

“Revive Us Again”
Nehemiah 13
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(Lord’s Day Service, March 11, 2018)

Nehemiah 13

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. ¹¹ 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. ¹² Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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! ¹⁷ Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, “What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day? ¹⁸ 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.”

¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ Then the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice. ²¹ 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. ²² 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.

²³ In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. ²⁴ 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. 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. ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?”

²⁸ 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. ²⁹ Remember them, O my God, because they have desecrated the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.

³⁰ Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work; ³¹ and I provided for the wood offering at appointed times, and for the firstfruits. Remember me, O my God, for good.

Introduction

The Book of Nehemiah is really about the building of the nation, city, and people of God by rebuilding the wall. Chapters 1-7 of Nehemiah focus on the rebuilding of the wall. Chapters 8-10 are about the renewal of the people: revival through the Word of God, revival through repentance, and revival through commitment. Chapters 11-13 are about the restoration of the city. Chapters 11-12 mark the celebration of the wall but after a few years, they fall back with their sin prevalent in the nation. Nehemiah, who left the city for a while, returns in Chapter 13 and we see the second reformation of revival.

After twelve years as a governor of Jerusalem, Nehemiah returns to Persia and remains there for seven to twelve years beside King Artaxerxes. During his absence, the high priests, his family, and the influential citizens of Jerusalem discard policies that Nehemiah incorporated from Scripture. The problems that Nehemiah face as he returns to the city are not new ones. They are actually problems caused by the people’s inability to keep the commitments made at the end of Chapter 10 as they end up falling back.

Passages like this helps us to look at the reality of our lives. We make commitments and we also fall. Was the revival real in this chapter? Was it real when we made commitments? It is similar to the principle of forgiveness. When you have forgiven someone, repented of your unforgiving heart, and loved that person, you really have forgiven that person at that time. But when you are perhaps reminded of a memory upon seeing that person again, your sin nature is acting. Because of the sin nature within us, you have to forgive again and again. As you keep forgiving, you will overcome and be able to love other people as the spirit nature is growing. Revival is like that.

Two natures of our hearts are alive and although there is revival, we might relapse again because sin remains in us. Therefore, what we need is to be revived again and again until Jesus returns with an eternal revival.

It is also similar to the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics, which states that in a closed system, things move toward a maximum state of disorder or entropy. Physical law has a parallel relationship to the spiritual realm. Unless we are constantly fighting against our sin nature, things tend to move towards spiritual entropy. So, we have a spiritual cycle as we will see in this passage.

I. A cycle of spiritual battles [1-9]

A. Reform [1-3]

At the end of Chapter 12, the people make a commitment about contributions for the temple workers. Verse 1 is a continuation from the previous chapter as it says, "*On that day.*" They make another commitment to be separate from the Gentiles who were influencing them to sin. The commitments are still part of the celebration of the wall because after verse 3, Nehemiah leaves the city and will come back after a few years.

Before committing to separate themselves from Gentiles, the people listened to the reading of the Scripture from the Book of Moses in verse 1. They become aware of God's standard and holiness for them. Verse 1 specifically mentions the Ammonites and the Moabites. Ammon and Moab were born from the incestuous union with Lot and his two daughters. After they were born, they constantly created problems for the Israelites.

Deuteronomy 23:3-5 says, "*No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of his descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD.*" The Ammonites and Moabites could not enter the assembly because of the way they treated the Israelites when the Israelites were in the wilderness. If the Ammonites and Moabites repented, they could have been included among the Israelites. Therefore, the reason the Israelites could not accept these foreigners into their midst in verse 1 was because they would corrupt the Israelites from following the Lord.

Verse 2 mentions Balaam. Who was Balaam? Balaam was a prophet hired by the Moabite king to initially curse the Israelites so they could be conquered. But whenever Balaam wanted to curse the Israelites, only blessings came out. Therefore, Balaam suggested that the Moabite women tempt the Israelites through intermarriage and lead them to sin. History is used through the Word to help the Israelites separate from sin (verse 3). In the same way, we also need to separate from influence of sin.

Oswald Chambers wrote, "*Today the world has taken so many things out of the church and the church has taken so many things out of the world that it is difficult to know where you are.*" We are supposed to be different in our spirituality and in our character, but we are too similar to the world in our lifestyles.

Vance Havner said, *“Today the world has so infiltrated the church that we are more beset by traitors within than by foes without. Satan is not fighting churches – he is joining them.”* In the New Testament days, false prophets and teachers had to come inside the church physically. More so in our days, we have false teachers who affect us individually through social media, internet, YouTube, and anything we read or watch that are created from individuals with their own theologies and philosophies. We need to always think and discern what is right and wrong through the Word of God. Sometimes, we have friendships with the world without discernment and are being influenced by them. Although we need to have friendships with the world, we are not ready to be friends if they are influencing us. Instead, we need to be spiritually ready so that we could be influencers of the world for Christ.

B. Relapse [4-5]

Verse 4 says, *“Now before this...”* which does not specify time. An educated guess along with commentaries suggest that after seven to twelve years, Nehemiah returns. There is an unholy alliance between Eliashib, a spiritual leader, and Tobiah, a key enemy of the Jews mentioned in Chapters 2 and 4 in Nehemiah. The temple contained storage rooms used for grain offerings, utensils, and tithes received from the people since in those days, people had to physically bring tithes. However, the storage room, which was also a part of the temple, was given to Tobiah as a condominium. Tobiah was an Ammonite and a Gentile who tried to hinder the rebuilding of the wall in Chapters 2 and 4 and even sent threatening letters to Nehemiah in Chapters 6.

Why would a high priest have a relationship with Tobiah? Tobiah was a Gentile with a Jewish name and was likely racially mixed. It must have been hard to discern whether he belonged with the people of God. There was a good chance that one of the high priests was also related to Tobiah through marriage. We see this with Eliashib and Sanballat, an enemy of Nehemiah, where Eliashib’s grandson was married to Sanballat’s daughter.

The nation of Israel was meant to represent the people of God in the world. In the center of this nation, there was the city of Jerusalem. In the center of Jerusalem, there was the temple. In the center of the temple, there was Tobiah. It was a reflection of the Israelites’ compromise. We are like this too. What sits at the center and throne of our hearts is not Jesus Christ but something else that we love (sins, addictions, passions, and etc.). We need to learn how to disassociate ourselves from these influences in our lives.

C. Return [6-9]

Nehemiah saw what was wrong when he returned to Jerusalem because he was comparing what was happening to the law of God. If you saw someone who was about to drink poison, you would not be polite to that person. You would be harsh and even violent in order to stop that person from drinking poison. That was what Nehemiah was doing as the poison, Tobiah, was sitting in the heart of the nation.

1. Demand to lead [6]

Nehemiah took the leadership again and was examining the heart of the nation. In the same way, we need to demand to lead in the spheres of our lives instead of letting other influences and beliefs take control. Be in control of your hearts and lead your hearts away from sin so that Christ can be at the center.

2. Discover the problems [7]

Know what is at the center of our hearts whether it is a bad or neutral thing. Nothing should be at the center of our hearts other than Jesus Christ.

3. Declare war [8]

Declare war after discovering our problems. Because we are so attached to our sins, we sometimes need to get emotional to the point of being angry at our sins. Nehemiah showed unhindered actions and Tobiah was evicted immediately. In the same way, we need to give eviction notices to our sins right away. Nehemiah's actions depicted Jesus Christ's actions when he entered the temple of Jerusalem and kicked out moneychangers from the temple area. We need to have hatred and disassociation of sin as we declare war.

4. Decisively purge [9]

Nehemiah did not fear to place his actions before God for judgment. He considered his actions as good deeds.

Nehemiah 13:14 says, *"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."*

Verse 14 says *"good deeds"* in English but the word used in original language is called *hesed*, meaning faithfulness, loyal, covenant, mercy, and the everlasting love of God. Nehemiah was being faithful by loving God through his actions. Being faithful to God means saying no to certain things so that we can do the right things. Of course, our faithfulness is never by itself but because of God's faithfulness towards us, we can be faithful.

Nehemiah 13:22 says, *"Then I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come and guard the gates, to keep Sabbath day holy. Remember this also in my favor, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love."*

The phrase, *"your steadfast love"* represents the same word as described before, *hesed*. Because of God's faithful love for us, we can be faithful to Him and be faithful in loving other people. Nehemiah can decisively purge because of the grace of God that is in his heart.

When Nehemiah prays, “*Remember me,*” it means that we will be remembered for the priorities of our lives. He challenges the Israelites to rearrange their priorities. In the same way, we need to prioritize our lives with God being first and that we do everything out of love for the Lord and for His glory. As He is faithful to us, we need to be faithful to Him.

II. The areas of spiritual battle [23-31]

Nehemiah helps the Israelites prioritize their lives in three areas, which are money, time, and relationships. These areas are important in our lives as any compromises made in them will lead to spiritual fall.

A. Contribution – We need to be good stewards with our finances [10-14]

Verse 10 explains that the portions of the Levites and the singers were not given to them while the priests somehow received their portions since the priests were not mentioned. Since the storage room was occupied by Tobiath and there were no rooms in the temple to store the tithes, the Israelites were not required to pay them. Therefore, verse 10 says that the Levites and singers fled to the fields.

Spiritual problems seldom occur in isolation. When the high priest moved Tobiath into the storage room of the temple, the people could not tithe since there were no rooms to place tithes. As a result, people were caused to sin by not tithing and the Levites and the singers were caused to sin as they fled from their duties of feeding the people spiritually.

There are three lessons that we can learn where two relate to finances while the other relates to sin in general.

1. Live with necessities of life

As Christians, we need to train ourselves to live with necessities of life. That includes savings that are a part of the necessities of your lives such as insurance, education for your children, etc. It does not mean that you are not trusting the Lord. You are wisely saving for the necessities of the future. Paying taxes is also living with necessities of life as the money is given to the nation to help the poor. Tithing should be the minimum for Christians as we should also give and provide for the full-time workers within the churches of Jesus Christ.

2. Always check your heart by how you use the rest of your money

After you live with necessities, use the rest of the money to show the generous hand of God as you give or be ready to give in the future when you save. God has given to you the finances to show the love of Jesus Christ powerfully through your giving. He is going to use you in your radical generosity. It is not about how much money you get but really about how you use the money.

3. Sin often has a chain reaction

Eliashib sins through his marriage and his placement of Tobiah in the storage room. The Levites and singers flee leaving no means to spiritually feed the people. As a result, the whole nation is sinning and is affected by the sins of a few.

B. Sabbath – We need to be good stewards with our time [15-22]

This is a focus on the usage of our time specifically on Sundays. Israelites had to trust the Lord and not work on the seventh day, trusting that the Lord would provide as He provided manna on the seventh day for the Israelites in the wilderness. But in the passage, the Jews were selling and buying on the Sabbath, thereby causing other believers to sin.

Verse 16 mentions Gentiles called Tyrians who also lived in the city. Since they lived in the city, they were somehow associated with the Israelites. They were young believers who were sinning because older believers were being bad examples.

Verse 20 talks about the surrounding Gentiles who were unbelievers. The Israelites were supposed to be an example to the Gentiles. One way was to keep the Sabbath because this showed a distinction between the Israelites and the Gentiles by their trust in the Lord. The Sabbath pointed forward to Jesus Christ who provides for us rest and eternal life.

Verse 17 uses the word “*profaning*” which means turning what is sacred into common use. Of course, sin is doing something bad. But often, sin could be making something sacred that should be devoted to God into common use. The Israelites were turning the Sabbath day, which was holy before God, into common use. The application for us is to make Lord’s Day special in our relationship with God. The minimum is to go to church on Sunday. Make sure that it is a special day to the Lord. Verse 19 is a depiction of how our hearts should be shut off from the compromises and sins of this world.

C. Marriage – We need to be good stewards with our relationships [23-31]

1. Sin before the Lord [23]

Marrying unbelievers or Gentiles was sin before the Lord. This is not speaking against interracial marriage but against interfaith marriage.

2. Sin affecting the next generation [24]

Interfaith marriage is not good for us because it affects the children of the next generation. In those days, the parents had to teach the faith to their children in the Hebrew language because the Bible was written in Hebrew. For the children to not know the language of Judah meant that the parents were not raising them up spiritually. The Bible is clear on this. If you are Christian, you are not to marry an unbeliever.

3. Sin must be ruthlessly dealt with [25]

In verse 25, Nehemiah, out of love, is picturing the eternal judgment that is coming. The point is that sin has to be ruthlessly dealt with.

4. Sin has a history [26-27]

From a personal perspective, our sins all have a history. From a family perspective, our sins can affect our children. From a national perspective, we see the example of King Solomon. We are to learn from our past and recreate our stories in Jesus Christ in redemptive history.

5. Sin will be remembered [28-31]

Eliashib's grandson was the son-in-law of Sanballat, another enemy of Nehemiah. Nehemiah prays to God to remember them and their sin in verse 29. But he also prays another prayer in verse 31, "*Remember me, O my God, for good*" or *hesed*. This means sin can be replaced in God's mind about us because of the *hesed* of Jesus Christ whose blood covers our sins. Instead of God remembering our sins, He remembers our faithfulness because Jesus Christ is our faithfulness and our *hesed*.

III. Concluding thoughts

A. Nehemiah – his relationship, his purpose, and his faithfulness

His relationship: Regarding Nehemiah's relationship with God, he prays to God four times in this chapter to remember.

Nehemiah 13:14 "*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.*"

Nehemiah 13:22 "...*Remember this also in my favor, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love.*"

Nehemiah 13:29 "*Remember them, O my God, because they have desecrated the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.*"

Nehemiah 13:31 "...*Remember me, O my God, for good.*"

The word, "remember," is always related to the promise of God. Nehemiah is thinking about the promise of the Scripture and he prays based on the Word. Although the situation seems discouraging, he remembers the promises of God.

Derek Kidner, one of the commentators about Nehemiah regarding his prayers, wrote, "*Nehemiah's private self is completely of a piece with his public one:*

single-minded, utterly frank, and godly through and through...It (his prayer) springs from love, not self-love, as his tireless zeal for God has testified.”

His purpose: Nehemiah's purpose was to please God. There were so many oppositions and discouraging situations. Still, Nehemiah did not want people's approval or that situations be better. All he wanted was to be approved by God and that has to be our purpose.

His faithfulness: Nehemiah was about forty when he first became the governor of Israel. He was about fifty-two when the work in Jerusalem was finished. After his seven to twelve years of absence and return, he was about sixty-five years old. Perhaps, Nehemiah could have felt that all the work that he has done was useless after returning and seeing his people in sin. But he was not discouraged and he did not retire. He fought and achieved one of the most important victories in his life. He was going to finish well. How old are you now? Many of you are tired and discouraged after serving the Lord for a few years. Keep going. Press on. He is faithful.

B. Nehemiah's book

If we ended in Chapter 10, 11, or even 12, it would have been great. It was the same thing in Deuteronomy where Moses, himself, could not enter into the Promised Land due to his disobedience. It was the same thing in Malachi and in Nehemiah. It may be discouraging but remember that the Old Testament is only the first half. When a person falls or a revival dies down, never end with a sense of failure. Revival is just a small glimpse and portion of Christ's glory and beauty. Even if revival dies down, it is never futile. Each time it happens, we are strengthened bit by bit.

Conclusion

Revival is not only a glimpse of God's grace in a generation but also a stream of God's grace in generations. It is not a compartmentalized stream of God's blessing but a continuous stream of God's blessing and the Old Testament is only the first half.

In terms of sports, we may be getting killed in the first half. But we have a divine coach, the Father figure to all the players, and He has the best player on the bench. The best player is the coach's Son, His One and Only Son. The second half will come and the coach is going to use His best player. The tide will turn in the second half and while it seems like we are going to win, the best player gets hurt. Though the player can continue on and win the game by himself, he leaves the game as the coach pulls him out. For a while, the rest of the players are in fear. But oddly, the lessons the other players have learned from THE player and the influences of THE player were so strong and powerful that as the rest of the players played, the team was bound to win.

Nehemiah is only part of the first half. Jesus Christ has come, died and resurrected. Then he leaves the mission to twelve, measly, bad, and scared players. From then on, the church of Jesus Christ marches on through generations and that is where we are now. We are going to win. Jesus will return. We must go to the cross daily because there is nowhere else for us to go. We must

keep on going to the cross to be forgiven, to be refueled, and to be strengthened. We must go through the tomb to be resurrected spiritually and revived again because the church of Jesus Christ marches on. Are these revivals useless? No, these are the glimpses that we can hold onto. We are part of the second half. In Nehemiah, we take a glimpse of the city (Jerusalem). But when Jesus Christ returns, we will take a residence in THE city forever and ever. Until then, let's keep on going and be faithful.