

Relapse Requires Reform – Nehemiah 13:1-31

Scripture Reading: 1Peter 1: 13-19

Introduction

If the Bible were a fairy tale, the book of Nehemiah would end with the words, “And they lived happily ever after,” as the last verse of chapter 12

Despite bumps along the way, the path of the Judeans under the leadership of Nehemiah and, later, Ezra had been relatively smooth and generally toward improvement

It would be difficult to think of a better way to end the whole account than with Nehemiah’s record of the joyous, celebratory, and worshipful atmosphere that marked the dedication of the wall

But the Bible isn’t a fairy tale, and God’s Word never shrinks from showing how things really are

Still, when we come to chapter 13 and read how the Judean community thoroughly failed to follow the very commands of God that they had earlier promised to obey, we can’t help but be at least a little surprised and disappointed

The timeline in this chapter can be quite confusing, and we need to untangle it so we can get a clear sense of when each event happened

The fact that verse 1 starts with the words, “On that day...” makes it seem as though it is a direct continuation of the narrative of the dedication of the wall, but that isn’t the case

Looking ahead a bit to verse 6 (**Neh. 13:6a**), we read:

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.

Looking back, then at **Nehemiah 1:1**, we recall that it was in Artaxerxes’s twentieth year when he sent Nehemiah to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall

So Nehemiah had been in Jerusalem for 12 years when he returned to Persia to presumably give an accounting to the king and resume his usual duties as cupbearer

We don’t know how long Nehemiah spent there because verse 6 (**Neh. 13:6b**) only says, “*After some time I asked leave of the king...*” but it was long enough for the people to become lax spiritually and, therefore, decline significantly

What makes the timeline come into proper focus, though, is the understanding that what happened in Nehemiah 12:27-47 took place before Nehemiah left for Persia

Then chapter 13 picks up with what took place when Nehemiah returned and how he dealt with the failures that had occurred during his absence

Unfortunately, what happened with the Judeans in between chapters 12 and 13 is not unusual

It would be wonderful if our follow through on the spiritual commitments we make were as strong as our intentions are when we make them

But that isn’t the case because everything tends to degrade over time unless we give deliberate attention to maintaining them, and that includes our spiritual lives and the commitments we make

The world and society we live in is spiritually corrupt and, unless we unwaveringly fight against our flesh, we will continually trend toward becoming more like the world than Christ

And the decline rarely happens all at once or suddenly but, instead, it comes on us slowly so that we are like the frog in the pan of water that slowly warms to a boil, never feeling the urge to jump until it’s too late

So let’s take a look at the four areas where the Judeans transgressed to see how we might avoid doing likewise

As we begin, we see the first area of relapse was in the area of their associations

I. Impure Associations

Look with me at verses 1-2 (**Neh. 13:1-2**)

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.

Remember, “*On that day*” refers not to Nehemiah 12:44 but to the time after Nehemiah had returned to Jerusalem to be governor again

And, while we can’t be certain, it would seem likely the portion of the Law that was read to the people was

Deuteronomy 23:3-6 which says:

“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. But the Lord your God would not listen to Balaam; instead the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loved you. You shall not seek their peace or their prosperity all your days forever.”

As we read there, the Ammonites and the Moabites had resisted Israel’s march to Canaan and the Moabites had hired Balaam to curse Israel

Therefore, the Ammonites and the Moabites were to have no part in Israel’s temple worship

Of course, as we are reminded in the case of Ruth who was from Moab, this prohibition didn’t extend to those who truly converted to worship God and abide by his covenant as we see take place with Ruth in **Ruth 1:16**

Rather, the example of Ammon and Moab is used as an example to show that foreign nations ultimately pursued a different agenda different from Israel’s which presented the danger of harm to Israel

Of course, that could mean physical harm but, even more likely, spiritual harm as the presence of foreign ideas and practices would tend to insinuate themselves into the thinking, practices, and affections of the Israelites

And God was concerned about the spiritual purity of his people

And in **Nehemiah 10:28** we see that the people of Judea had come to the understanding that they were to be separate from the “peoples of the lands” and they vowed to do so

Clearly, with the absence Nehemiah’s strong, guiding presence, the people of Jerusalem had gotten lax and allowed foreigners to move back in among them

But when Nehemiah returned and the people hear the Law, we see that they immediately responded to eliminate those who wanted to associate with the people of Israel but not make the full commitment to honor God from their midst

While we aren’t in the same exact position as Israel and we aren’t to keep unbelievers out of our worship services, and we should actively be seeking to reach them for Christ, we need to understand the danger they present

God still expects his people to be pure and that purity requires constant vigilance and there is danger of compromise when we allow our relationships with unbelievers to become too close

An unbeliever is ultimately a rebellious enemy of God until they come to faith in Christ, no matter how friendly or nice they may seem so we need to remain on guard and keep our closest associations confined to fellow believers

Like the Ammonites and the Moabites, unbelievers today need to make the choice to join together with Christ if they want to enjoy full fellowship with God’s people because that is the only way they can be a part of the spiritual life Christ-followers enjoy

We might well wonder how the Judeans had come to accept and even perhaps welcome the foreigners into their midst and I believe the answer is found in the next relapse – the defilement of God’s house

II. Defilement of God’s House

We find this relapse described in verses 4-5 where we read that one of the enemies of the people of Judea, Tobiah, was allowed to live within the temple itself

Let’s look at those verses together (**Neh. 13:4-5**) –

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.

As we see in **Nehemiah 3:1**, Eliashib was the high priest and, as we see a little further along in 13:28, he had a familial connection to Sanballat who was a cohort of Tobiah which may supply a reason to be deferential to Tobiah

As here we read that Eliashib cleaned out one of the large temple storerooms and converted it into an apartment for Tobiah who is repeatedly referred to as “Tobiah the Ammonite” (**Neh. 2:19**)

We have just seen that the people of Israel were to have no close relations with the Ammonites but it’s little wonder they would have become lax in obeying that command when their high priest made accommodation within the temple itself for a powerful Ammonite violating the holiness of the temple

Further, Eliashib was guilty of misusing the storeroom itself as it was meant to be the repository of the food and worship materials donated by the people for the support of the Levites

As we read in 10:37-39, the people had committed to giving the firstfruits and the tithes which would have been stored in this room and in 12:44 they appointed men to collect, protect, and distribute those offerings to the Levites

So Eliashib’s action in this instance interfered with those commitments by taking up the storage space for them

And, as we find out in verse 10 (**Neh. 13:10**), the Levites had consequently not been receiving their allotted portions which forced them to go to work farming to support their families

Of course, this meant they had less time and energy to perform their duties at the temple

It’s amazing how far sin expands but Eliashib’s defilement of the temple and displacement of the sacrifices led to diminished service by the Levites and further sin by the people of Jerusalem through associating with foreigners

However, when Nehemiah returned he put things back in order quickly and forcefully

We read in verse 8 (**Neh. 13:8**) that Nehemiah was “*very angry and [he] threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber*”

Then he gave orders to have the chambers – apparently Tobiah had either occupied more than one chamber or Nehemiah considered his mere presence to have polluted the adjoining chambers – and he had the temple vessels and offerings returned to their rightful place

Nehemiah also reinstated the tithe with trustworthy men to monitor the storehouses and reestablished the Levites in their rightful duties along with their support

What we want to note is Nehemiah acted promptly and forcefully in dealing with the sins that were revealed

Whereas Eliashib’s sin had compounded and grown to affect the people and cause them to likewise sin, Nehemiah took swift and deliberate action to root the sin out to put things right and keep it from compounding further

We need to do likewise when God reveals sin in us both personally and corporately – we need to take it seriously and take swift, decisive action to root it out of our lives and our midst

Next, Nehemiah discovered that the people were dishonoring the Sabbath

III. Dishonoring the Sabbath

Looking back at **Nehemiah 10:31** we see the people had vowed to properly honor the Sabbath –

“...if the peoples of the land bring in goods or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on a holy day.”

But upon Nehemiah’s return we read in verses 15-16 (**Neh. 13:15-16**) –

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!

Chafing under the Sabbath regulation was nothing new for Israel

300 years before Nehemiah, the prophet Amos recorded Israel’s attitude (**Amos 8:4-6**) in this way –

Hear this, you who trample on the needy and bring the poor of the land to an end, saying, “When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain? And the Sabbath, that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great and deal deceitfully with false balances, that we may buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals and sell the chaff of the wheat?”

And 150 years after Amos, Jeremiah described the beasts of burden carrying loads in and out of the city on the Sabbath in **Jeremiah 17:19-27**

And in response, Jeremiah had prophesied God’s warning in verse 27 (**Jeremiah 17:27**) –

“...if you do not listen to me, to keep the Sabbath day holy, and not to bear a burden and enter by the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle a fire in its gates and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem and shall not be quenched.”

That prophesy may well be what is on Nehemiah’s mind in verse 18 (**Neh. 13:18**) of our passage where he warns that profaning the Sabbath was what led to the destruction of Jerusalem in the first place and the risk of present judgment

The regulations regarding the Sabbath were a part of God’s Law – the fourth commandment found in **Exodus 20:8-11** says very clearly –

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work...

And violating God’s Law is evil which is precisely what Nehemiah calls what the people are guilty of as he confronts their leaders

When it is all boiled down, what they were guilty of is putting their business interests ahead of obedience to God

And that is a tendency we need to be vigilant against today

While we aren’t under the Sabbath regulation today – actually keeping the Sabbath is the only one of the Ten Commandments that isn’t restated in the New Testament as binding on his church today and **Colossians 2:16** releases believers from the Sabbath rule – we are still required to be obedient when it comes to worshipping and honoring God

After all, Jesus says the first and greatest commandment is to *“...love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”* (**Matthew 22:37**)

No doubt the Judeans could have come up with dozens of reasons to ignore the Sabbath requirement such as:

“That’s an old command given and meant for a long time ago; it has no force today.”

“Competition is fierce and my business can’t survive if I give up one day a week.”

“Really, what harm does it do? Let’s not be overly legalistic about it.”

“My grapes will spoil if I don’t tread them promptly.”

Really, it’s not hard to think of “reasons” when we put our business interests or even our pursuit of leisure or family or any number of things above worshipping and honoring God

“I’d like to spend daily time alone with God, but I have a busy schedule and I deserve to relax and just have me time.”

“I work all week and do chores on Saturday so Sunday is my only day to sleep in, have a leisurely breakfast, and read the paper.”

“Sunday is family time.”

When Nehemiah discovered the defilement of the temple he acted swiftly and decisively to ensure the holy place was honored and he does the same thing here to make sure that holy time was honored

And in the verses that follow we see him order the city gates be shut and locked at sundown on Friday and that they not be reopened until sundown on Saturday

Then he stationed guards to ensure no wares went in or out of the city – later he appointed the Levites to join in as guards signifying the holiness of the entire city as the Levites were typically in charge of guarding the temple only

And he warned those who camped outside the gates, hoping to either sneak in somehow or to be the first in line when the gates opened, to stay away or risk punishment by his hand if they persisted

What we are talking about here, at its most basic level, is a matter of priorities and obedience

And there is nothing inherently wrong with most of the things that cause us to move God down our list of priorities except that they become more important to us than obeying and honoring God

So, when we recognize the tendency to allow other things to usurp God in our own lives, we need to act as Nehemiah did by moving swiftly to set boundaries and erect safeguards to keep those things from causing us to sin

The last relapse we see in our passage is that the Judeans were still involved with improper marriages

IV. Improper Marriages

In spite of the fact that the people had vowed to stop marrying foreigners in **Nehemiah 10:30**, Nehemiah discovered, upon his return, that it remained a persistent problem and that they had entered into mixed marriages with the people of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab and that half of their children didn’t even understand the Hebrew language

This meant that those children would be unable to understand the Scriptures as they had not been translated into any other languages at that time – so they would find temple worship unapproachable and irrelevant

Also, those children would feel more at home with those who spoke the same language as they did rather than with the Hebrew speaking Judeans making them less a part of the covenant community

It’s been accurately observed that the people of God are always just one generation away from extinction

And, clearly, the cultures of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab were watering down the faith of the Jewish people

Again, this was not a nationalistic or ethnic concern but a religious one

And for believers today there is no need to avoid interracial or interethnic marriage

However, Christ-followers are to still avoid marrying outside the faith and for the same reason

The most vulnerable area of a person’s life is the emotional attachments they form with the opposite sex and getting emotionally involved with an unbeliever can have disastrous spiritual consequences

In verse 26 (**Neh. 13:26**), Nehemiah uses the example of Solomon who was led into sin by his foreign wives

And the same snare awaits any believe who marries an unbeliever

It's the responsibility of the parents to pass their faith along to their children and that becomes ever so much more difficult in a household where the parents aren't of the same faith

Once more, Nehemiah acted swiftly and forcefully and his actions seem shocking to our modern sensibilities

After all, verse 25 (**Neh. 13:25**) tells us he "*confronted [the wrongdoers] and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair*"

I think we would agree that Nehemiah regarded the offense of intermarriage seriously but we also need to understand the times he lived in so we can put his actions into proper context

We need to remember that Nehemiah was acting as the governor and was, therefore, the head of the judicial system and the beating mentioned here might well be the punishment afforded certain criminal offenses

Likewise, the hair-pulling, which was most likely the plucking of hair from the beard of the offenders, was an established means of putting someone under public disgrace

In **Ezra 9:3** we read that Ezra pulled out his own hair when facing the same problem of intermarriage because he was so appalled by the situation

And the fact that Nehemiah called on God to curse the offenders simply expresses how seriously he took the offense

After all, he discovered that even the family of the high priest wasn't immune as the grandson of the high priest had married the daughter of Sanballat – who had proven to be an enemy of the people of Judea

Our text says Nehemiah "chased him from [himself]" which could mean he sent him into exile from the province altogether

This was likely because anyone in the lineage of the high priest could conceivably become the high priest making his a particularly grievous offense

Conclusion

As we conclude this morning we see in verses 30-31 (**Neh. 13:30-31**) Nehemiah assess his actions 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."

The thing I want to highlight from his assessment is that Nehemiah had done everything he could see to do to bring the people back to the path of righteousness

And Nehemiah's reforms impacted every area of revealed sin in the community and he undertook those reforms with urgency and passion

And in this final chapter we see that no matter how uncomfortable it may prove to be, we must confront sin in our own lives and in our midst

Four times in this chapter we see Nehemiah pray and ask God to remember him for good which tells us that Nehemiah was only and always concerned with pleasing God

He was a great administrator and organizer but he was also a faithful servant of God who would make a fine example for any believer to imitate

And Nehemiah's final words recorded in the book that bears his name would be fit for any person of faith –

"Remember me, O my God, for good."

Let's pray

1Peter 1:13-19 (Page 1014)

Therefore, preparing your minds for action and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.