

Nehemiah Part 21
A Godly Response to Sin
Nehemiah 13:1-31

God's people begin to take for granted all that God had done for them and slide back into their sinful patterns of life. Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem (which he had left in the hands of now obviously not-so-capable leaders) with a Godly response to their sinful behavior.

Nehemiah 13:1-31 *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**, 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**.*

*Now before this, **Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God**, and who was **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 commandment to the Levites, singers, and gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests. **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 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?”** 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 Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and Pedaiah of the Levites, and as their assistant Hanan the son of Zaccur, son of Mattaniah, 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 winepresses on the Sabbath**, and **bringing in heaps of grain and loading 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, who 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? 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 load 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 also 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 only the language of each people. **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 Sanballat 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. Remember me, O my God, for good.

On that day...

Nehemiah is referring to the fact that he had been gone for some 10 or 12 years. This is the day of his return to Jerusalem after that time away...

Hearing God’s Word Brings a Call to Obedience

Nehemiah 13:1-2

No Ammonite or Moabite should ever come into the assembly of God

- As the people drew near to God in worship (as seen in Nehemiah 11 and 12),
- they became aware of God’s standards.
- In this case the standard stated in Deuteronomy 23:3-4,
- where the Ammonites and Moabites were not to be regarded as part of Israel.

Deuteronomy 23:3-4 *“No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of them may enter the assembly of the LORD forever, because they did not meet you with bread and with water on the way, when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you.*

Because they had not met the children of Israel with bread and water

- The Ammonites and Moabites were singled out because of their devious schemes against Israel,
- when Israel came into the promised land - at least a thousand years before this.

Long before the Ammonites and Moabites had schemed against Israel, God had made a promise to the father of the Jewish people,

- Abraham: *I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you* (Genesis 12:3).
- The command about the Ammonites and the Moabites is a simple fulfillment of this promise.

Coming into the assembly of God

- to be regarded as one of the people of Israel and people of God.
- It meant one could fully participate in the spiritual life of Israel.

An Israelite became a part of God’s covenant by birth

- but an Ammonite or Moabite could not.
- They had to become a part of the covenant by choice
- by joining with God’s covenant people and **leaving their own people.**

This command was a powerful message

- both then and now.

- It said to these Ammonites and Moabites, “You are not a part of the people of God by birth. You **must make a choice**. You cannot live the thinking and deeds of your anti-God culture, and truly join in the spiritual life of God’s people.
- **Unless you leave one and join the other**, you will never really be a part of this spiritual life.

God turned the curse into a blessing

- This refers to the events of Numbers 22-24,
- where God blessed Israel, even though the prophet Balaam wanted to curse them.
- It also reminds us that God is able - more than able - to turn any curse into a blessing.

After hearing God’s command, Israel obeys and separates from the mixed multitude.

Nehemiah 13:3

- They could have thought of 20 reasons to not do what the word of God plainly told them to do.
- Instead, they simply obeyed.

They could have made familiar excuses

- “That command was made long ago, and speaks to a different time.”
- “Things are different now.”
- “Let’s not go overboard.”
- “Let’s assign a task force to examine the issue.”

The mixed multitude

- This refers to those who wanted to associate with the people of Israel,
- but did not want to count the cost and make a full commitment.

Even today, there are people of good will in churches

- Honorable people, who respect God and His word.
- Yet they are part of **the mixed multitude**

Because they have not received God’s covenant of salvation in Jesus.

- Such people are welcome, but it should be understood where they stand.

Temple reforms

Nehemiah 13:3-9

But during all this I was not in Jerusalem

- This section indicates that Nehemiah left Jerusalem and
- went back to his duties in the Persian court.
- He was gone from Jerusalem for anywhere from 10 to 12 years.

Nehemiah left sometime after the remarkable spiritual revival noted in the recent chapters.

- But the real test of revival –
- the real test of God’s work in our lives - is the long term.
- It is seeing where we are with the Lord ten years after a season of great work.

I came to Jerusalem and discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah

- When Nehemiah came back, he saw that **Eliashib the priest**
- had entered into agreements with one of the enemies of Nehemiah’s work of rebuilding the wall - **Tobiah**.

Tobiah was an Ammonite (Nehemiah 2:10)

- one of the very mixed multitude that had been put out of the assembly of God’s people some 10 years before.

- Now **Tobiah** was not only *present* among the assembly, he actually rented rooms in the temple courts.

Tobiah had not changed over the years.

- He did not join the people of God in the terms of His covenant.
- The problem was evident to Nehemiah –
- but **Eliashib** was completely blind to it.

And it grieved me bitterly There were many reasons why this was so distressing to Nehemiah.

Because rooms in the courts of the temple of God

- were being occupied by a man not only a pagan,
- but who also had a history of actively opposing God’s work in the days of Nehemiah.

Because it reflected so badly on Eliashib

- (a man who was a spiritual leader in Israel) and those around him.
- It showed that if Eliashib was blind to a problem area,
- there was also no one around him who could confront him with the problem.

It made Nehemiah question the lasting value of the spiritual revival he witnessed when last in Jerusalem.

Therefore I threw all the household goods of Tobiah out of the room

- Nehemiah wasn’t one just to sit back and grieve.
- He took action - throwing all Tobiah’s stuff out of the rooms he occupied in the temple courts,
- then ceremonially cleansing the rooms,
- and finally by putting the rooms to their proper use - as storerooms for the sacred things of the temple.

Nehemiah is much like Jesus when He cleansed the temple from those who profaned it.

- Both Jesus and Nehemiah had the wisdom to not confuse love with being “nice” –
- and the wisdom to know when to take bold action.

Financial reforms

Nehemiah 13:10-14

I also realized that the portions for the Levites had not been given them

- The people did not obey God’s word regarding giving.
- The Levites and the singers could not fulfill their duties - and they had to leave that service.

Why is the house of God forsaken?

- The lack of giving was a way of forsaking the house of God.

I gathered them all together and set them in their place

- Nehemiah set the situation right by expecting the Levites and the singers to recommit to the work of serving God and His people as they should.
- He also reorganized the collection and accounting of the people’s tithes and gifts.

Priority reform

In those days I saw people in Judah treading wine presses on the Sabbath

- The Sabbath was being ignored in disobedience to God’s clear command under the Old Covenant.

- Foreigners sold and the people of Israel bought.

At the root, this was a problem of priorities.

- There is nothing wrong with buying and selling,
- only when our desire to buy and sell, to make money or spend money,
- becomes more important to us than honoring God.
- This was a clear way the people of Israel were putting making and spending money before glorifying God.

The New Testament makes it clear we are not under the law of the Sabbath

- in the same sense Israel was under the Old Covenant (Colossians 2:16-17);
- but we are certainly under the same obligation to make honoring God more important than making money or spending money.

You bring added wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath

- Nehemiah knew that sin was not only a personal issue.
- When such open sin is winked at and left uncorrected among God's people,
- it invites the correcting hand of God.

Nehemiah wasn't going to sit still for this

- he threatened **If you do so again, I will lay hands on you!**
- He did not mean the gentle laying on of hands for prayer,
- but the rough laying on of hands for correction.

Relationship reform.

Nehemiah 13:23-31a

In those days I also saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab

- In the years Nehemiah was away
- the Israelites had resumed their practice of intermarrying with the surrounding pagan nations
- This was in dramatic disobedience to God's command.

So I contended with them and cursed them, struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear

- From this strong reaction of Nehemiah,
- we gather he considered this to be the most dangerous of their sins –
- pursuing ungodly romance,
- and getting involved in romantic relationships God had said “no” to.
- Do you lift romance above honoring God? Most people do. Even Christians.

His example of Solomon is well taken (Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? . . . pagan women caused even him to sin)

- If Solomon, one of the wisest and most blessed men ever,
- sinned with unwise and ungodly romance
- then no one else should consider themselves invulnerable.

Nehemiah's clear conscience

Nehemiah 13:31b

Remember me, O my God, for good

- Nehemiah knew he did his best to make the people of God strong, safe, and secure.
- Beyond that, he also led them to be pure, worshipful, and obedient.

Yet, Nehemiah carried a sense of failure.

- In chapter 10 the people made a solemn covenant to God that they would not do 3 things
 - have ungodly romantic relationships (10:30),
 - buy and sell on the Sabbath (10:31),
 - and support the work of God with money as He commanded (10:32-39).

Nevertheless, in Nehemiah 13, some 10 to 12 years later,

- Israel was steeped in the exact sins they vowed to stop.
- Nehemiah had to address the problems of ungodly romantic relationships (13:23-31),
- buying and selling on the Sabbath (13:15-22),
- and failing to support the work of God as He commanded (13:10-14).

In Nehemiah 10:39 the people promised:

- *we will not neglect the house of our God.*
- But later in Nehemiah 13:11, Nehemiah had to ask: *Why is the house of God forsaken?*
- It was forsaken because Israel did not keep its promises before God.

This makes a point vividly clear:

- the law - that is, rules, vows, promises, covenants, and the such,
- are all ultimately powerless to stop sin.
- Only the grace of God, alive and flowing in our lives,
- can give us the power to truly overcome sin.

Paul expresses this in

Romans 8:3, *For God has done what the law, **weakened by the flesh**, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, **he condemned sin in the flesh**,*

Too many Christians look for victory

- in the making of rules, of vows, of promises –
- and fail to find it, because all those things tend to make us look to ourselves,
- instead of looking to Jesus.

The Old Testament history of Israel, from beginning to end, illustrates this.

- When the nation was first born at the Exodus,
- despite the most spectacular miracles, displays of God's glory, and revelation of the law,
- the people sinned, by crediting a gold calf with their deliverance from Egypt!
- And now here, at the end of the Old Testament history of God's people in the promised land,
- Nehemiah is pulling hair out - his own and those of sinners –
- because they couldn't keep their promises to God.

If we could be saved by our own promises,

- by our own commitment to Jesus,
- then His death would have been noble, but unnecessary.
- We aren't saved by some vow we make, or some leaf we turn over,
- but by trusting in who Jesus is, and what He has done to save us.