

A Time for Rejoicing and A Time for Reformation

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[0 : 00] And we're going to turn to our Bible reading. And this morning we're once again, and indeed for a final time, at least with Paul in this series, in Nehemiah.

And we're going to be reading this morning from Nehemiah chapter 12, verse 27 through to the end. So do grab a Bible and open that up. If you're visiting with us and you don't have a Bible with you, we have plenty spread around.

The red book's at the front, at the side. And if you don't have one, if you wave your hand, Duncan would love to reach one to you. And so do open up and follow along. We're on page 408, if you're using a visitor's Bible.

And we're going to read Nehemiah 12, 27 through to the end of the book. Beginning verse 27 then. And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, they sought the Levites in all their places to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, with thanksgivings, with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres.

[1 : 08] And the sons of the singers gathered together from the districts rounding Jerusalem and from the villages of the Natophophites, also from Beth Gilgal and from the region of Geba and Asmaveth.

For the singers had built for themselves villages around Jerusalem. And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and they purified the people and the gates and the wall.

Then I brought the leaders of Judah up onto the wall and appointed two great choirs that gave thanks. One went to the south on the wall to the dung gates.

And after them went Hoshesiah and half of the leaders of Judah. And Azariah, Ezra, Meshulam, Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, and Jeremiah. And certain of the priests' sons with trumpets. Zechariah, the son of Jonathan, son of Shemaiah, son of Mataniah, son of Micaiah, son of Zechariah, son of Asaph. And his relatives, Shemaiah, Azrael, Millilai, Gililai, Mai, Nethanel, Judah, and Hanani.

[2 : 14] With the musical instruments of David, the man of God. And Ezra the scribe went before them. At the fountain gate they went up straight before them by the stairs of the city of David.

At the ascent of the wall, above the house of David, to the water gates on the east. The other choir of those who gave thanks went to the north. And I followed them with half of the people on the wall, above the tower of the ovens, to the broad wall, and above the gate of Ephraim, and by the gate of Yeshanah, and by the fish gate, and the tower of Hananel, and the tower of the hundreds, to the sheep gate.

And they came to a halt at the gate of the guard. So, both choirs of those who gave thanks stood in the house of God, and I and half of the officials with me. And the priests, Eliakim, Maseah, Miniamin, Micaiah, Elyonai, Zechariah, and Hananiah, with trumpets, and Masiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzi, Jehonanan, Malkijah, Elam, and Ezer.

And the singers sang with Jezreiah as their leader. And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy.

And women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away. On that day men were appointed over the storerooms, the contributions, the firstfruits, and the tithes, to gather into them the portions required by the law for the priests and for the Levites, according to the fields of the towns.

[3 : 47] For Judah rejoiced over the priests and the Levites who ministered. And they performed the service of their God and the service of purification, as did the singers and the gatekeepers, according to the command of David and his son Solomon.

For long ago in the days of David and Asaph, there were directors of the singers, and there were songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. And all Israel in the days of Zerubbabel and the days of Nehemiah gave the daily portions for the singers and the gatekeepers.

And they set apart that which was for the Levites. And the Levites set apart that which was for the sons of Aaron. On that day they read from the book of Moses in a hearing of the people.

And it was found written that no Ammonites or Moabites 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.

[4 : 58] Now before this, Eliashib, the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, and who is 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 commandments to the Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests.

While this was taking place, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the 32nd year of Artaxerxes, king of Babylon, I went to the king. 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?

[6 : 19] 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 Shalamiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and Padaiah the Levites, and as their assistant, Hanan 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 that 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 green and looting 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 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?

[7 : 49] 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.

And I stationed some of my servants at the gates that no lewd 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 wall? 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, I also 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.

[9 : 03] And I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair.

And I made them take an oath 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.

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 Sambalat, 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.

[10:24] Remember me, O my God, for good. Well, amen. This is God's word, and we'll return to it shortly.

Well, good morning and good to see you. Well, please do have Nehemiah open in front of you, Nehemiah 12 and 13. It's our final visit to this book this morning.

And it poses the question, what would you expect to see in a congregation of God's people that are struggling and seeking to be faithful to the Lord?

What would you expect to see? And you see two things in this final section, rejoicing, but also constant reformation. And those are the marks, I think, of a normal church, rejoicing, but alongside that constant reformation.

So we come this morning to the end of our Ezra, Nehemiah studies, and it's a hugely significant moment in the people, in the life of God's people at this point.

[11:39] The restoration of the temple, that's happened. God's people are once again in God's city. They're now populating the city once again, and also the surrounding area.

The promises made long ago to Abraham are beginning to be seen again. Despite the constant unfaithfulness of God's people, those promises are once again being seen to be fulfilled.

By this point, for 90 years, that little colony of returners in Judah, those who've returned from exile in Babylon, they've come to rebuild Jerusalem, rebuild the temple, and they've struggled over those decades between hope and fear, between progress and discouragements, enthusiasm and drift.

Thirteen years before Nehemiah arrived, you had an Ezra who came. The theologian, Bible teacher, he had come with a new wave of returners and brought real reformation.

But again, there had been difficulty and drift. The enemies of Judah had seized the moment. They had brought real difficulties. But now, with Ezra, an energetic leader, a Jewish high official, he's come and he's brought real energy.

[13:03] He's galvanized the people in Jerusalem and they've restored the wall. They rebuilt the wall. They restored worship in the temple. And so, we've seen over these weeks from ruins and rubble, the city walls have re-emerged high, proud again.

And we see today the choirs singing around the top of the walls rejoicing, giving thanks to the Lord. And what we see here, there is a time for rejoicing amongst God's people.

We see that all through chapter 12. But alongside that, there is also the need for constant reformation. That's what we see in chapter 13. These final chapters are utterly realistic.

It doesn't shy away from reality. Tempting, I'm sure, for Nehemiah as he wrote this account. Very tempting for him to paint things in a very positive light. Those memoirs of his 12 years in Jerusalem. In many ways, he could have left it at the very start of chapter 13. That great rejoicing of the choirs around the wall. A huge moment of rejoicing. He could have left it there.

[14:17] But he includes chapter 13 because it's an honest account. And with chapter 13, we get a sense of how things have played out.

Chapter 13 is about 10 to 15 years later than the events of chapter 12. So what we have here is Nehemiah coming back after a long time away and seeing what's happened in Jerusalem whilst he's been gone.

And as we'll see, it's very sobering. So as well as there being a time for rejoicing in God's people, the focus of chapter 13 is that there's a need for reformation always in God's people.

So we look at both these things. There is a time for joy but also a time for tears. Let's look at the joy first. In chapter 12, we see celebration with rejoicing in this chapter.

So this is chapter 12 verse 27 through to the first paragraph of chapter 13. And I think we do need, don't we, this reminder to rejoice.

[15 : 29] Yes, as we'll see, there is a time to face reality, to heed the call to reformation and repentance but we mustn't forget to rejoice. It's a rejoicing tethered to reality, yes, but it's rejoicing nonetheless.

Look with me at verse 43 of chapter 12 which gives a sense of what was going on here. Let's look at verse 43. And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced for God had made them rejoice with great joy.

The women and children also rejoiced and the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away. You can't miss the emphasis here, can you? Rejoicing, joy.

The occasion of this rejoicing was the dedication of the wall, verse 27. Remember, they've rebuilt the wall and now's the moment to celebrate, to dedicate the wall.

Two things to note about this day of rejoicing. One is the posture of the people as they go about this and the second is the impact of their rejoicing. So first, their posture. Their whole approach suggests care and reverence for the Lord.

[16 : 46] They carefully prepared for this day of rejoicing. Now, perhaps we think that rejoicing should always be spontaneous in order to be authentic.

Well, not so. The seriousness and the care demonstrated in the preparation here didn't seem to be the enemy of joy, but actually a prerequisite for it.

The organization, the care, enhanced the joy. Just note the sorts of preparations that are undertaken here. Look at verse 27. the Levites were sought out.

They had to be brought to Jerusalem. Somebody had to organize the logistics. How do we get the Levites into the city? Verse 28.

The sons of the singers gathered together from the districts surrounding Jerusalem and from the villages of the Nathalifites, however you say that. Josh probably pronounced it correctly. Also from Beth Gilgal and so on.

[17 : 47] Now that didn't just happen spontaneously. No, preparation and organization had to take place. Verse 30.

Purification took place, both of the priests and the Levites themselves, but also the walls and the gates. Now what strikes you as you read this is the diligence and the care with which the people went about their preparation for this dedication of the wall.

They took this day of rejoicing of giving thanks to the Lord seriously. They knew that rejoicing well meant proper preparation.

They remembered who it was they were giving thanks to. The king of the universe, the lord of the ages, the creator of all things. This was not something to be done casually.

They were coming to the lord of heaven and earth and they had to come carefully with proper preparation. And for us there are moments aren't there when it's right to rejoice when there are significant moments in the life of a people of God or of a congregation.

[19 : 03] Perhaps a major building project's been completed like here, the walls rebuilt. Maybe a significant building's been completed or maybe there's another significant milestone in a ministry.

It is right, isn't it, to give thanks, to rejoice, to give thanks to the lord. And we would do well to note the posture of the people here as they prepare.

Care is taken. Proper planning went into the day. Organization didn't act as a break on joy but actually facilitated it. Just observe how Nehemiah organized the choirs.

Look at verse 31. One choir went south with certain named leaders. We're told exactly which gates they went to and so on. The other choir went north, verse 38.

And again, a list of leaders and which gates they walked to. The musicians were playing, particularly trumpets. The choirs are singing.

[20 : 05] And the summary of it all, verse 43, again. And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced. For God had made them rejoice with great joy.

The women and children also rejoiced and the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away. Derek Kidner writes about these events.

He says, elaborate festivities can be hollow. But where the occasion is great, the demanding business of planning, preparation, assembling, and rehearsing makes good kindling material for the emotions.

See, carefully planning, careful organization can really help us rejoice fully to the Lord. God. So what is our approach to special moments like this?

And they do come around every so often. What is our attitude? What is our posture? Are we casual? Or are we careful? careful? But it's not just special moments, is it?

[21 : 14] Every time we gather, every time we come here on a Sunday, every time we gather is hugely significant. Every time we gather is special, isn't it? It is right to rejoice as we gather together, as we gather in God's presence.

But our approach as we do that is not to be casual or flippant, but rather careful and prepared. That makes fertile ground for joy.

So let's not despise careful preparation. So that's their posture on this day of rejoicing. Let's note secondly, the impact their rejoicing has.

Just note that final sentence in verse 43. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away. there is something about the joy of the people of God as they gather, as they worship the Lord, as they praise His name.

There is something deeply compelling to those around as they see that happening. As one preacher put it, here was a people worshipping and rejoicing and praising the Lord and the noise of it went far and wide.

[22 : 30] How important is it that worship and praise be real and spiritual? The quality of our praise is a contribution to the work of the kingdom of God.

See, our praise speaks of the reality of God's presence with us and amongst us at work in our hearts and lives. And that actually has a very powerful evangelistic edge.

James Philip put it this way, His presence cannot be hidden. And when the joy of our place is heard, even afar off, it will draw others to taste and see that the Lord is good.

It is not the literal volume of the sound, but the spiritual volume and quality. That is the real point.

When men get to know that God is here, this is the evangelism that gets places.

There is something about the gathered people of God rejoicing, praising the Lord's name, that is deeply powerful, deeply attractive to the watching world.

[23 : 39] People will know as they come through our doors that the Lord is here. He's in our midst. So, friends, how is our praise, our singing?

What is the spiritual volume of our worship and rejoicing in the name of the Lord? what is the spiritual temperature of our gatherings? Do we sing like we mean it?

To rejoice in the Lord is a key part of our worship to the Lord. It's real fuel for faithfulness. It's real witness. Not only the singing with our lips, although that's important, but also the singing of our lives.

Don't be afraid to let your joy be seen by others, to be seen by those around you. People will notice, even a very normal, ordinary feeling Christian life is deeply compelling to those around.

They will see something of the joy of the Lord in your life. So don't become fearful of the point of staying silent when it comes to reaching those around you.

[24 : 57] There is more response out there in a world devoid of hope than we might realize. People are searching, people are looking. And our rejoicing, our joy together, is a powerful part of our witness together.

joy in the Lord is a great antidote to worry. It brings great peace. He says, rejoice in the Lord always.

Again, I will say rejoice. Let your reason all must be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Rejoicing is a real mark of real faith, because it flows out of a realization of all that God has done for us.

As we think again on what God has done for us through the Lord Jesus, what can we do but rejoice and give thanks and praise him? For those in Nehemiah's day, they saw God's faithfulness to his promises as Jerusalem was once again populated, as the temple was once again the place of sacrifice and worship.

[26 : 24] That was a source of great joy for them. For us, we look back on greater fulfillment, don't we? We look back on the death, resurrection, ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We have every reason to rejoice. So let us take care to rejoice, to do so with real reverence, with awe, with careful preparation.

That's the great thing we see here at the end of this book, rejoicing. But alongside that rejoicing, the conclusion to this book keeps us firmly grounded in reality.

And the reality is the constant need for constant reformation amongst the people of God. So chapter 13 sets out the challenge of reformation always in God's people.

Now as I mentioned at the start, chapter 13 takes place some years later, after the events we've just been reading about. So, sometime later, Nehemiah, look at verse 6, sometimes later, he returns to Jerusalem and he discovers some very unsettling things.

[27 : 48] Some disturbing shifts have taken place which need to be addressed. Four scandals have erupted in the intervening years. The enemy has not been idle it seems.

Yes, Nehemiah had a very fruitful 12 years in Jerusalem. Yes, he brought about great reformation during that time. Just think back to the events of chapters 8, 9, and 10.

The reading of the law, the mass confession of sin and repentance but it doesn't take long for things to drift. In fact, it's in the very areas that God's people promised to remain faithful to the Lord that they have drifted away.

the very areas they promised to faithfully serve the Lord, those are the very areas they've compromised in. You can imagine Nehemiah's heart sinking as he learns about what's been going on.

Moving from chapter 12 to chapter 13 is a bit like moving from a nice warm bath to a cold shower. It's a huge wake up. It's not a pleasant transition but it is dealing with reality as we come to this last chapter of the book.

[29 : 07] And we must face reality. In his book on Nehemiah, Jim Packer has some things to say about what we observe here in this last chapter.

He says this, within the church, the complaint that things never change is often heard. But in reality, a conjunction of three distinct forces ensures the opposite, namely, that things will never simply stay put or go on endlessly right after they have for the moment come right.

The first force is human restlessness which takes many forms. The second force is God's energy working to transform his people into a truer Christ-likeness and a maturer holiness of life.

the third force is Satan's energy directed to corrupting the good things God has made and the good work that he is doing. He carries on.

With these three forces pushing and pulling at the same time, you cannot wonder that within the frame of what looks like steadiness, churches do not stay steady at all.

[30 : 17] There are ups and downs, wobbles, recoveries, and then more wobbles. Lost vision and vitality may reappear sometimes quite suddenly. And then after such moments of revival, a negative reaction.

You could call it post-renewal blues. It easily sets in. And that's a sober reminder, isn't it? And that is what chapter 13 is about.

As Nehemiah exits stage right, the enemy enters stage left, sowing discord and chaos. Serious corrective action would be needed as Nehemiah returns.

As Derek Kidner puts it, if on his first visit it had been a whirlwind, his second visit, we see in chapter 13, was all fire and earthquake to a city that had settled down in his absence to a comfortable compromise with the Gentile world.

Four issues present themselves. Four scandals meet Nehemiah which need dealt with. Number one, verses four to nine, to buy a gate. Look at verse four.

[31 : 31] Now, before this, let me just say, that is not a time reference. That's not referring to chronology. Rather, you could say, in the face of these things, in light of what you've just read, in other words, in light of what you've just seen about God's people promising to separate themselves from the Ammonites and so on, here's what happened.

Now, in light of this, Eliashib, the priest, verse four, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of God, who was related to Tobiah, prepared for Tobiah a large chamber where they had previously put the grain offering, the frankincense, the vessels, the tithes of grain, wine and oil, which were given by commandment to the Levites, singers and gatekeepers, and the contributions of the priests.

Now, what's happened here is really very, very shocking. It's hard to comprehend. No wonder Nehemiah, verse seven, calls it evil. Here is Tobiah, a determined enemy of God's people.

We've bumped into him before in Nehemiah, remember Sambalaz and Tobiah. These were the great enemies of God's people. Tobiah is an Ammonite, the ultimate Ammonite. And here he is at the very heart of the temple. What we just read in what just happened in verse one of chapter 13, look back. It was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God.

[32 : 56] And here we have Tobiah, an Ammonite, being given lodgings in the very heart of the temple. They've cleared out a huge room for him. It's not as if it was some unused space around the back.

No, no, no. The room they've given him was a large chamber and it was holding lots of items critical for the running of the temple. They clear that all out. In you come, Tobiah.

And all of it has been facilitated by the high priest, Eliashib, whose job it was, his job was to protect the temple from people like Tobiah.

And here he is, rolling out the red carpet. Please, enemy of God's people, come in. Have your place in the middle of the temple. It's hard to comprehend. How did that happen?

Well, verse 4, they were related through marriage. Eliashib, the high priest, was related to Tobiah through marriage.

[34 : 04] You couldn't make it up. Here is compromise and corruption off the charts. It seems that the ties of marriage were stronger for Eliashib than his ties to the Lord and his people.

The lure of temporary favor with the great and good, that proved too strong for him. That trumped his faithfulness to the Lord.

And perhaps with Nehemiah away back in Susa, he thought he could get away with it. Does our faithfulness suddenly evaporate when our spiritual mentors and overseers are absent?

Just be alert. When the cat's away, the mice do often play, don't they? That's often true in church life. But upon his return, Nehemiah, his actions are swift and decisive.

There's no setting up committees to discuss the differences of opinion. There's no conversation to be had so that both sides can understand each other. None of that. Nehemiah threw Tobiah's belongings out of the temple, onto the street.

[35 : 20] And then he reinstates the vessels of the house of God, end of verse 9. Pretty radical action, I would say. You can imagine the scene, Nehemiah hurling these things out the door.

Sometimes radical action like that is what is required. If we were there, would we criticize him, I wonder, for his actions? You can imagine the conversations that were had.

Did you see what Nehemiah did? A bit hasty, don't you think? A bit severe, lacking in grace. Who does he think he is? Aren't we to love our enemies? Nehemiah was absolutely correct.

Nehemiah was absolutely correct, wasn't he, to take the action he took. He saw very clearly who Tobiah was.

Remember what he had done in the past. He was a determined enemy of God's people. And there he was in the temple, in the very heart of things. as one writer put it, the compromise of Eliash the high priest was in total opposition to the word of God and therefore must be dealt with swiftly, decisively, not gently.

[36 : 38] There are times when gentleness is sin. Nehemiah knew that time would come. This was not a moment for gentleness, Tobiah needed out.

You couldn't have compromise like that with the world. That's the first scandal, Tobiah gate. Number two, tithe gate. Tithe gate, verses 10 to 14.

Another sin that returned was the neglect of the temple staff and their upkeep, leading to discouraged Levites leaving their posts and returning home to their own fields, verses 10 to 13.

They were not being looked after. Back in chapter 10, the people had vowed to support properly the upkeep of the temple and its services and sacrifice and priests and to give tithes to the priestly tribe of Levi. They needed that in order to live. The Levites had no territory of their own. They couldn't grow their own crops. They couldn't farm their own animals.

[37 : 43] They had to depend on the giving of others to sustain them. And the people had promised we will sustain the Levites. We will give our tithe to support the temple work.

But within a few years, those reforms had again become neglected. The zeal of chapter 10 had somehow given way to the laxness of chapter 13.

And once again, it needed leadership from Nehemiah to put those reforms in place once and for all. Chapter 13 tells us what he did. He confronts the officials, verse 11.

He puts them back to work. And then, verse 12, all Judah brought the tithe. Nehemiah also ensured that the right men were put in charge of rightly handling the tithe, verse 13, men who were known to be reliable.

Nehemiah also ensured that the right men were put in He got the people, again, doing what they promised they would do. They promised to tithe, they hadn't done it, Nehemiah ensured that it happened.

[38 : 55] You will keep your promises. Now, this presents a challenge to us, doesn't it? Nehemiah was holding the people to the promises they had made. And the reality was they hadn't given the tithe they had promised to give.

They said they would do it, they hadn't done it. Now, for us today, if you are a member of this church, then you made this vow when you joined.

Here's what you promised to do. You promised to give a fitting proportion of your time, talents, and money for the church's work in the world. We are to give financially, as well as other things, in response to his lavish grace shown towards us.

Everything we have is from the Lord. And whilst the New Testament doesn't specify a tithe for us today, we can hardly imagine that the New Testament church is to be less generous than the Old Testament people of God.

We've been given even more than they have. And the reality is, there are those in our church who do not give, even though they promise to.

[40 : 14] Now, we have about 460 members in the church, all of whom have taken those vows to give of their time, talents, and money. At present, 15% of our members are not giving, monthly, yearly, quarterly.

That's about 65 members are not financially contributing to our church. Now, let me say, that's not information that I'm privy to. I don't know who those people are, but the treasurer has given me the numbers.

But, friends, that is not right, is it? If you assume a median UK income for each of those people, if they were to tithe, that income, that comes to a quarter of a million pounds not being tithed to the church work.

That's a considerable amount of money, isn't it? You might well be sat next to a saint. Perhaps you're sat next to somebody who earns half as much as you do, but they are tithing their income and you're not.

That's not right, is it? you have made promises to support gospel ministry in this church. You ought to fulfill that pledge.

[41 : 30] Now, that also means that 85% of the church are giving generously, and that is a wonderful thing. This is a very generous church. Just think about all those special offerings we do every year.

My mind is blown away by the generosity of so many in this church fellowship. So let me encourage you. We are a generous church, but there are 15% who aren't.

So if you're not giving, resolve today to do it. Now let me confess. I made a pledge to one of our campaigns recently, and I hadn't fulfilled it.

So I had to go back and check how much did I pledge, and I made sure I gave this week. So that's one of the impacts of preaching on this chapter. You've got to practice what you preach. But it's right, isn't it? If I pledge something, I must do it.

If I make a promise to give to the Lord and his people, I must fulfill it. We must look on. That was the second scandal, tithe gate. Number three, Sabbath gate, verse 15 to 22.

[42 : 33] The heart of the issue here with the Sabbath was that wealth and money had taken hold in the hearts of God's people to the extent that it had now become the focus of their Sabbath day.

Two issues Nehemiah identifies, number one, verse 15, God's people themselves were engaging in commercial activity, treading the wine press, bringing goods to the city on the Sabbath.

Second issue, Tyrians were selling fish and other goods to God's people and even Jerusalem itself on the Sabbath. So God's people were both actively working themselves but also buying goods on the Sabbath.

Now again, Nehemiah sees the issue very clearly and he wasn't afraid to confront it. You could perhaps imagine Nehemiah after Tobiah Gate, after Tithe Gate, he didn't want to put his feet up, I'm done, but he's got another crisis to confront and he does it.

Look at verse 17, he confronts the issue. What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day? How could you do this?

[43 : 44] Our fathers did this and it did not go well for them. We are making the same mistake all over again. Nehemiah doesn't leave it at a verbal rebuke.

He takes practical steps to address it. Look at verse 19, he shuts the gates of Jerusalem just before the Sabbath and has them opened once the Sabbath is finished.

So you can't get into the city on the Sabbath. He also set some trusted servants at the gates to enforce things. Some, it seems, tried to push the matter and they set up their stall right outside the gates.

Look at verse 20, but again, Nehemiah wasn't having it, verse 21. Why do you lodge outside the wall? He said, if you do again, I will lay hands on you.

The more I hear about Nehemiah, the more I like him. Now you might wince at his actions, but I bet if you were a faithful believer in Jerusalem at the time, if you saw the same things that Nehemiah saw, if it grieved your heart, if it distressed you like it did Nehemiah, you would be thrilled, wouldn't you, to see Nehemiah taking the action he takes.

[45 : 00] You wouldn't wince. You'd rejoice. Thank you for a leader like him. He's got the gumption, the conviction to do what needed to be done. I think faithful believers at the time would have rejoiced, given thanks to the Lord for Nehemiah.

Now this scandal, Sabbath gate, it ought to cause us to think about our own attitude to the Lord's day. We've seen this recently, haven't we, already in Nehemiah. But the Lord has set aside a day upon which we are to rest and be with his people and worship him.

So let me ask again, have other priorities encroached upon your Sundays? Perhaps it's not the lure of wealth, but maybe the lure of pleasure or the lure of socializing that dictates your Sunday diary.

You want to know if Sundays are your priority? What does your diary tell? What story does your diary tell about your Sunday priorities? The Lord's day is a wonderful gift to us, isn't it?

We get to lay aside other stuff. We get to come together and worship the Lord the whole day. Don't miss out on the blessings of a day set aside to be with the Lord and his people.

[46 : 22] Final scandal. And it's one, as always, we've encountered already. Every one of these issues we've encountered already. But here's the last scandal for Nehemiah to deal with.

And it's marriage gates, verse 23 to 29. Now the issue is not one of race, but religion. The problem wasn't the fact these people were not born in Jerusalem.

In fact, they worshipped other gods. That's the issue. And the Jews had married outside of the covenant of God's people, having promised not to do so, back in chapter 10.

And so, here's the problem, verse 24. 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.

They couldn't understand teaching about the Lord and his people because they didn't understand the language. God's people were to be a holy people set apart for him.

[47 : 22] To go about this, to be indulging in intermarriage with other peoples, indicated they had departed from that holiness. They were not separating themselves, and they lost their testimony.

They lost the next generation. And one preacher put it, the word holiness has in its root form two meanings, separation and brightness.

Separation and brightness. The one qualifies to the other. When the separation goes, so does the brightness. Just consider, Solomon, one of the greatest kings, had everything going for him.

And yet, this very issue brought him down. All that was bright disappeared because he didn't separate himself. He didn't obey the Lord with regard to marriage.

And this wasn't just a side issue with a few people. No, this goes to the very heart of the leadership amongst God's people. Look at verse 28. One of the grandsons of the high priest has married the daughter of Sambalot, of all people.

[48 : 33] Sambalot's worse than Tobiah. And here's the grandson of the high priest marrying into Sambalot's family. He couldn't make it up. And Nehemiah calls a spade a spade, verse 29, they have desecrated the priesthood.

This was no small matter. And again, Nehemiah tackles the issue head on. He confronts them and makes them swear not to do this again. Why is Nehemiah doing this?

Why is he so concerned about this marriage issue? Well, Nehemiah is protecting the future of his people, isn't he? All those children yet to be born. He knows that they have a priceless heritage and

that will be lost to them.

It will be their greatest betrayal next to their desertion of God. If they do this, they lose their children, their next generation. What does that tell us about our duty to our own children and those not yet born?

Shall they grow up in Christian homes where the Lord Jesus is praised as Lord, where that is a daily reality? Or will they be brought up into a compromised situation where they see little or nothing of the Lord and his people?

[49 : 53] who you marry is so crucial for the ongoing fidelity, not just of yourself, but your children? That was Nehemiah's concern, the future of his people.

Well, what do we make of all this? Nehemiah ends with four scandals. It's hardly the most positive ending, is it? If you're writing your own biography, I'm not sure you'd end up like this.

You'd end up very positively. But Nehemiah ends differently. One writer said, it seems to peter out in what might be considered a somewhat unsatisfactory manner, not so much with a bang, but a whimper.

All the scandals referred to in this final chapter have been the subject of earlier treatment, but here they rear their head again. Despite the best efforts of the reformers to get rid of these problems, they raise their head again.

It is as though the book is pointing to its own failure, reminding us that however important good structures and routines may be, nothing can substitute for the renewal of the naturally perverse inclinations of the human heart.

[51 : 06] That is the great issue, isn't it? You can do all the structures you want, but the human heart must be reformed, always, and that must be our central prayer as we conclude this book, as we seek to build for eternity, as we seek to play our part as Christ builds his church.

There are many challenges, many opponents, both outside and inside the church, but the greatest need, the greatest issue is our own hearts and lives as individuals, as a church.

we need to be constantly reformed by God's living and active word so that we would live in conformity to it, that we would live lives marked by holiness and rejoicing, lives lived in response to the grace that we've been shown through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

That is a people that can be effectively put to work for the purpose of building God's eternal kingdom, a people constantly rejoicing but also constantly being reformed with hearts changed.

Let that be our prayer at the end of this book. So let's pray and then we'll sing to close. our Heavenly Father, we thank you that your word is always realistic, but always brings us hope.

[52 : 46] We thank you that your word is like a mirror, showing us reality, showing us our own hearts. And so as we are confronted by it this morning, would you help us where we need to respond in repentance, but also to respond with great joy, with great rejoicing, because we're not alone in this task of building your kingdom, but you are with us.

You equip us. You help us. So Lord, help us to lift our eyes to your great promises, to be a reminder that we belong to you.

And so with the keynote of our lives, be rejoicing, because you are our king, and we get to serve you. So help us to respond to your word with faithful trust and obedience.

In Jesus' name, Amen.