings. And I imagine the people of Israel were very happy not to have to make charitable contributions. Look at verse 10.

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 own field. Eliashiv's carelessness meant that the work of God was undermined.

No room in the temple, no tithes. No tithes, no supplies for the priests and Levites. No supplies, they get day jobs. Day jobs, no sacrifice, no teaching of God's word.

So if you want the renewal of God to come to a crashing halt, you can do nothing better than to find a way to stop the teaching of the word of God. Have a look at how Nehemiah responds.

Verse 7. I discovered the evil that Eliashiv had done for Tobiah, preparing for him the chamber of the courts of the house of God, and I was very angry and entered into dialogue.

[8 : 23] No, no, I threw out all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber. And I gave orders that they cleanse the chambers. Down in verse 11. I remonstrated with the officials and I said, Why is the house of God forsaken?

And I gathered them together and set them in the station. In Nehemiah's mind, Eliashiv's weakness threatened the very purity of the house of God.

And so he cleanses it and reinstitutes the worship. Now this neglect of God's word spills over into the other two areas, and let me mention them quickly to you.

The first is the Sabbath, which is in verses 15 to 22. When Nehemiah returns, he discovers that the people of Jerusalem had managed to completely alter the purpose of the Sabbath.

Instead of being a day of prayer and rest, it had become a cash cow. And Jerusalem had been turned into a great big Edmonton shopping mall. Now you probably know that the Sabbath is unknown in the ancient world outside of Israel.

[9 : 31] It was part of the distinctiveness of belonging to the people of God. God's children were to set aside one day for rest and prayer as a demonstration that every hour of their lives belonged to God.

The only problem is that the Sabbath is a stumbling block to financial ambition. It interferes with lifestyle goals if you're greedy. And it has this unfortunate way of exposing our false idols and our true priorities.

You see the progression. The neglect of the teaching of God's word at the centre leads to God's priorities taking second place. So again, Nehemiah swings into diplomatic action.

Verse 17. I remonstrated with the nobles and I said to them, What is this evil thing that you are doing profaning the Sabbath day? Didn't your fathers act in this way?

Did not our God bring all this evil on us and on this city? Yet you bring more wrath upon Israel by profaning the Sabbath. And there's this lovely phrase a little bit later where he says he's going to lay hands on them unless they do what he says.

[10 : 36] Which I take it means that he's going to arrest them. The third area in verses 23 to 29 is the corrosion of the families. 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 the language of each people.

Now in the Old Testament God commands his people not to marry those who belong to other gods. And there are a number of very obvious reasons for that.

But here Nehemiah's concern is for the next generation. You see for someone who worships the true and living God to marry someone who worships a false god will deeply impact the life and belief of the children.

And already these children were losing their identity as the children of God. Half of the children in Jerusalem could no longer speak Hebrew. Their thought patterns and their expressions were being formed by the gods of Ammon.

[11 : 40] And it puts a distance between the next generation and the word of God. And when we lose contact with the word of God we lose contact with God himself.

Nehemiah knows that all it takes to undo the work of generations is just one single generation. It's very pertinent for us in the Anglican Church of Canada.

Look what Nehemiah does, verse 25. And I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. This is very helpful for us, I think.

It's not really dialogue, is it? Now he hasn't gone to the Dale Carnegie School of Polite Political Correctness. He sees this as a threat to the very people of God.

He sees it's in the high priest's family and in verse 28 he chases the unfortunate culprit. Which is why Felix and I wear robes. Give you all a head start.

[12 : 50] He doesn't say, I'm going to pray about this. He acts. And it's very important to remember that he is not a priest. He is a layman. So let's step back for a moment and try and draw out what God is saying to us from this chapter.

There are two main lessons. And the first has to do with, how do you undermine the renewing work of God? Well, if you're going to undermine the work of God, what you've got to learn from this passage is you have to do it indirectly and gradually.

Just a little compromise here and a little compromise there. Eliashiv didn't start out to defile the temple. He saw an attractive marriage as a way of promoting his career.

And marrying into Tobiah's family meant a little bit of give here and a little bit of take there. And by the time father-in-law Tobiah asked for a room in the temple, he was hopelessly compromised.

I have no choice, he said to himself. I have to allow it. Here is the key mechanism to undermine the work of God. You have to get the people of God and particularly the leaders who allow changes that contradict the word of God.

[14 : 10] At every point in this chapter, Nehemiah lays the responsibility for the reversal of the renewal at the feet of those who allowed compromise. Now, if I step back even a further step, throughout history of the people of God, there have been two ways to undermine God's work.

One way is for Christian leaders to not allow what God allows. This is the way of legalism, where there's rigidity and inflexibility on everything from the biggest to the smallest.

And that usually degenerates into a power game for the clergy, where you are in or not in, depending upon whether you follow all my rules. And I know some of you have come from churches that have that kind of background.

But there is a second way, the way that we see in this chapter here, and I think in the Anglican Church in Canada, we are in much greater danger of this second way. If the first way is to not allow into the church what God allows, this second way is to allow into the church what God does not allow.

We are under constant pressure from the world around us. And it takes courage and it takes clarity to say no to things that compromise the truth of God.

[15 : 29] And it's so much easier to yield and hope for goodwill. It's so much easier when it comes to the hard and unpopular biblical teachings to be optimistic about human nature and to avoid unpleasantness.

But each time we take a step back from the word of God, we damage God's work of renewal. Again, if you had asked Elijah the question, do you want to stop the worship of God and stop the sacrifices and the preaching of the word?

He'd say, of course not. This is a new way, he would have said. We need to be inclusive of Tobiah and welcome him into the temple. And I think the picture of the furniture being thrown out the window is brilliant.

I mean, the furniture replaces the tithes. The only way we can accommodate to the world is to discard what pleases God. The only way for Elijah to be inclusive was to substitute what God desired with what he desired.

And what is so difficult for us, living when we do and where we do, is that the pressure of the world is so inviting and so attractive. Let me give you an illustration. Last week, the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada overwhelmingly adopted a resolution called A Call to Human Dignity.

[16 : 49] So much of the resolution is so very good. Let me quote to you a section from it. All persons pursuing employment and those employed by our church shall be treated with courtesy, compassion, fairness and integrity by a church and its representatives or officials without discrimination on the basis of, and it lists a whole bunch of bases of discrimination, and one of them is creed.

In other words, what you believe can no longer be a factor in choosing someone you employ as a church. Our own Felix Orgy stood and made a motion, an amendment, subject to the tradition of scripture and the tradition of the Anglican Church of Canada, which was soundly defeated.

There is a children's book by the name of Rowan and the Travellers about the villagers who live in a village called Ryn.

And in the recent past, someone has brought a mountain berry bush to the village. The mountain berry bush has beautiful red luscious flowers and luscious red fruit.

It's fast growing and sturdy. It blossoms and fruits at the same time. So the people of the village cultivate as many as they can. And the village is surrounded by this lovely scent.

[18 : 14] And more importantly, the crop of fruit increases and increases, and it promises to ease their work. Through the book, there is a vague sense of foreboding. And people gradually begin to fall into a sleep, a sleep from which they cannot be woken.

And we only find out at the end of the book that the sleep comes from long exposure to the rich scent of the flowers of the mountain berry. But underneath the bush is something more terrible.

Growing underneath is the unrenned tree, black, voracious. And when it breaks through the surface, it moves at deadly speed, consuming everything in its path.

Because in fact, the mountain berry bush is the top of the unrenned tree. And it puts its prey to sleep. And then the tree devours it.

And the only remedy is some useless, insignificant weed, boiled into some foul-smelling liquid, which they accidentally discover can destroy the trees and protect you from the deadly effect of the scent.

[19 : 19] There are many mountain berries growing in the church today. And what the world wants us to allow smells so good.

It's very attractive. Some of the mountain berries want us to take away the offence of the cross and the uniqueness of Christ. Take away the stench of death, which is the way Christ smells to the outsider.

But if we allow ourselves to allow what displeases God, we push God away. Interesting to me, in each one of the three scenes, Nehemiah speaks about compromise in terms of impurity.

Verse 9, verse 17, verse 29. The temple needs to be cleansed. The Sabbath was profaned. The families were defiled. So, that's how you firstly undermine the renewing work of God.

Secondly, the second lesson has to do with this. How do we deal with our own compromise? Now, if we want to strengthen and nurture the renewing work of God, this chapter teaches us that we must do two things.

[20 : 34] The first is this. We must call things what they are. Don't you find it interesting that in verse 7 and 17 and 27, Nehemiah's word for the compromise is evil.

We don't live in a benign and neutral world. And Nehemiah doesn't minimize evil because it makes people uncomfortable. He doesn't sanitize it. He doesn't sentimentalize it.

He doesn't evade it or make euphemisms for it. He doesn't dialogue with it or discuss it. But like Jesus, he saw it for what it was and he calls it for what it is.

And that is part of our responsibility as the people of God. It was not a kindness to allow Tobiah to live in the temple. It was evil. There is a disease rampant in the church today and it comes from a lack of courage.

We are so afraid of being accused of intolerance. We are so afraid of ruffling feathers that we allow what God does not allow. And here is Nehemiah, a man likely in his 60s, and he is much more concerned with what God thinks than what anyone else thinks.

[21 : 48] And when I get to 60, I wish to be like him. We need to pray for a sensitivity for what offends our God. Not out there, but in here.

But we will find it easy to call sin something else. Because you see, what's ugly and offends God becomes tolerated for some and what's tolerated becomes useful and what's useful becomes permissible and what's permissible becomes necessary and beautiful.

We need to call things what they are. And the second way to ensure the ongoing renewing of the church is constant cleansing. When we are faced with this force of degeneration and compromise, it's not enough for us to bring it into the light and call it what it is.

We need to do what Nehemiah does and bring it to God for cleansing. Now, cleansing is the way that things are brought back to what God intends.

It's the way God establishes what is right and holy in our lives as individuals and in our life as a church. We cannot be right. We cannot walk in fellowship with God. We cannot grow in renewal.

[22 : 57] We cannot have joy unless we are subject to constant, cleansing. And that is why when we gather together here, Sunday by Sunday, we begin our service with this prayer, Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be opened, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts.

And then when we come to the communion, we pray that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body and our souls washed through his most precious blood. Let me conclude.

If I can speak personally for a moment. This book of Nehemiah has been very wonderful and helpful for me. Not just because we see a man of conviction and prayer, but to see how God works in the face of genuine opposition and fragility.

Remember when Nehemiah came to Jerusalem, the walls were broken down and the people of God were in danger of being utterly wiped out. It's very difficult not to draw parallels with our situation today.

The Anglican Church in Canada is weak and declining and disobedient in many parts. And it seems that the main strategy for dealing with a slide of numbers is a wholesale commitment to compromise with the culture.

[24 : 17] Many of the seminaries teach a revisionist view of scriptures. There's a deep embarrassment with the name of Christ. There's a happiness in one of our local seminaries to sponsor courses on channeling and Wiccan taught by witches.

Many of the leaders of the church have abandoned the faith of the scriptures for a pale, culturally dictated belief. And the book of Nehemiah is a call from God for us to extend our care beyond the boundaries of our own families and friends.

Because the health and direction and renewal of the people of God is the concern of each of you and all of us. And you must not leave it in the hands of the clergy. I think we would be hard-hearted people indeed to come away from the book of Nehemiah, not determined to pray and work and hope for the renewing of our church, not just here in St John's, where we work to take the log out of our own eye and heavens knows we need renewing, but in the whole of the people of God.

And that is where this book is most helpful because it shows us how God brings renewal to his people. Do you remember the process? It was a three-fold process. It began with people hearing the word of God being taught.

It moved secondly into ongoing repentance before God. And thirdly, it showed itself in worship and joy. And if we want to know the ongoing renewing work of God, this is where we must start, this is where we must continue, and this is where we must go on.

[25 : 51] We must commit ourselves to sitting under the teaching of God's word week by week by week by week, to bringing our hearts and praying that God would soften them and bring them to repentance, and to asking him to give us the spirit, to worship him with joy.

And as we do, and as renewal may come, we need to guard ourselves and the church from all that would deviate us from the purpose of God. To pray for God's ongoing cleansing that he might mend us.

And that is why we have gathered this morning. We've gathered to remember that mighty act of cleansing that God has won for us. For when the time was right, he sent his only son from heaven who lived for each of us and died for each of us, taking to himself all that we have done that stands between us and God, all the impurity and all the weakness and all the compromise that's ours.

In his death, we are cleansed. And it's so striking that this book of Nehemiah finishes by Nehemiah allowing us to look into one of his prayers again in verse 30.

And what he wants to be remembered for is not his great position in Persia, is not the great achievement of building the wall of Jerusalem, but that he brought cleansing and established that cleansing among the people of God.

[27 : 13] We come forward for communion this morning as you remember the death of Jesus. We come to the only place of renewal and the only place of cleansing. Amen.

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We hope that this message has helped you and that you will share it with others. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.