

Slow Fade

Brian Carroll / General Adult

Work in Progress / Nehemiah 13

Most people don't walk away from faith in a single moment—they drift. Not with a bang, but with a quiet series of small compromises that hardly feel like compromise at all. Nehemiah 13 pulls back the curtain on that reality and shows us something unsettling: spiritual collapse rarely explodes—it erodes. And if we're not paying attention, the same slow fade can happen in us.

Introduction

- You just watched a scene from the 2002 movie adaptation of JRR Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*.
- And even if you're not a Tolkien fan (or perhaps have lived under a rock for the last 24 years), that was Gollum
 - Gollum wasn't always like that.
 - His name was Sméagol.
 - He was an ordinary guy, had normal relationships, lived a normal life.
 - It didn't look like much. Just a simple piece of gold.
 - But it was no ordinary ring—it carried a powerful, corrupting influence.
 - And almost immediately...Sméagol wanted it.
 - Not later. Not after thinking it through. Right then.
 - He wanted it badly enough to kill for it.
 - That ring began to change him.
 - Not all at once, but over time, it began to reshape him.
 - He grew isolated. His thinking changed.
 - His identity shifted, until eventually, he wasn't Sméagol anymore

- He became Gollum
- By the time you meet him in LOTR, he's a deeply divided character.
 - He's got two voices - one that remembers who he was, and one that's been consumed.
 - Gollum called the ring "my Precious."
 - The very thing that was destroying him was the thing he loved most in the world.
 - The thing to remember about him - he didn't lose himself all at once, he lost himself a little at a time.
- That's what makes that story so unsettling.
 - Because it's not just about Gollum
 - It's about what happens when something slowly, quietly, takes hold and you don't even feel it happening.
 - We're usually comfortable leaving that kind of story in fiction.
 - Leave it in the pages of the novel or on the movie.
 - But the reality is that the Bible shows us the very same pattern.
 - Certainly, there are individuals who walk that pathway - but there are also tragic times when the whole nation begins to drift into failure.
 - Not a sudden collapse or open rebellion.
 - Just a slow fade.
 - That's where we find ourselves at the end of this journey through Nehemiah.
- The last time we saw these people, they were dialed in.
 - They had heard the Word of God.
 - They had confessed their sin.

- They had made very specific commitments - even signed on the dotted line.
- They said things like, “We will not neglect the house of our God.”
- And now, just a short time later.
- The fade begins.
 - Not loudly or dramatically.
 - But unmistakably.
- Lines that had been drawn start to blur.
- Priorities that had been clear start to shift.
- Things that would have been unthinkable start to feel normal.
- And that’s the danger.
 - Spiritual collapse rarely explodes, instead it erodes.
 - And Nehemiah is a real-time look at the erosion at work.

Scripture Reading

Nehemiah 13:1–10 ESV

¹ On that day they read from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the people. And in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God,

² 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.

³ As soon as the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent.

⁴ Now before this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, and who was related to Tobiah,

⁵ prepared for Tobiah a large chamber where they had previously put the grain offering, the frankincense, the vessels, and the tithes of grain, wine, and oil, which were given by commandment to the Levites, singers, and gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests.

⁶ While this was taking place, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I went to the king. And after some time I asked leave of the king

⁷ 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.

⁸ And I was very angry, and I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber.

⁹ 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.

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 field.

- We get to chapter 13 and we learn that Nehemiah has had to return to the King.
 - Based on the timing given to us in chapter 2, it looks like Nehemiah has been in Jerusalem for about 12 years.
 - Back in 2:6, Nehemiah had to agree to return at some point - so this may very well be the agreed-upon time.
 - We don't really know how long Nehemiah is away, but while he is away, things start to get sideways back in Jerusalem.
- The sense of irony and frustration in this chapter is almost overwhelming.

- The nation has come a long way in the 100 years since Zerubbabel brought the first group of exiles back.
- There have been setbacks and challenges, but we've just experienced this incredible spiritual revitalization through the reading of the Law and the renewal of the Covenant.
- The nation entered into a WRITTEN covenant, with signatures.
- We have the receipts of their commitment...but we see something really important at work.
- Signatures on a page don't mean much if they don't stem from a true change of heart.
 - In some ways it reminds me of the front pages of a lot of bibles.
 - Maybe you've seen it - your bible may even have them.
 - But there are often pages where you can document significant spiritual milestones.
 - But it isn't that documentation that assures your salvation.
 - Baptism isn't the documentation that assures your salvation.
 - There are a LOT of baptized unbelievers sitting in church pews who are hoping that their baptism counts for something.
 - It's not all that different from the people who signed that covenant back in [Nehemiah 10](#)...that signature isn't worth the ink it's signed with if it isn't coming from a place of true repentance.
- And that's why Nehemiah ends with this bleak picture of spiritual decline...a slow fade into folly.
 - And let's not pretend this is an Old Testament problem.
 - **The writer of Hebrews warns us very clearly about this potential.**

Hebrews 2:1 *ESV*

¹ Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.

- But how does this process begin?

It begins when the people blur their boundaries (vv. 1-9)

- Chapter 13 opens with a reminder about the requirements of the Law.
 - This was read publically...everybody knew it.
 - The rule was simple: no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be allowed into the assembly of God.
 - That sounds harsh - but it is consistent with the promises that God made to Abraham.
 - Remember, God promised to bless the nations that bless Abraham and curse the nations that cursed Abraham.
 - Nehemiah reminds us here about why these people are particularly cursed, and it goes all the way back to [Numbers 21](#).
 - While it may sound harsh, it wasn't without grace.
 - You may remember the story of a young woman named Ruth.
 - What country was Ruth from? She was a Moabitess.
 - But she was welcomed into the assembly of God's people.
 - But remember the oath she made to her MiL back in [Ruth 1:16](#).
 - Your people shall be my people and your God my God.
 - She was from Moab, but she gave up everything to follow the God of Israel.
- So we know the standard - and it's pretty cut and dry. We even see that there is room for grace.
 - But that's not what's happening here.
 - Our ol' buddy Tobiah makes an appearance again.
 - Turns out he's got some Moabite or Ammonite DNA.

- But he's also got some family connections with this priest named Eliashib.
- Turns out a little nepotism goes a long way.
- While Nehemiah is away, Eliashib basically gives Tobiah an office IN THE TEMPLE.
 - He cleans out a room where they stored a lot of the sacred vessels and supplies.
 - Tobiah takes a trip to IKEA and fills the space with comfortable and functional furniture.
 - And he basically turns it into an apartment so Tobiah has somewhere to stay when he comes to harass Nehemiah (I don't actually know if that's why he's in the city, but that's the only thing Tobiah seems to be good at, so it works in my head).
 - This is so absolutely mind-blowing to me.
 - Nehemiah's reaction is predictable.
 - He throws out Tobiah's junk.
 - He has the place disinfected because Tobiah was a nasty tenant.
 - And he restores the chamber.
- We see that only Eliashib is mentioned, and he may be the gross offender.
 - But let's be honest.
 - How many priests and Levites watched this happen and didn't intervene?
 - Silence didn't make them innocent, it made them complicit.
 - Remember - they know the standard. And this ain't it.
 - Maybe it was because of the family connection.
 - Maybe somebody said, "It's just a storage room."
 - Maybe somebody said, "Tobiah is a really swell guy."

- The point is that more than a handful of people had to turn a blind eye to an OBVIOUS violation of the Covenant even if they were able to rationalize it.
- And this is where we are tempted to say, “Those foolish Israelites.”
 - But be careful, because how many lines do we blur?
 - How many relationships do we have with people like Tobiah.
 - They’re not evangelistic.
 - They’re corrosive.
 - We’re not winning them to Christ, they’re pulling us away from Him.
 - Paul warned about this...

1 Corinthians 15:33 ESV

³³ Do not be deceived: “Bad company ruins good morals.”

- And we may have a mind full of excuses and rationalizations.
- And we slowly fade from obedience into disobedience.
- Not with a dramatic fall, but a casual, perhaps even imperceptible slide into sinful patterns.
- Blurred lines don’t stay blurry for long, they eventually become visible decline.

It shows up when we start to neglect our priorities (vv. 10-22)

- Remember that chamber they cleaned out for Tobiah...well, it turns out that is where they kept the “payment” for those who served in the Temple.
 - The Levites and priests had to be taken care of.
 - The law provided for their support.
 - But when you empty the room where their support was stored - guess what?

- They become like ancient TSA agents - they're working but nobody is signing their paychecks.
- And how long do you work without a paycheck before you start looking for other options?
- So they start to leave the Temple and head back to their homes so they can make a living.
 - If you remember the last words of the covenant in chapter 10.
 - It says, "We will not neglect the house of our God."
 - And what are we now doing? We're neglecting the house of our God!
- I'm going to say this — there's a part of me that looks at the Levites and says, "I can't blame them for bailing."
 - They've got families to take care of.
 - They've got to eat too.
 - But this is why this decline is so sinister.
 - It started with a bad decision, a spiritual compromise.
 - But now it's impacting others.
- And now there are no worship leaders in the Temple and the spiritual health of the entire nation suffers as a result.
- Guess what - you can see it happening in v. 15.
 - The community starts to get inconsistent with the sabbath.
 - People were treading winepresses on the sabbath.
 - They started bringing in all kinds of harvests in on the sabbath.
 - Maybe they saw this as a compromise.
 - We need to get this stuff to the market so it's fresh.
 - They may even be using what we talked about last week as cover.

- Remember, 9/10 of the people were to live in the villages and farms around Jerusalem to provide the resources necessary for the city.
- They're only doing what they've been asked to do.
- People from Tyre got in on the action too.
 - Now you've got non-Jews selling stuff on the sabbath.
 - It's a mess and you can sort of tell that it's starting to affect Nehemiah.
 - He actually threatens some of these people down in v. 21.
 - He tells them that if they don't stop, he's going to lay hands on them.
 - That's NOT the same kind of hand laying that happens in the New Testament.
- This is all part of the same slow fade.
- And it's not isolated to the Jews in Nehemiah's day.
- This is what happens in our lives too.
 - We make a small or a series of small compromises.
 - When you add those things up, it starts to impact the whole community.
 - It never stays private. It never only impacts you.
- Every time something that should be central gets pushed to the side, it creates a gap.
 - And gaps don't stay empty.
 - They get filled with something else.
 - In Nehemiah's day, the gap was in the Temple.
 - The Levites leave.

- Worship suffers.
- The whole nation feels it.
- The sabbath was another gap.
 - A little violation here, nobody notices.
 - A vendor opening a shop there, and maybe it's even seen as a HUGE convenience.
 - Like having an ancient Dollar General just down the street.
 - But a little bit of compromise and eventually you've got a gigantic mess.
- And it still works the same way.
 - When what is supposed to be central in our lives, gets treated as optional, something starts to shift.
 - Not all at once.
 - But over time.
 - For some, that shows up in how we treat gathered worship.
 - It used to be a priority.
 - Now it's one option among many.
 - And we've always got reasons.
 - Schedules. Sports. Travel. Fatigue.
 - And again...none of that feels like rebellion.
 - But when the people of God start stepping away from the place where God's people gather, it doesn't just affect them.
 - It affects the whole body.
 - When enough people make that shift, what was once normal starts to disappear.

- And suddenly, the very thing we said we would not neglect, is exactly what we're neglecting.
- Which is the same language we get in [Hebrews 10:24-25](#)

Hebrews 10:24–25 ESV

²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,

²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

- And when that kind of drift goes unchecked, it doesn't just affect what we do, it starts to reshape who we are.
- Because at some point, this isn't just about neglected priorities it's about a compromised identity.

They begin to live out of step with who they are. (vv. 23-29)

- I'll be honest - this is one of the hardest sections in the book.
- This isn't about God's people becoming something else... it's about God's people living like they've forgotten who they are.
- First, we find out that they're revisiting a problem that has already been dealt with once before in the book of Ezra.
 - And though the books of Ezra & Nehemiah cover a century, the end of Ezra and the book of Nehemiah are in about the same timeline.
 - The people Nehemiah is dealing with likely have a living memory of this issue from the last time it was addressed.
- But now, it's gotten more complicated.
 - This is what spiritual compromise and sinful patterns do.
 - They don't work towards simplicity.
 - They only work toward complexity.

- When you look at David's sin with Bathsheba - the sin only got more complex.
 - It went from a private, inappropriate glance on the roof to adultery to conspiracy and murder.
 - This isn't just observation, the Bible actually describes the progression.
 - James said it this way:

James 1:14–15 *ESV*

¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.

¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

- Now in Nehemiah...you've got children growing up in God's people, who can't even speak the language of God's people.
 - They still live in the same place, but they don't sound the same anymore.
 - They still belong to the same people, but something fundamental has shifted.
 - That's not just a cultural issue.
 - That's an identity issue.
 - I'm not going to get political here — but a common language is a key to the unity and identity of a people.
 - If you visit Canada, you'll find a pretty significant divide between French-speaking Quebec and the rest of the country.
 - We did a mission trip in Alberta once and the people there treated Quebec like it was a different country.
 - And honestly, it kind of is.

- In Ezra, this was a problem - but now that a little bit of time has passed, this has become a major issue that is impacting their very identity.
- And it still works the same way.
 - You can be around the things of God, and slowly lose the language of the things of God.
 - You stop speaking about Scripture the way you once did.
 - You stop praying the way you once did.
 - You stop thinking in categories shaped by God's Word.
 - Not all at once.
 - But over time, and eventually you still belong to God's people, but your life doesn't sound like it used to.
- Maybe you know some people like that.
 - You've seen the drift in their lives.
 - And the more you see the drift, the less you see them in this place.
 - And they just don't sound like they used to.
 - For many, that began with a government-sanctioned stay-at-home order in March of 2020 and they've still not found the joy that they once had Christ.
- Or maybe you see the drift in your own life.
 - And the vibrancy that was once your walk with Christ has faded to the point that you're not really sure what happened.
 - It was a slow fade...no gross moral failure, no epic collapse.
 - It may have even started because of something beyond your control.
 - The experience of grief, illness, or even being the victim of someone else's sin.
 - I think of how many people walk around today the victim of church-hurt.

- They were hurt by some legitimate sin, and they've allowed that to impact their walk with the Savior.
- Even leaders aren't immune from this.
- Nehemiah sees what's happening and his response is strong.
 - Look at v. 25:

Nehemiah 13:25 *ESV*

²⁵ 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.

- Just let that sit for a second.
 - Because that feels like a lot. It's rather jarring.
 - This isn't calm, measured leadership.
 - This isn't a gentle conversation over coffee.
 - This is a man reacting with intensity.
- We need to understand something about the Bible.
 - Just because the Bible records something, doesn't mean it's prescribing it for us to imitate.
 - Nehemiah is showing us what happened, not giving us a leadership playbook.
 - Jacob, as student pastor I know you deal with some ridiculous stuff - you can't turn to [Nehemiah 13](#) as your go-to response.
- But we do need to ask the question:
 - What would make someone respond like this?
 - What would drive a leader to this point?
 - Nehemiah is a man who knows what's at stake.
 - He knows where this pattern leads.

- He's seen it before and now he's watching it again.
- So even if we're not called to reproduce his reaction, we should still feel his urgency.
 - Nehemiah reacts strongly because slow drift doesn't stay small.
 - It grows.
 - It spreads.
 - It reshapes a people.
 - And he refuses to treat something destructive like it's harmless.
- Many of you remember the Titan submarine disaster in 2023.
 - That was the sub that was on an expedition to see the wreck of the Titanic when it imploded and instantly killed everyone on board.
 - The investigation of the accident determined that the experimental carbon-fiber used in the hull of the sub failed after repeatedly being subjected to deep-water dives.
 - Slowly but surely with each dive, the individual strands of carbon fiber were failing until enough had failed to result in a catastrophic implosion.
- That's the problem with this slow fade of sin - enough failures and you end up wrecking everything.

Invitation

- And when you step back and look at [Nehemiah 13](#), it's honestly a sobering way to end the book.
 - No big victory moment.
 - No triumphant celebration.
 - Just a people who were once dialed in slowly drifting.
- And if you're paying attention, it should feel familiar.

- Because we've seen this story before.
- We saw it at the very beginning.
- That man by the river, who found something small, something that didn't look like much.
- And over time, it took everything.
- That's **Sméagol**.
- He didn't plan to become Gollum.
- He didn't wake up one day and say, "This is who I want to be."
 - He just kept choosing the ring.
 - And over time what once tempted him defined him.
 - What once disturbed him became normal.
 - And eventually, he couldn't even recognize what he had lost.
- And that's the warning of [Nehemiah 13](#).
 - Not that God's people suddenly stop being His, but that God's people can slowly start living like they've forgotten that they are.
 - And here's where this lands for us.
- For some of you you can see the drift.
 - You can trace it. There was a time when your walk with Christ was vibrant.
 - When His Word was alive to you.
 - When prayer was natural.
 - When gathering with God's people wasn't a burden—it was a joy.
- And now, it's not what it used to be.
 - Not because of one big moment.
 - Just a series of small shifts.

- A boundary blurred here. A priority neglected there.
- And over time, something changed.
- For others you're not even sure when it started.
 - No big failure. No dramatic story.
 - Just a slow fade.
- And now you don't sound like you used to.
 - And then there may be some here.
 - Who are watching it happen in someone you love.
 - And you feel what Nehemiah felt.
 - That weight.
 - Not anger, but burden.
- So what do we do?
 - We don't panic.
 - And we don't pretend.
 - We pay attention.
 - Because the danger isn't that you've fallen out of God's grace, the danger is that you've drifted from the places where that grace is most clearly experienced.
- So the call is simple.
 - Where have the lines started to blur?
 - What priorities have quietly slipped?
 - Where has your life started to move out of step with who God has made you to be?
 - And here's the good news, You don't have to keep drifting.

- Because the same God who pursued His people in Nehemiah's day, is still pursuing His people today.
- Not to cast them out but to call them back.
- So don't ignore the drift.
- Don't explain it away.
- Don't wait for it to fix itself.
- Turn.
 - Return to the things that once anchored you.
 - Return to the Word.
 - Return to prayer.
 - Return to the people of God.
 - David prayed in [Psalm 51](#) - "Restore unto me the joy of my salvation."
 - David wasn't asking to be saved again. He's asking to feel it again.
 - That's the prayer you begin with today.
- Because the story doesn't have to end like Gollum's.
 - It can end with restoration.
 - Spiritual collapse rarely explodes, it erodes, like rust on a piece of metal.
 - It's small at first, but eventually it consumes.
- We've called this series *Work in Progress*.
 - And that's exactly what we've seen.
 - A city under construction.
 - A people being rebuilt.
 - Lives being reshaped by the Word of God.

- And for a while, it looks like everything is coming together.
 - But [Nehemiah 13](#) reminds us of something we don't always want to hear.
 - Just because something has been built doesn't mean it's finished.
 - And just because something is strong today, doesn't mean it doesn't need attention tomorrow.
- Because the work God is doing in us, isn't a one-time project.
 - It's ongoing.
 - And if we stop paying attention if we stop guarding what God has built.
 - If we start treating as optional what God has said is essential, the same place that once showed evidence of growth can slowly show signs of decay.
 - Not all at once.
 - But over time.
- So here's the takeaway.
 - You are God's workmanship.
 - But you are still under construction.
 - And that means we don't drift we stay engaged in the work.
 - We guard what God has built.
 - We return when we begin to wander.
 - We stay close to the One who is doing the work in us.
- Because this is still a work in progress.
 - The work God is doing in you is still going.
 - The scaffolding is still up.
 - The question is whether you're showing up to the site.

