

## Deterioration and Anticipation Nehemiah 13

We are finishing our journey of Nehemiah today, and **what a conclusion it is!**

**Nehemiah is chucking furniture, and scalping some dudes!**

- **If you are in to UFC this may be the right week for you to be here!**
- **Or, perhaps you can identify with his if you're Alabama fan. Too soon?**
- **We need to pray to rightly understand it apply it — otherwise some of you may try to pull a Nehemiah 13 the next time your in traffic!**
- Next week we begin Advent, but this week we conclude with holy anger.
- We see here the sinfulness of sin, and the idea is that God is not okay with sin.
- We must remain vigilant, and not take sin lightly, but kill it. We must pursue holiness with passion.
- And we also see our great need for a Savior.

[Pray]

How many of you have traveled back to your hometown – after being away for period of years – and thought, **“Wow, this place has changed!”**? I certainly have.

- For some people, the place just looks **smaller**.
- For others, the place is **run down**.
- **My dad's home in Detroit no longer even exists! The entire street was bulldozed.**

But I have had the same experience in a **spiritual sense too**.

- **When I was in college, I experienced the closest thing to “a revival” that I've ever known....**
- These college days were electric, and all of it for the most part, was student led.**
- God was saving people and calling people into the ministry.
  - Many of those classmates are still thriving in the ministry.

But then I returned to my alma mater several years later to speak at the Spring Revival, and **things had declined spiritually**. I thought, **“Wow, this place has changed.”**

- There was a clear **lack of vitality, and even of interest**.
- **I was even heckled and harassed in chapel by students.**
- **I remember calling a few of my former classmates, lamenting the state of things.**

**Welcome to Nehemiah 13.** Nehemiah served about 12 years in Jerusalem, and was part of a great revival, but then had to go back to Susa. After being in the Persian court for an undefined time, he returned to Jerusalem, and he found **spiritual deterioration**.

**Nehemiah is not a fairy tale. It doesn't end with a happy note.**

- **If it were a Hollywood film, it would end at **verse 43**.**
- **We grow up with “The all lived happily ever after” stories.**
- **Many think marriage and life are always going to be like, but are awakened to reality!**
- **The Bible is true, because God is the author.**
- Nehemiah actually ends on **a downer**.
- D.A. Carson's title: **“The Triumph and Failure of Reformation and Revival.”**

- There was revival and reform (8-12), but now we see that the reformation was short-lived.
- **Nehemiah doesn't end on a happy note, but the Bible does.**
- **It does end with happily ever after.**
- **Until then, we will have many unhappy moments in this life.**
- **Nehemiah is part of that grand drama, and so we finish with *deterioration*, but because we know the whole story, we can also read it with a great sense of *anticipation*.**
- **Nehemiah 13 leaves us longing for Christmas!!!**

**So let's look at what Nehemiah finds when he returns; how he responds; and how this ending prepares us for our coming King.**

**Chapter 13:1-3.** These verses really go with **12:44-47** (both begin "on that day" which is a general statement, probably better translated "During this time" – that is **the time of renewal and dedication**).

- **It's also a good introduction to what follows; it shows how outrageous things become in Jerusalem, given their knowledge of the Scriptures regarding the purity of worship and marriage.**
- **In connection with this time of renewal, the people take a good step. They find what is written (particularly in Deut 23:3-5) and they do what it says.**
- **It's refreshingly simple.** Oh that it were always like this!
- **Moses expressly excluded Moabites and Ammonites from the religious assembly of Israel because of their **historical opposition** to Israel and their **infectious idolatry**.**
- The other nations **were welcome to believe** in Israel's God, like Ruth the Moabite, and say, "**Your people are my people, and your God is my God,**" but for those who refused, they were to be removed so as to protect the people from idolatry.
- So this is a good step.
- And it shows that this dedication and renewal period probably lasted **several weeks**.

**13:4-31.** But then **we read of the decline several years later...**

- **And it's the same old problems!**

**13:4.** "**Now before this.**" refers to the events that happened **while Nehemiah was away**, not the events that happened "**before the dedication day and time of renewal.**"

- **Notice verse 6:** "While this was taking place, I was not in Jerusalem." So we have moved past the time of dedication and renewal.
- **In spite of all the reform, we now read of **the total disregard of Scripture.****

**Every aspect of decline and disobedience that follows is really a result of one main problem: **disregarding what Scripture says!****

**Remember the commitment in ch 10? "We will do everything written in this book!" (10:28-29)**

## The rest of chapter 13 should be read alongside of chapter 10.

- The **same topics** are addressed and there are clear **literary links** between the two.
- In chapter 10, the people commit to obeying Scripture in three main ways: **(1) marrying believers, (2) honoring the Sabbath, and (3) supporting the temple.**
- But in chapter 13, we find these same problems resurfacing.
- Remember how **chapter 10 ends**, “**We will not neglect the house of our God.**”
- Now read chapter **13:11**, “**Why is the house of God forsaken?**”

### Neglect.

- It wasn't because the people didn't know better regarding these things.
- They had been **reading the Scriptures** for weeks! And **Malachi** had been prophesying!

### **Malachi, a contemporary of Ezra/Nehemiah....**

He likely preached during Nehemiah's absence.

- He rebuked Israel for their shoddy worship (Mal 1:6-14)
- He rebuked them for their corrupt priesthood (2:1-9)
- For their marriage with foreigners (2:10-16)
- For robbing God by neglecting to pay the tithe (3:6-12).

### **The very issues addressed in Nehemiah 13.**

The people were not sinning in ignorance.

## **How Nehemiah responds to the Judah's sinfulness and rebellion (4 Responses)**

### **#1: He Cleanses the Temple (13:4-9)**

**4-5: Tobiah** is still here! He was an **Ammonite**, and hates God's people.

- **Tobiah married a Jew, and his son to another (6:18).**
- That's problem 1 – **marrying unbelievers.**
- Eliashib and Tobiah have formed a tight bond, and **Eliashib** has compromised big time...

**Be careful that the wrong relationships don't lead you to compromise biblical standards!**

**5: Problem two, Eliashib gives Tobiah motel accommodations in the temple!** (12:44-47).

- “No Ammonite should enter the assembly” (1-3), but now Tobiah has a suite there! He's like sipping Champaign, eating cashews in the temple!
- This is Tobiah — he's tried to kill Nehemiah!
- He's very slick and smooth, like a snake in the temple.
- And Eliashib has no convictions! He has no business in leadership!
- Maybe he thought, “Well, Tobiah's a nice guy and a relative; it doesn't matter that he's not a believer. He can just live in the temple!” What!
- **It's like the Joker is living in the Batcave because Alfred let him in!**
- He's let a wolf in with the sheep!
- What's happened is that tolerance has replaced truthfulness.
- People's feelings have overshadowed God's Word.

These rooms were places to hold temple articles, offerings, and accommodate the Lord's servants.

- By giving Tobiah a room, **certain articles for worship weren't present, and those officiating the house of God were not taken care of.**
- **Eliashab dishonors God, and he hindered the people from worshipping God.**
- Many today are afraid of offending people — but here's the thing: you will either offend people or God! Eliashib offends God!

**6: I love this, "I wasn't in Jerusalem." This didn't happen while I was there! I was in Susa sipping King's the wine and sampling his food.**

**"king of Babylon."** Persian kings are called king of Babylon and Assyria, respectively (Ez 5:13; 6:22). And Successive empires took on the identity of their predecessors. Artaxerxes might actually have been holding court in Babylon at the time." (McConville)

**7: Upon returning, Nehemiah discovers this "evil."**

- **There are things that are right and wrong, good and evil**
- **He doesn't see it as a friendly gesture to a visitor.**

**8a: His response involves righteous anger.**

- **This is what happens when holy zeal and sin collides.**
- **Would that all of our anger be "holy."**
- **Nehemiah, I believe, is reflecting God's own anger toward their sin.**
- **God hates sin. He is not dispassionate toward sin.**

It's time for action, not a discussion...

**8b: He throws out all of Tobiah's furniture!**

- **You can imagine being around the temple on that day, and seeing this — there goes a coffee table, a headboard, cups, plates, personal items, etc being thrown out!**
- **You can imagine Tobiah returning home that day.**

**This episode reminds us of the time Jesus cleansed the temple.**

- **Jesus exploded with righteous anger at those who defiled Jerusalem's holy place.**
- **Many don't envision Jesus as ever being angry — they have in mind the picture of the white Jesus with feathered hair, holding a lamb.**
- **Jesus flipped tables, he hated what was happening in the temple.**
- **"My house will be called a house of prayer," he declared.**

**Many modern listeners can't stomach this chapter.**

- **We live in a "be-nice-and-affirm-everything-I-do" day.**
- **So Nehemiah should just be accepting, right?**
- **No! This is happening among God's people, in God's house!**

- **Such a blatant misuse of the temple couldn't be tolerated!**
- Nehemiah sees this offense as dishonoring to God, a violation of His holiness, and a marring of the people's witness to the world.
- It had to be confronted.

In the NT, this is known as **church discipline**. A forgotten action in many churches – a practice that Jesus himself instituted.

- You can't let go unrepentant, destructive and divisive sin go unchecked (Matt 18).
- Paul tells the church in Corinth who is committing gross sexual sin – a sin that is “not even tolerated among the pagans” (1 Cor 5:1) – to “remove him” (5:2), to “purge the evil person from among you.”
- The goal is to win back the sinning brother.
- And the goal is to keep the people of God pure.
- **This is not popular, but the purity of the church, the good of the sinning brother, and for the witness of the church is at stake, and for the sake of God's holiness, so it must be done.**
- It's painful work. But necessary work.
- Harvey Turner, “If you do church discipline, people will leave your church; if you don't do church discipline, Jesus will leave your church.”

**9:** Nehemiah also ordered the adjoining “rooms” (plural) purified. It seems the desecration extended beyond Tobiah's rooms. He then restores all the temple items.

**The people had become cold, careless and secularized.**

It started at the top with spiritual leaders being godless, and as we shall see is present within families.

- They had tolerated certain sins.
- They compromised God's standards.
- My friends, we must keep our temple clean, we must not allow our love to grow cold.

**NT: Demas** is a great example of one whose love grew cold. In one letter, Paul writes warmly, “Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and **Demas**, sends greetings” (Col 4:14). Toward the end of Paul's life, however, he writes, “**Only Luke is with me. Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me.**” (2 Tim 4)

Jesus gives this kind of warning to churches also in Revelation. (2:4)

## **#2: He Renews the Tithes (13:10-14)**

**10:** Not only was Tobiah living in the temple, but **the provision for the clergy was neglected**, and consequently they were forced to leave Jerusalem.

- The worship of God then ceased, as the priests went to take care of themselves.
- God's plan was for them to be sustained by these tithes, and the people committed to doing so (10:32ff; 12:44-47), but **they failed to keep their promise.**

- With a lack of teaching from the Levites, and lack of singers to lead in worship, Jerusalem's spiritual life eroded.

So we've seen the **sin of commission** – giving Tobiah residence

Now we read of the **sin of omission** – failing to give the tithes

**Greed and worldliness leads to all kinds of other sins.**

- “The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil...”

Neglecting your responsibility to be a faithful steward, and failing to trust God by giving your offerings, is a sign of a serious heart problem. .

**Malachi's central theme is the “non-payment of tithes” (Brown).**

- Malachi also denounced those who divorced Israelite wives, possibly so as to gain financially by a new marriage, opening up new trade contracts with neighboring people.

Raymond Brown says, **“Materialism became Judah's new god.”**

- No one cared what Scripture said anymore.
- Everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes.
- It was a recipe for spiritual disaster.

**11:** Nehemiah “rebukes” (“confronts”) the officails (and twice more later: 17, 25).

**They had signed the resolutions.**

**They were the guys responsible for ensuring that public worship wasn't neglected.**

**11b-13:** Nehemiah sets things right.

- People brought the offerings – verse 12. Look how understated.
- They must have felt quite ashamed, having declared, “I will obey God and not neglect worship.”

**The priority of worship was disregarded, and Nehemiah says this can't be tolerated.**

- Only Levites and Priest could perform OT worship.
- **You couldn't call in a second team!**
- So public, corporate worship was shut down!

**Not making corporate worship a priority is an obvious sign of spiritual decline.**

My friends corporate worship for you must be a priority and not an option.

**13:** He puts people in leadership that were **reliable**.

- That is, people of character. (Cf, Ti 1)
- **We see a value on reliability – faithful, available, responsible, humble. Be that!**

**14:** The first of four of these prayers in chapter 13.

- He asks God to remember his faithfulness.
- Holy Ambition — living for the good of people and the glory of God.
- Nehemiah's work here isn't popular, it isn't in step with everyone else, but it is for the people's good and for the glory of God.
- In this life, you have to decide for whom will you live?
- You can't live for God's glory and be a people pleaser.

### #3: He Enforces the Sabbath (13:15-22)

Now Nehemiah rebukes the people for breaking the Sabbath.

Remember **10:31** – “when people come to sell items on the Sabbath, we will tell them to get lost.”

**15-16:** Two offenses: **(1)** working on the Sabbath, bringing loads of food into Jerusalem and selling them (15); **(2)** foreigners, the Tyrians, who could care less about the Sabbath, sold fish and all kinds of good on the Sabbath (13:16)

The Sabbath was a sign of Israel's relationship with God.

- It marked them out as God's people. It was like their wedding ring. It was to be a day for rest and worship – a gift from God. It reflected a deep trust in God to provide for them.

Practically, it was also God's design for how life should be lived.

- It's not to be all work! It must include work, but not be all work!
- In fact, everyone will Sabbath, either voluntarily or involuntarily.
- **You can worship and rest, or you can be driven by a red vehicle with a light flashing on the way to a big building!**

But money, work and property had replaced the Sabbath.

Their unique relationship to God was no longer visible to outsiders.

- They were just like everyone else.

**17-18:** He gives another rebuke, this time a theological one.

He reminds them of what happened historically when the people violated God's command regarding the Sabbath: exile. By doing so again, they were placing themselves under God's anger. (See Jer. 17:19-27)

**This didn't happen overnight, like other compromises, it happens *slowly*.**

- **puritans sin is like baby snakes grow into big serpents - they must be killed**

When Nehemiah he arrives, he sees how bad it has gotten.

- **Wickedness was excused in the name of financial advancement.**

- Some people think that “Christianity is Christianity” and “business is business” and the two should never meet.
- Since everyone is dishonest in business, it’s okay to do so. **Wrong!**

**19: Nehemiah takes action** by closing and guarding the gates.

- He also placed his own men there to prevent traders from entering the city (Neh. 13:19b).

**20-21:** Then he made threats against the foreigners in 20-21. He didn’t even want there to be a temptation of trading on the Sabbath.

- **“I will lay hands on you!”**
- Look how understated this is, **“From that time on, they did not come on the Sabbath.”**
- He must have been an **intimidating man** – scholars think he was about **60 at this time!**

**22:** He gets the Levites involved – they’re purified since sanctifying the Sabbath was holy work.

**22b:** Another prayer for remembrance, this time with a reflection on God’s covenantal love.

#### #4: He Disciplines the Unfaithful (13:23-31)

Here we go again. Intermarriage with unbelievers.

Remember **10:30?** The first resolution.

- In Nehemiah 4:7-8, only a few years earlier, **Ammonites and men of Ashdod** had plotted to fight against Jerusalem.
- **Now, these enemies have become marriage partners!**
- They are pursuing the same goal with a different method.
- There’s more than one way to destroy the city.

**23-24: The Drift.** One generation’s compromise would have lasting effects.

- If they couldn’t speak the language of the people of God, **then they would not be able to pass on the faith. They would not know the worship of God, the Word of God, the God of the word....**
- They were in danger of losing their entire spiritual heritage.
- They were a generation away from complete paganization, of total apostasy.

**25: Nehemiah’s action.** Another rebuke. He curses them.

- This doesn’t mean he **“cursed them out,”** but that **he pronounced a curse on them.**
- **He called condemnation on them.**
- **Remember 10:29** – “If we don’t do this, let curses come down on us!” Nehemiah says “Bring them down.”

**“Beat them and pulled out their hair” – What!**

- These events are not all-together clear, and are interpreted in different ways.



- **One could be critical of Nehemiah here for his violence.**
- **Others claim that this was likely a public shaming ritual.** Pulling out one's hair was a sign of disgrace.
  - **He wasn't just grabbing people at random and yanking their hair out!**
- **"Beating them"** may imply that there was a bit of a fight with the transgressors.
  - Viewed positively, we should remember that he was the ambassador from Persia and the leader in Judah, so he was able to use force and take this drastic action in this particular historical context.
- **In any event, this is not a license to go beat people up this week!**

**25b:** He makes these offenders take an oath to not give their children in marriage to unbelievers.

**26-27:** He supports his measure by making a biblical argument with **Solomon**.

- **Solomon came to ruin because of this very offense, and led the nation into ruin.**
- **And now, this flagrant sin was jeopardizing the well being of God's people.**

**28: Marriages to pagans had even occurred among the priestly circles!**

- Leaders were repeating this Solomon's sin.
- Eliashib's grandson had married the daughter of Sanballat the Horonite.
- A grandson of the high priest becomes the son in law to Sanballat!

And Nehemiah expelled him from the community.

**Again, the people had become secularized, and disregarded God's standards.**

**When we are indistinguishable from the world when not only dishonor God, but we also lose our influence on the watching world.**

- **We lose our saltiness.**

**29:** Nehemiah prays, and asked the Lord to remember the offenders on the Day of Judgment. He cleansed the temple, but left room for God's wrath.

**30-31:** These verses summarize all that Nehemiah has done to ensure pure worship and support for the clergy.

**31b:** A general prayer for God to remember everything that has happened in this book.

### Anticipation

**So we've seen (1) the unholy & outrageous misuse of the temple, (2) the forsaking of corporate worship, (3) the excusing of wickedness in the name of financial gain, and (4) jeopardizing the very existence of the people of God with flagrant sin.**

**What a depressing ending! Happy Thanksgiving and Merry Christmas!**

## Why doesn't Nehemiah end in 12:43?

God intends for Nehemiah to end this way.

- It's not a fairy tale.

What does this ending do to us?

It's forces us to lean into the future.

We're at **the end of the history of OT era.**

- And what do we find? Failure.
- We find this: **God's people can't keep God's law!!**
- In spite of all of their commitments. In spite of all the reform.

In some ways, Nehemiah's story is like the entire Old Testament: **Sin at the beginning, Sin in the middle, and sin at the end!**

- There are periods of renewal throughout (Sinai, Promised Land, David, Hezekiah, Josiah), but then decline.
- That familiar tune is here again in Nehemiah.

**So what do we do?**

- We stand at the end of the OT, and we wonder if there's any hope!?
- We can't keep God's law!!!
- But there's hope because we know the whole story.

Art Azurdia:

**“Nehemiah ends on a bumner, looking for a Savior.”**

- To be sure, we must not belittle Nehemiah's work.
- Don't despise the days of mercy.
- God used him - big time.

But still, the OT pattern of decline-after-reformation is working itself out.

- **Nehemiah shows us the flakiness of the professing people of God.**
- God's people can't keep God's law.

**So Nehemiah preaches an implicit Messianic message.**

- There's only one who will keep the covenant perfectly.
- The story points forward to the ultimate way in which our sins can be atoned for.
- The story points forward to not a physical temple in Jerusalem, but Jesus himself as the temple; not an imperfect priesthood, but the Jesus Himself our Great High Priest; not a sacrifice of animals, but Jesus Himself as the Lamb of God.

Further, the book ends looking for a King greater than David.

- **It's interesting that in chapter 12, the repeated name of “David” keeps appearing.** (12:36; 37, 45-46)

- **They had the priests; they had the temple; they had the sacrificial system; but no King.**
- He doesn't appear in the intertestamental period either.

And what do we read in the opening words of the NT:

1 The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, **the son of David**, the son of Abraham.  
(Matt 1:1)

**The King has come!**

So the OT leaves us with a longing for a King, along with a perfect sacrifice, a perfect priesthood, and a perfect temple – all of which are bound up in the person of Jesus.

**Matthew 1:20-21**

<sup>20</sup> But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, *for he will save his people from their sins.*”

Light has come. The sacrifice has come. The Priest has come.  
The King has come. Forgiveness has come. Salvation has come.

**Nehemiah's ending leaves us longing for Christmas.**

- The one born in Bethlehem **does keep God's law!**
- **This obedient Servant obeys where Israel failed.**
- **This man whose zeal for God's house consumed him, will take our curse – his back beaten, his beard plucked, his face spat upon (Isa 50:6) – he will bear our sins in his body on the tree – that we may be declared righteous through repentance and faith.**
- “In the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive adoption as sons.” (Gal 4:4ff).
- Jesus Christ's *holy ambition* to please the Father has resulted in our salvation.
- The Father “remembered Him” by raising him from the dead.
- To God be the glory.
- **And now, we new covenant believers, indwelt by the Spirit, will experience moments of reformation and renewal, but while we live in this fallen world, we will also experience failure, and so we await the Second Advent of the Lord Jesus, who will once and for all, make all things new, and we his redeemed will live in a New Jerusalem, apart from sin and shame forever.**
- Maranatha!