

**“Always Reforming”**  
**Nehemiah 13**  
**November 1, 2020**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

Many books conclude with a “happily-ever-after” ending. Nehemiah is not one of those books. The very matters that seemed to have been settled by Israel’s covenant renewal back in chapter 10 have once again become problems. As a review, in that covenant Israel committed itself to refrain from giving their sons and daughters in marriage to foreign unbelievers, to keep the Sabbath, and to support the temple with their tithes. In this concluding chapter of the book, Nehemiah must once again confront these same sins.

The chronology of this chapter is important and a little confusing. Nehemiah tells us in verse 6 that he had gone back to serve King Artaxerxes. In the 32<sup>nd</sup> year of the king, which was about the year 433 BC, he approaches the king to ask permission to return to Jerusalem. We know that his first trip to Jerusalem was around the year 445, twelve years prior to the events of our chapter. What we don’t know is how many of these twelve years were spent in Jerusalem and how many in Persia. Nehemiah had worked at a feverish pace to complete the wall. Amazingly, the events of the first 12 chapters, all the way through 13:3, spanned only seven months. Remember that Nehemiah was on a leave of absence to go to Jerusalem initially. His main job was as cupbearer to the king, a job to which he needed to return when his task in Jerusalem was concluded. So my best guess is that the vast majority of these twelve years, probably around ten, were spent in Persia, not Jerusalem.

So now, after his ten-year absence, Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem to discover that it has fallen back into the same sins he had addressed years earlier. It didn’t take long for their promises and commitments to weaken. Don’t you find that to be a realistic description, not only of our lives but of our churches too? Have you ever had the experience of making a promise both to yourself and to God about some change needed in your life? You are sincere in your desire to make this change but find that your zeal for it fades over time, and you eventually forget it completely. The truth is that ongoing reformation is needed. We should expect to have to fight all our days to remain faithful to God, to keep trusting him and obeying him. Though we long for plateaued living where we can kick back and rest a little, we find instead that unless we keep fighting, we slide backwards. Reformation of our lives and our churches must be perpetual rather than one-time. The matters Nehemiah confronts here are the same ones, broadly considered, that we still fight. Let’s look at these sins, together with the answer to them.

## **I. Wrongs to Be Righted**

Upon his return to Jerusalem, Nehemiah finds four areas of significant spiritual decline among the people. Though the precise circumstances may look a little different for us, we still fight the same sins. The first one is to make God small and people big. Nehemiah must have been shocked to arrive back in Jerusalem and find Tobiah having taken up residence in the temple. The storeroom, where the people's tithes were to be kept, had been transformed into an apartment for him. You may remember Tobiah from earlier in the book. He was a constant thorn in Nehemiah's side, a powerful man who allied himself with Israel's enemies. How did this enemy come not only to be tolerated but to be given a room in Israel's most holy place? It was a case of nepotism. He was related, probably through marriage, to Eliashib the high priest. But why would Eliashib do this? He did so because he feared man more than he feared God. Tobiah was a man of great influence and significance. Eliashib was more concerned to please Tobiah than he was to please God, a concern that undoubtedly brought some advantage to Eliashib. And seemingly everyone else in Jerusalem went along with it, probably because they feared Eliashib more than they feared God.

Don't you find the same temptation within yourself? Perhaps it's in the area of people-pleasing. You care far more about what people think of you than what God thinks of you. You end up not even knowing who you are anymore because you become what you think others expect of you. Peer pressure is a very strong motivator in your life. God is a light presence in your life rather than a weighty presence. He is small and other things or people are big.

The second sin Nehemiah encounters is neglect of the tithe. The work of the temple required a great deal of effort from many people. The Levites were the primary workers, and God had given Israel a command to give ten percent of their crops and goods each year for the support of the temple. These goods were to be stored in the very room Tobiah had been occupying. But the tithe had not been given, with the result that the Levites had no choice but to leave Jerusalem and return to their towns and work their fields like everyone else. So the work of the temple was dormant.

Israel had a history of problems with tithing. A couple of centuries prior to this, before the exile, the prophets condemned them for using their tithes to bribe God (Amos 4:4ff; 5:22). They thought they could buy God's favor with their tithes. Now, their problem is the opposite, that of robbing God by withholding the tithe (Mal. 3:8). So they were vacillating between a superstitious approach and a stingy approach to tithing, between bribing God and ignoring God. Instead, the tithe should be viewed as an act of worship, one that both acknowledges God's ownership of all things and trusts him to provide for our needs. My wife has been a big encouragement to me and to all of our children in this. Those of you who know her know that she loves the treasure

hunt involved in shopping at thrift stores. When our children were younger, before taking them to the thrift store with her, she would ask them what they needed and wanted there. Then they would pray for God's provision of that. More often than not, the very things they had prayed for would be there, at a fraction of the price they would have cost elsewhere. Three little children learned that God provides for his children, and three little children grew up learning to tithe with joy and trust in their hearts.

The third sin was the violation of the Sabbath. It was business before worship. The Sabbath was beginning to look just like any other day of the week. Business was being conducted as goods were transported and sold. Nehemiah points out that this was the very sin that led to the exile in the first place. It is true that the Sabbath obligation in the New Testament is changed somewhat from that of the Old Testament. Paul teaches that the Sabbath laws were a picture of what we have in Christ (Col. 2:16-17). But there is still an element of sabbath obligation we have, expressed well by the Heidelberg Catechism.

First, that the ministry of the gospel and Christian education be maintained, and that I diligently attend church, especially on the Lord's day, to hear the Word of God, to participate in the holy Sacraments, to call publicly upon the Lord, and to give Christian service to those in need. Second, that I cease from my evil works all the days of my life, allow the Lord to work in me through his Spirit, and thus begin in this life the eternal Sabbath."

We are guilty of this same sin when we put the worship of God as a lower priority than the rest of our lives.

The last sin Nehemiah confronts is that of mixed marriages. As we've noted before, the Bible is not against racially mixed marriages. But it is opposed to marriages between God's people and those who are not worshipers of the God of the Bible. Nehemiah states a compelling reason for this prohibition of religiously mixed marriages. **"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"** (v. 26). The author of much of the wisdom in the book of Proverbs ended up drifting from the Lord and bringing great harm to the entire nation. Earlier in the paragraph, Nehemiah pointed out how these marriages resulted in the loss of their children to the worship of Israel's God. They no longer even spoke the language the Bible was written in.

We would all agree, I'm sure, that it is a tragic outcome for our children to leave the Christian faith. It happened in this instance through a process. The children didn't walk with God because their parents embraced idolatry. Their parents embraced idolatry as a result of linking themselves with those who

didn't worship their God. I think the application for us is to rid our lives of anything that draws our hearts away from the Lord. Our children may be sacrificed if we don't do so. If there is a hobby that draws you away from the Lord, find another hobby. If television watching replaces the Lord as the desire of your heart, then curtail your television viewing. To remain true to the Lord is serious business.

## II. The Righter of Wrongs

We see what a serious business it is to follow the Lord by noting the fierce response Nehemiah makes to these sins. When he finds Tobiah occupying the temple storeroom, he doesn't negotiate with him about a mutually agreeable compromise. He throws out both Tobiah and all his furnishings. When he discovers the neglect of the tithe, he confronts to their faces the officials responsible for collecting them. When the Sabbath was being violated, he posts guards at the gates of the city to prevent the merchants from entering on the eve of the Sabbath. Then he goes out to those same merchants who are outside the gates and threatens them with violence if they don't leave and stay away. And concerning those who had married foreign women, he **“confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair”** (v. 25). And it is clear to all he confronted that he meant business. There is no indication of resistance from Tobiah, even though Tobiah himself was a man of power and influence. When he threatens the merchants with violence, they don't challenge him. They leave and don't cross him again. One of the young men who had married a foreign woman was banished, even though he was from an influential family.

What should we think about this display of power from Nehemiah? It goes against the grain of our contemporary culture in which many think that the essence of being a Christian is simply to be nice. It is clear that Nehemiah is not being nice here. I want to point out three things that are important for us to know about Nehemiah's strong actions. First, this is not the only biblically appropriate response to sin. The Bible at times simply urges the response of patience. We simply bear with people patiently (2 Tim. 2:24). At other times we are to rebuke with gentleness (Gal. 6:1). There are times too when a stronger response is called for. In the New Testament era, this stronger response is never to take the form of physical violence. Unlike in Nehemiah's day, the power of the sword has been removed from the church today by Jesus himself. But there is a spiritual means Jesus makes available to the church, and that is church discipline. Such discipline is a severe remedy, to be employed when those who profess faith in Christ refuse to repent of sin. If the idea of church discipline embarrasses you, then I would suggest to you that this response is an indication of embracing more the values of our world than those of the Bible. Niceness has eclipsed holiness.

A second truth to be pointed out is that judgment is an indicator of value. God judges what he values. We do as well. Our culture judges and condemns those who lay claim to absolute truth found in God's revelation through the Bible. This includes claims to moral truth as well as theological truth. And any who dare violate this denial of truth are quickly judged and condemned, making clear that our culture values relativism and self-autonomy. God values the preservation of his people, and that is evident in Nehemiah's actions. These sins that Nehemiah confronts threaten to destroy God's people through obliterating their distinctives. God values his people and maintaining a relationship with them marked by their distinctives as his holy people. He values the Church.

Third, let me point out that Nehemiah had a softer side to him. We saw back in chapter 5 that it was his practice to provide for the significant financial needs of his governor's office and staff out of his personal funds rather than through the taxation of an already impoverished people. Nehemiah was exceedingly generous, though it cost him a great deal of money. So the one who righted the wrongs in Israel had both a soft side and a hard side. He was both generous and firm. He shows what the ultimate righter of wrongs is like, our Lord Jesus. He is both gentle and fierce. Jesus said of himself, **"I am gentle and lowly in heart"** (Matt. 11:29). But he also once made a whip and chased the money changers out of the temple. And the last book of the Bible portrays something far more frightening about Jesus. It says that on the day he returns in his wrath that even the most powerful people on the earth will seek shelter in caves. And they will call to the mountains and rocks, **"Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb"** (Rev. 6:16). Can you imagine something so frightening that a person would prefer to be buried alive than to face it? Such is the wrath of the one greater than Nehemiah, our Lord Jesus.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Jesus is the one who will right all wrongs. But the truth is that all of us have perpetrated wrongs. How do we know that we will not be the victims of Jesus' wrath? The opening verses of chapter 13 are deliberately included to give us an answer to that. The passage mentions an incident from the Old Testament when the Moabites hired the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites. Balaam was highly motivated to do so because they were offering him a great deal of money. But every time he opened his mouth to bring a curse, God filled his mouth with blessing instead. God **"turned the curse into a blessing"** (v. 2). When our behavior deserves God's curse, Jesus turns it into blessing on the basis of having taken the curse for us himself. He rights the wrong in us by becoming the wrong and being cursed for it. And when others wrong us, he is able to turn that to blessing as well. So we trust him to right the wrongs in our lives.