

Nehemiah Lesson 13

Nehemiah Chapter 13

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Introduction: Last week, we covered how 9 out of 10 Jews were chosen to move outside of the city of Jerusalem in the surrounding areas and towns. Also, we discussed the priests and Levites that returned to the land and the official dedication of the temple.

We complete our study on the book of Nehemiah this week as we cover Chapter 13. Chapter 13 presents the spiritual problems which had crept back during the absence of Nehemiah and his unwavering stand for righteousness.

I. Nehemiah Turns Out the Mixed Multitude.

Neh 13:1 On that day they read in the book of Moses in the audience of the people; and therein was found written, that the Ammonite and the Moabite should not come into the congregation of God for ever;

Neh 13:2 Because they met not the children of Israel with bread and with water, but hired Balaam against them, that he should curse them: howbeit our God turned the curse into a blessing.

Neh 13:3 Now it came to pass, when they had heard the law, that they separated from Israel all the mixed multitude.

There is some difference of opinion as to when the events of this chapter take place. Some take the position it was a continuation of the events of the dedication as noted in chapter 12. The immediate context would seem to indicate this. Others, take the position chapter 13 is some time later after Nehemiah had gone to Babylon and returned. The latter view seems to make more sense in the greater context.

In any event, there was a day of public convocation of the people at the Temple, perhaps upon Nehemiah's return. Then "they read in the book of Moses in the audience of the people . . . that the Ammonite and Moabite should not come into the congregation of God for ever."

Deu 23:3 An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD; even to their tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the LORD for ever:

Deu 23:4 Because they met you not with bread and with water in the way, when ye came forth out of Egypt; and because they hired against thee Balaam the son of Beor of Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse thee.

As will be quickly noted, there had been flagrant violation of this command. Under

Nehemiah's leadership, they "separated from Israel all the mixed multitude." Pagan, unbelieving gentiles had intermingled with God's people. They were told to leave. As Christians, we have a responsibility to keep our selves separate from the world. In both our actions and in selecting a mate for our life, we should look to God for guidance.

2 Cor 6:14 Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?

2 Cor 6:15 And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel?

2 Cor 6:16 And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

2 Cor 6:17 Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you,

Neh 13:4 And before this, Eliashib the priest, having the oversight of the chamber of the house of our God, was allied unto Tobiah:

Neh 13:5 And he had prepared for him a great chamber, where aforetime they laid the meat offerings, the frankincense, and the vessels, and the tithes of the corn, the new wine, and the oil, which was commanded to be given to the Levites, and the singers, and the porters; and the offerings of the priests.

Prior to this, Eliashib the priest had made an apartment for Tobiah in the Temple. Recall from Nehemiah 4:3 that Tobiah was an Ammonite. He had in fact married a daughter of a priest (6:18) and now was actually living in the Temple. The compromising Eliashib had cleared out rooms in the Temple used for grain offerings, storage of tithes, and other necessary purposes to make a substantial apartment for Tobiah.

This was a gross violation of the law. Not only was there intermarrying by a priest's daughter of an enemy of God's work, they had been allowed to live in the Temple in direct violation of the Law as we read earlier in Deuteronomy 23:3-4.

Neh 13:6 But in all this time was not I at Jerusalem: for in the two and thirtieth year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon came I unto the king, and after certain days obtained I leave of the king:

Neh 13:7 And I came to Jerusalem, and understood of the evil that Eliashib did for Tobiah, in preparing him a chamber in the courts of the house of God.

Neh 13:8 And it grieved me sore: therefore I cast forth all the household stuff of Tobiah out of the chamber.

Neh 13:9 Then I commanded, and they cleansed the chambers: and thither brought I again the vessels of the house of God, with the meat offering and the frankincense.

Nehemiah speaks in verse 6 about how all of this took place while he was gone. He evidently had returned to Babylon, perhaps to report to the king on the status of things in Jerusalem. Some take the position, Nehemiah was gone for twelve years (based

upon 5:14). However, it seems more likely his leave of absence was much shorter than that.

He indeed had been the official governor during that time, but events seem to indicate he was not gone long from Jerusalem, perhaps a year or so. He then was given permission by the king to return. During his absence however, major problems developed.

In verse 7, upon returning from Babylon, Nehemiah learned that Tobiah had been moved into the Temple, displacing necessary rooms used for God's service. He threw Tobiah out along with his household stuff. He then ordered the chambers ceremonially cleansed and restored them to their prior and intended purposes.

II. Nehemiah's Reform in the House of God

Neh 13:10 And I perceived that the portions of the Levites had not been given them: for the Levites and the singers, that did the work, were fled every one to his field.

Neh 13:11 Then contended I with the rulers, and said, Why is the house of God forsaken? And I gathered them together, and set them in their place.

Neh 13:12 Then brought all Judah the tithe of the corn and the new wine and the oil unto the treasuries.

Neh 13:13 And I made treasurers over the treasuries, Shelemiah the priest, and Zadok the scribe, and of the Levites, Pedaiah: and next to them was Hanan the son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah: for they were counted faithful, and their office was to distribute unto their brethren.

Neh 13:14 Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and wipe not out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God, and for the offices thereof.

Nehemiah further learned that in his absence, the Levites no longer were being paid their prescribed portion. They therefore were forced to return to farming to make a living. In learning of this, Nehemiah "contended with the rulers and said, Why is the house of God forsaken?" After being chastened by Nehemiah, Judah again tithed to the Temple and its support. He furthermore appointed treasurers who "were counted faithful." They were expressly directed to distribute the tithe to their brethren the other priests and Levites.

In so doing, Nehemiah besought the Lord to remember the good he had done for God's house. It might be inferred that he did not make himself popular by forcing the matter of tithing and setting things aright. However, in so doing, he asked God to not forget the good he had done for His house and its ministry. No doubt, God did not overlook his faithful service.

John Gill in his Old Testament Commentary said this about the failure of paying the Levites by the tithes.

Ver. 10. And I perceived that the portion of the Levites had not been given

*them, etc.] The tithes, being removed to some other place, might be converted to another use; or the people, seeing what was done by Eliashib, neglected to bring them in, as judging they would not be properly disposed of; and besides, the Levites had deserted their station upon this: *for the Levites and the singers that did the work were fled everyone to his field*; to look after their country farms, or to get their living by agriculture, since there was no care taken of them at Jerusalem; (see Nehemiah 12:28,29).*

Ver. 11. *Then I contended with the rulers; etc.] The ecclesiastical rulers, the priests that were appointed over those chambers, (Nehemiah 12:44), he expostulated with them warmly, and chode them severely for their conduct: and said, why is the house of God forsaken? no care being taken of the maintenance of the ministers of it, contrary to the promise made Nehemiah 10:37), and I gathered them together; the Levites and singers that were dispersed in the countries round about: and set them in their place; in the temple, and in the course of their ministry there.*

III. Sabbath-breaking Restrained

Neh 13:15 In those days saw I in Judah some treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and lading asses; as also wine, grapes, and figs, and all manner of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the sabbath day: and I testified against them in the day wherein they sold victuals.

Neh 13:16 There dwelt men of Tyre also therein, which brought fish, and all manner of ware, and sold on the sabbath unto the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem.

Neh 13:17 Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said unto them, What evil thing is this that ye do, and profane the sabbath day?

Neh 13:18 Did not your fathers thus, and did not our God bring all this evil upon us, and upon this city? yet ye bring more wrath upon Israel by profaning the sabbath.

Neh 13:19 And it came to pass, that when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the sabbath, I commanded that the gates should be shut, and charged that they should not be opened till after the sabbath: and some of my servants set I at the gates, that there should no burden be brought in on the sabbath day.

Neh 13:20 So the merchants and sellers of all kind of ware lodged without Jerusalem once or twice.

Neh 13:21 Then I testified against them, and said unto them, Why lodge ye about the wall? if ye do so again, I will lay hands on you. From that time forth came they no more on the sabbath.

Neh 13:22 And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should come and keep the gates, to sanctify the sabbath day. Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of thy mercy.

Other problems had sprouted in Nehemiah's absence. The Sabbath was being ignored. Jews were working as usual on the Sabbath. Moreover, gentile merchants were doing brisk business with Jews thereon. Nehemiah first "contended with the nobles of Judah." He reminded them that God had judged them in the past for similar sins (ignoring the

sabbatical year). In verse 19, he then ordered the gates of the city closed at the beginning of the Sabbath on Friday evening and not opened again until the Sabbath was complete.

Verse 21 points out that Nehemiah further policed it with his own servants. Yet, the gentile merchants waited outside the wall on the Sabbath for several weeks.

Nehemiah warned them, “if ye do so again, I will lay hands on you.” After being threatened with force, they stopped trying to sell their wares even outside the wall on the Sabbath. He further ordered the Levites to henceforth present themselves ceremonially clean and to police the gates of the city on the Sabbath day in verse 22. Again, Nehemiah besought God’s remembrance for enforcing His Word. He no doubt was not popular in his decisions, but he was right!

IV. The Dismissal of Strange Wives

Neh 13:23 In those days also saw I Jews that had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab:

Neh 13:24 And their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people.

Neh 13:25 And I contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them, and plucked off their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, Ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves.

Neh 13:26 Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? yet among many nations was there no king like him, who was beloved of his God, and God made him king over all Israel: nevertheless even him did outlandish women cause to sin.

Neh 13:27 Shall we then hearken unto you to do all this great evil, to transgress against our God in marrying strange wives?

Neh 13:28 And one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was son in law to Sanballat the Horonite: therefore I chased him from me.

Neh 13:29 Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood, and the covenant of the priesthood, and of the Levites.

Nehemiah also discovered that restoration Jews were intermarrying and assimilating with pagan gentile peoples of the region. The children of such unions could not even speak proper Hebrew. He fiercely verbally chastised them and even physically punished some of them. He forced the nation to swear before God that they would not intermarry with the ungodly. We read earlier in II Corinthians that we as Christians are still commanded today to not be unequally yoked with non-Christians.

Nehemiah reminded them of the sin of Solomon and his intermarriage with ungodly women. Solomon’s breach of the principle of separation led to sin in his life which brought God’s judgment upon him. Again, Nehemiah’s position likely was not popular. Yet he noted, “Shall we then hearken unto you to do all this great evil, to transgress against our God in marrying strange wives.” Nehemiah discovered that one of the sons of the high priest had become the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite. (Recall that

Sanballat had been an archenemy to the rebuilding of the wall and the restoration of God's work.)

When Nehemiah found out, he notes that "therefore I chased him from me." One thing is sure. Nehemiah had no time for those who compromised the Scriptures. His actions no doubt made him unpopular. However, he knew what he did was right before God. Again, he enjoined God to remember that he had stood for right. When we stand up for what is right, you can be sure you will not be popular with the world. As a matter of fact, we are promised that if we do take a righteous stand, we will be persecuted.

2 Tim 3:12 Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.

2 Tim 3:13 But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived.

2 Tim 3:14 But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them;

Matthew Henry pointed out how Nehemiah did so much good in turning things back around to the way God had appointed things to be done.

We have here one instance more of Nehemiah's pious zeal for the purifying of his countrymen as a peculiar people to God; that was the thing he aimed at in the use of his power, not the enriching of himself. See here,

I. How they had corrupted themselves by marrying strange wives. This was complained of in Ezra's time, and much done towards a reformation, Ezra 9 and 10. But, when the unclean spirit is cast out, if a watchful eye be not kept upon him, he will re-enter; so he did here. Though in Ezra's time those that had married strange wives were forced to put them away, which could not but occasion trouble and confusion in families, yet others would not take warning. *Nitimur in vetitum—we still lean towards what is forbidden.* Nehemiah, like a good governor, enquired into the state of the families of those that were under his charge, that he might reform what was amiss in them, and so heal the streams by healing the springs. 1. He enquired whence they had their wives, and found that many of the Jews had *married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab* (v. 23), either because they were fond of what was far-fetched or because they hoped by these alliances to strengthen and enrich themselves. See how God by the prophet reproves this, Mal. 2:11.

Mal 2:11 Judah hath dealt treacherously, and an abomination is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah hath profaned the holiness of the LORD which he loved, and hath married the daughter of a strange god.

Mal 2:12 The LORD will cut off the man that doeth this, the master and the scholar, out of the tabernacles of Jacob, and him that offereth an offering unto the LORD of hosts.

Judah has dealt treacherously, and broken covenant with God, the covenant made

in Ezra's time with reference to this very thing; he has *profaned the holiness of the Lord by marrying the daughter* (that is, the worshipper) *of a strange god*. 2. He talked with the children, and found they were *children of strangers*, for their *speech betrayed them*. The children were bred up with their mothers, and learned of them and their nurses and servants to speak, so that they could not speak the Jews' language, could not speak it at all, or not readily, or not purely, but *half in the speech of Ashdod*, or Ammon, or Moab, according as the country was which the mother was a native of.

Neh 13:30 Thus cleansed I them from all strangers, and appointed the wards of the priests and the Levites, every one in his business;

Neh 13:31 And for the wood offering, at times appointed, and for the firstfruits. Remember me, O my God, for good.

In concluding the book, Nehemiah notes how that he cleansed the impurity from Israel and reappointed the prescribed *wards* (courses and shift assignments) of the Levites. He ends the book with a final invocation for God to remember him for good. He had come and done what was not popular but what was right.

When we die, it won't be what we take with us that will matter as much as what we leave behind. Our lives have so much more meaning and impact on others than we can possibly imagine. When we stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ to give an account of our lives, we will probably realize what kind of value our life has had on others, both good and bad.

Like Nehemiah's desire in verse 31, a similar prayer remains in order to this day. To so serve the Lord that He remembers us for good will be a blessing indeed. To hear Him say, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant," will be worth it all.

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Prov 4:18 But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.

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Practice Random Acts of Kindness. Each act spreads, and many will be blessed.