

Rebuilding with Uncompromising Faith

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- [0 : 01] Cyclone Tracy hit Darwin on Christmas Eve 1974. It destroyed about 80% of the houses in Darwin.
- And it required the evacuation of over 30,000 of the then 47,000 inhabitants. One thing that I didn't realise until I first went to Darwin and spoke to someone who actually went through Cyclone Tracy, said to me that the vast majority who were evacuated never ever came back.
- They never came back. Of the 30,000 evacuated, less than 8,000 actually returned to Darwin and rebuilt again. And those who did had a massive task in front of them.
- And one of the things that I was told was that as Darwin was rebuilt, they had learnt their lesson. It was rebuilt from that moment on to withstand Cyclones.
- With unique architecture. Now the book of Nehemiah is a time in history when the Israelites are seeking to rebuild the city of Jerusalem after a catastrophic event that wiped out the city.
- [1 : 21] It was God judging his people for their consistent idolatry. They loved other things more than they loved their God.
- And so this whole book is about the rebuilding of Jerusalem. But fundamentally, it's about God rebuilding his people as he rebuilds his city.
- If you've got the St. Paul's app in front of you, you've got three points in there and it might be easier for you to follow along. The first one is a flawed people.
- In chapter 1, Nehemiah was born and raised. What we're going to do now, because we're getting to the end of chapter Nehemiah 13, I'm going to retell the story for you. Quickly.
- In chapter 1, Nehemiah was born and raised as a Jew in exile. He had, however, risen to the position of cupbearer to King Artaxerxes. It was there that he had received the shocking reports of the state of his fellow Jews who had returned to Jerusalem.
- [2 : 24] This led to long periods of praying where he laid before God the failure of his people and his own failure and his wish for God to keep his covenant promises.
- In chapter 2, he was sent to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem by King Artaxerxes with a diplomatic passport, the government checkbook and some security guards. In chapter 3, the disorganised and apathetic people of God came together under Nehemiah's leadership and worked extraordinarily hard to rebuild a wall.
- They faced tough opposition from surrounding enemies. In chapter 4, internal conflicts and exploitation by their own people. In chapters 5 and 6, the walls are finally built at the end of chapter 6 in remarkable time.
- Into chapter 7, we start to see in a very real way the rebuilding of the people of God as leadership is installed. The people are organised.
- The city is secured. And now the main work of re-establishing the covenant community of God's people comes into full swing in chapters 8, 9 and 10.

[3 : 34] There was constant reading and re-reading and explanation of God's word. The word of God is obeyed as the feasts of God are now re-instituted and they are celebrated with joy.

This in turn leads to confession and repentance and covenant renewal. In chapter 10, all the work of the reformation of the people of God comes to this high point in chapters 11 and 12 as the city of God is once again repopulated.

And as the city and on its walls are filled with praise and worship to God. And so you get to the end of chapter 12 and you say, the rebuilding work of the people of God is a triumph.

And if it was written by Hollywood, that would be it. Chapter 12 would be the end of the story. There is, however, chapter 13.

And right from the very first verse, we see a slide. On that day, the book of Moses was read aloud in the hearing of the people and there 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.

[5 : 07] Our God, however, turned the curse into a blessing. And when the people heard this, they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent. Now, on the surface, that seems like they're keen to obey God's word.

But the decree regarding the Ammonites and the Moabites, prohibiting them from joining the assembly to the 10th generation, was peculiar to the Ammonites and the Moabites.

There is not a single bit in the Old Testament that extends that to every person. of foreign descent. However, what is done here is every person of foreign descent is kicked out.

It's fundamentally against God's purposes. The term foreign descent is used in Exodus 12, verse 38, referring to the non-Israelites who joined the Israelites and left Egypt.

And the law made provision for non-Israelites to become Israelites. Think of Ruth, for instance. And so what we have here at the beginning of chapter 13 is a drift towards legalism and a lack of concern for the nations that Jerusalem was meant to bless.

[6 : 38] Jerusalem was to be the place where God dwelt with his people in harmony. And from there, the world was to be blessed. All peoples. Of course, verse 3 there is not the only problem.

I think the central issue of this chapter is in verses 4 to 9, where we read that the very rooms where all the provisions for the temple worship are supposed to be stored, a motel room has been set up for Tobiah.

He's from the goon squad in chapter 4. He's an enemy of God's people, and now he has a suite in the temple. He's been brought right into the very centre of God's people and their community life and their life with God.

Tobiah's presence in the centre of their life is akin to them putting an idol in the middle of the temple. It's like Tobiah has become their new leader, their new God, their new saviour.

And so Nehemiah takes the right action in verse 8. He threw Tobiah's fridge and clothes and mattresses and DVDs and CPAP machine and everything out onto the footpath.

[7 : 56] He kicked him out of the temple. And what you see as you go through chapter 13, the failure of this reformation is right there.

Verses 10 to 14, they neglect the tithes for the temple and the Levites. Verses 15 to 22, they break the Sabbath regulations. We see mixed marriages in 23 to 28 with the next generation, the key here, the next generation are not even able to speak the language of Scripture and therefore unable to know their God.

And this is all in the shadow of the magnificent covenant renewal and commitments of chapter 10. It's sin, rebellion, faithfulness, faithlessness on repeat once again.

Again. At the centre of it all is the perversion of the temple. This was the house of God. The one place where sinners could come and offer sacrifices and enjoy fellowship with God and reassurance of his favour and his grace towards them.

[9 : 08] You also get a sense as you read chapter 13 that as great a leader as Nehemiah was, he is frustrated with the failure of God's people once again.

He pulls out some hair, he bashes a few people around. The text makes no comment about that at all. The focus is on the faithlessness of God's people.

It's almost as if his response is exactly the right response to sin. And what do we make of the last line of Nehemiah?

Remember me with favour, oh my God. That refrain, remember me, pops up three times in the last chapter.

It only occurs once previously in Nehemiah, and that's in chapter 5 when he mentions his example of sacrificial leadership. But three times in this last chapter, Nehemiah sounds like a man who is weary, who is frustrated, who's getting old, tired and cranky.

[10 : 29] The wall has been built, but he cannot effect real change in the hearts of God's people.

The final summary of Nehemiah's mission is in verse 30. So I purified the priests and the Levites of everything foreign. I assigned them duties, each to his own task.

I also made provision for contributions of wood at designated times and for the firstfruits. It's like this whole reformation work ends with a whimper.

And let's just put restart again. Have another go once more. The walls are built, but the people continue to crumble.

In other words, you get to the end of Nehemiah 13, and it's not a Hollywood ending in any way whatsoever. It's a letdown.

[11 : 35] But then again, so is the end of Deuteronomy, and Judges, and Chronicles, and Two Kings, and so many other books of the Bible.

So it is. And the issue is sin in the human heart. Deep inside of us, we cannot live up to our own standards, let alone covenant commitments to God.

You see, what the narrative of Nehemiah should really get to us as we get to this last chapter, it should drive us to look elsewhere. It should drive us to look for the flawless Israelite.

to a flawless leader and saviour. Nehemiah ultimately points us to Jesus. The birth narratives of Jesus tell us that even as a boy, he is totally committed to the work of his father at the temple.

He's about his father's business. The temple, even as a young boy, was central to him in such a way that he stayed there when his parents headed back home.

[12 : 53] Jesus, throughout his life, fulfilled every single covenant requirement in his perfect life. During his own time, people marvelled at the perfection of his life.

He had an integrity which was just unmatched. A flawless man committed to the father. He is the true Israelite in whom there is nothing false.

But John 1 tells us that he's not just, not just a man, but he is God himself coming into this world. He is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

He is full of grace and truth. And so when God, in the person, God the Son, Jesus Christ, turns up into this world, he does not flex his muscle and go to the palace in Jerusalem.

He heads to the temple in Jerusalem instead. And what we see when he arrives at the temple in Jerusalem is another Nehemiah.

[13 : 55] He clears it out. He clears it out. He sits and makes a whip. And he clears the temple of those who are trading in the courts, who have taken up residency in the temple.

These people are selling the free gift of relationship with God for a price. And like Tobiah in the temple, they are a roadblock of getting to God, of relating to God, and receiving assurance and compassion from God.

They're a roadblock to free gift of grace. And it makes Jesus angry. He declares that he will tear down this temple, and he will rebuild it in three days.

He will fulfill the role it was meant to play. He will be the place where we will come to meet with God and find forgiveness and assurance and compassion.

And he does that by dying on the cross for our sin, for our failure, for our inability to obey God's covenant requirements.

[15 : 14] And he will rise again for our justification and eternal life in his presence. Romans 5 says of Jesus that those who put their trust in him, with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.

You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God. He shed his blood so that we might have forgiveness of sins and that we might have his perfect record of covenant obedience accredited to our account despite our failure.

That is the great triumph of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And that means, friends, as I said right at the beginning of this Nehemiah series, God's disposition towards you as his children, if you are Christian, is constant delight because of Jesus.

The illustration I gave you back then was when I first became a father and I held Isabel for the very first time. First experience of the father.

And Dad had to go off and have surgery and I had Isabel lone parenting for two hours when she was first born and the kid did not stop screaming.

[16 : 45] For two hours. I got nothing for you, kid. But I remember holding her in my arms for two hours and she screamed and she screamed and she screamed.

And the midwives, at least on two occasions that I recall, came into the room and said, are you okay, Dad? Because that's not stopping.

And I said to them, I'm loving every minute of it. I was so delighted in being a father. So delighted.

That was before 15 years of this experience of parenting. And so my tendency is to look to God in the same way that when I fail, he looks upon me as I do with my children and feel a sense of disappointment.

But that's not how he looks to you in Jesus. He looks to you as I did in that moment because my love is flawed.

[17 : 49] His is not. He has constant delight in his children because of Christ. Delight in you. Thank you, Jesus.

And even now, he's interceding for you. Jesus, the man in heaven, interceding, he is your advocate. His pleasure in you is not based on your obedience or your faithfulness, but on the finished work of Christ.

And in Christ, you have every spiritual blessing, loved by God, forgiven, empowered for new life. And yet that may not be your current experience.

You may feel a sense of your sin and you should. You may feel overwhelmed and conscious of your failure. That is normal discipleship.

And that's because we're still waiting for the final triumph of the gospel. You see, Jesus has saved us for the new Jerusalem where there will be no temple, but where we will be with him in his presence with great joy.

[19 : 06] You see, the goal of the Christian, the final triumph of the gospel and the end of all things is Revelation 21. I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven for God, prepared as a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, look, God's dwelling place is now among the people and he will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God.

He will wipe away every tear from their eye. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away. Those who are victorious will inherit all of this and I will be their God and they will be my children.

Jesus guarantees that final chapter for those who trust in him and overcome. But we must remember that Jesus is perfect.

He is the flawless savior. He is not like you and me. You see, our sense of justice, our sense of right and wrong have been ruined by sin.

[20 : 14] And frankly, we read Nehemiah 13 and we see Nehemiah acting, pulling beards and beating up and we go, well, that's just wrong. We not only sinfully overreact to injustice, we also sinfully underreact to injustice as well.

Even our strongest emotions of compassion are but a tepid compassion compared to Jesus. And because of that, we struggle to grasp the depths of his grace but also his judgment.

Jesus' compassion and delight in his followers is unfiltered, perfect compassion. Everyone who has not been looking to him for hope will in the end experience his perfect unfiltered anger.

You see, when you read on in Revelation 21, straight after the promise of inheritance in Jesus forever, we read, but the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magical arts, the idolaters and all liars, they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur.

This is the second death. As the only flawless one, his anger and his compassion rise and fall together. They rise and fall together because of his perfection.

[21 : 56] Like they did with Nehemiah. Righteously committed to covenant commitments and angry when he didn't see them.

Access to God and relationship with God had been perverted. He was angry and it's more so with Jesus.

Whether it be eternal life in his kingdom or eternal death cast away from it, Jesus is not weary or frustrated with either. And if you're not a Christian, you've got to know this is coming from a heart of sensitivity.

Know that Jesus offers you life, hope, perfection, joy forever. That's what he offers you. Not based on any of your performance, but based on his.

You will not find a greater offer than the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and the door is still open to you. But know that it will close. And when it closes without receiving it, you will receive the perfect anger of Christ forever.

[23 : 17] So that leads me to straight into one more glimpse of Jesus that we get in Nehemiah 13 and I've never seen this before.

In verses 6 and 7 we are told Nehemiah left Jerusalem to return to the throne room of Artaxerxes, the throne room of the world at that time.

And then he came back to Jerusalem and it was in that intermediate period that the people of God descended into thin covenant unfaithfulness.

It was while he was away. If you jump into the gospels you will notice that Jesus tells many parables that call his disciples to be alert and covenant faithfulness between his departure and when he returns.

Matthew 25 we just read out one of them. Jesus is the returning bridegroom who will arrive joyfully at the end of the age extend a warm work unto all the guests who have patiently remained waiting for him and are prepared for his arrival.

[24 : 31] And we are told there that the kingdom is a door that can and does close and at the end Jesus will gather those to himself those who have been waiting for him and he will close the door behind him.

If you're a disciple of Jesus the end of Nehemiah drives me to ask this question if he was to return right now how would he find your lamp burning?

how are you waiting for him right now? I want to ask whether Jesus is the centre of your life or whether Tobiah is.

don't take the grace of God for granted. It is so easy in our day and age to drift towards compromise and call it tolerance drift towards disobedience and call it freedom drift towards superstition and call it faith we cherish the ill discipline of lost self-control and we call it relaxation we slouch towards prayerlessness and deluding ourselves into thinking that we've managed to escape legalism and living by grace we slide towards godlessness and we convince ourselves that we've been liberated and free friends we do not automatically drift towards discipline we do not automatically drift towards following Jesus and discipleship but god has graciously given us the means for his grace coming to us regularly he's given us means they are gifts to keep us striving towards the final triumph of the gospel our heavenly home and here at

St. Paul's it is because we treasure Jesus and his grace towards us that we choose to engage in worship every week we choose to worship him privately in devotional life at least four times a week we choose to walk more closely together with each other teaching serving equipping and caring in community groups and we choose to serve the world in ministry when I ask you the question what is your next step that's not a legalistic question that is God's means of grace to you that you might get to the heavenly home the final triumph of the gospel Jesus is yet to return do not let your lamp go dim and the book of

[27 : 43] Nehemiah should drum into us a holy distrust of ourselves and give us a clear grasp of just how tenuous our devotion to him is press on brothers and sisters do not be overcome by the battle have great confidence in Christ and his gospel we live we serve we sacrifice in the light of the cross and an empty tomb but we also live and serve and sacrifice in the painful knowledge of our failures of our disappointments and our inconsistency and may this tension which has existed for more than 2,000 years may that tension cause you as a disciple of Jesus to cry out with the church as it has for generations please come Lord Jesus come bring the final triumph of the gospel shall do you swear

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