

This morning is the last chapter in Nehemiah. Together with the people of Jerusalem, Nehemiah has rebuilt the wall, gathered them to hear God's law, repented of their sins, trusted in God's grace, made commitments to the Lord, and celebrated His faithfulness. Now comes the unexpected ending:

*NIV Nehemiah 13:1- On that day the Book of Moses was read aloud in the hearing of the people and there it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be admitted into the assembly of God, ² because they had not met the Israelites with food and water but had hired Balaam to call a curse down on them. (Our God, however, turned the curse into a blessing.) ³ When the people heard this law, they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent. ⁴ Before this, Eliashib the priest had been put in charge of the storerooms of the house of our God. He was closely associated with Tobiah, ⁵ and **he had provided him with a large room formerly used to store the grain offerings and incense and temple articles, and also the tithes of grain, new wine and oil prescribed for the Levites, singers and gatekeepers, as well as the contributions for the priests.** ⁶ But while all this was going on, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king. Some time later I asked his permission ⁷ and came back to Jerusalem. Here I learned about the evil thing Eliashib had done in providing Tobiah a room in the courts of the house of God. ⁸ I was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah's household goods out of the room. ⁹ I gave orders to purify the rooms, and then I put back into them the equipment of the house of God, with the grain offerings and the incense. ¹⁰ **I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them, and that all the Levites and singers responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields.** ¹¹ So I rebuked the officials and asked them, "Why is the house of God neglected?" Then I called them together and stationed them at their posts. ¹² All Judah brought the tithes of grain, new wine and oil into the storerooms. ¹³ I put Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and a Levite named Pedaiah in charge of the storerooms and made Hanan son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah, their assistant, because these men were considered trustworthy. They were made responsible for distributing the supplies to their brothers. ¹⁴ Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services. ¹⁵ In those days I saw men in Judah **treading winepresses on the Sabbath** and bringing in grain and loading it on donkeys, together with wine, grapes, figs and all other kinds of loads. And they were bringing all this into Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Therefore I warned them against selling food on that day. ¹⁶ Men from Tyre who lived in Jerusalem were bringing in fish and all kinds of merchandise and selling them in Jerusalem on the Sabbath to the people of Judah. ¹⁷ I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this wicked thing you are doing-- desecrating the*

Sabbath day? ¹⁸ Didn't your forefathers do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity upon us and upon this city? Now you are stirring up more wrath against Israel by desecrating the Sabbath." ¹⁹ When evening shadows fell on the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I ordered the doors to be shut and not opened until the Sabbath was over. I stationed some of my own men at the gates so that no load could be brought in on the Sabbath day. ²⁰ Once or twice the merchants and sellers of all kinds of goods spent the night outside Jerusalem. ²¹ But I warned them and said, "Why do you spend the night by the wall? **If you do this again, I will lay hands on you.**" From that time on they no longer came on the Sabbath. ²² Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and go and guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy. Remember me for this also, O my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love. ²³ Moreover, in those days **I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab.** ²⁴ Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples, and did not know how to speak the language of Judah. ²⁵ I rebuked them and called curses down on them. **I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair.** I made them take an oath in God's name and said: "You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves. ²⁶ Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned? Among the many nations there was no king like him. He was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel, but even he was led into sin by foreign women. ²⁷ Must we hear now that you too are doing all this terrible wickedness and are being unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women?" ²⁸ One of the sons of Joiada son of Eliashib the high priest was son-in-law to Sanballat the Horonite. And I drove him away from me. ²⁹ Remember them, O my God, because they defiled the priestly office and the covenant of the priesthood and of the Levites. ³⁰ So I purified the priests and the Levites of everything foreign, and assigned them duties, each to his own task. ³¹ I also made provision for contributions of wood at designated times, and for the firstfruits. Remember me with favor, O my God.

This is why the Bible is so great. You would think it would end at the end of 12:43, with great joy and celebration. **Nehemiah 12:43** - *The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.* But it doesn't end with a happily ever after. After 12 years spent in Jerusalem restoring the city and the community, Nehemiah goes back to the King in Persia. After some time, he returns to Jerusalem to see how things are, and everything has reverted back to how it was before.

Remember that in 10:28-39, the people made five specific commitments:

28 "The rest of the people-- priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, temple servants and all who separated themselves from the neighboring peoples for the sake of the Law of God, together with their wives and all their sons and daughters who are able to understand-- 29 all these now join their brothers the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD our Lord. 30 "We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons. 31 "When the neighboring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts. 32 "We assume the responsibility for carrying out the commands to give a third of a shekel each year for the service of the house of our God: 33 for the bread set out on the table; for the regular grain offerings and burnt offerings; for the offerings on the Sabbaths, New Moon festivals and appointed feasts; for the holy offerings; for sin offerings to make atonement for Israel; and for all the duties of the house of our God. 34 "We-- the priests, the Levites and the people-- have cast lots to determine when each of our families is to bring to the house of our God at set times each year a contribution of wood to burn on the altar of the LORD our God, as it is written in the Law. 35 "We also assume responsibility for bringing to the house of the LORD each year the firstfruits of our crops and of every fruit tree. 36 "As it is also written in the Law, we will bring the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, of our herds and of our flocks to the house of our God, to the priests ministering there. 37 "Moreover, we will bring to the storerooms of the house of our God, to the priests, the first of our ground meal, of our grain offerings, of the fruit of all our trees and of our new wine and oil. And we will bring a tithe of our crops to the Levites, for it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all the towns where we work. 38 A priest descended from Aaron is to accompany the Levites when they receive the tithes, and the Levites are to bring a tenth of the tithes up to the house of our God, to the storerooms of the treasury. 39 The people of Israel, including the Levites, are to bring their contributions of grain, new wine and oil to the storerooms where the articles for the sanctuary are kept and where the ministering priests, the gatekeepers and the singers stay. "We will not neglect the house of our God."

They made five commitments: They would not intermarry with pagans. They would not buy and sell on the Sabbath. They would cancel debts every 7th year. They would tithe and support those who ministered in the temple. They would not neglect the house of God.

But what does Nehemiah see when he returns?

The giving of tithes has ceased, so the Levites moved back to their farms to stay alive.

Nehemiah 12:44 - At that time men were appointed to be in charge of the storerooms for the contributions, firstfruits and tithes. From the fields around the towns they were to bring into the storerooms the portions required by the Law for the priests and the Levites, for Judah was pleased with the ministering priests and Levites.

The Levites were supposed to give themselves fully to ministry and be supported by the tithes of the people, but as the people stopped tithing, they could not minister and went back to their farms, thus diminishing the spiritual life of Israel.

Tobiah the Ammonite is given room in the temple where the tithes should be by the priest Eliashib. They had stopped tithing, and so the room was open. Wrong on so many levels, bringing a pagan into the storage room for the holy

³⁹ The people of Israel, including the Levites, are to bring their contributions of grain, new wine and oil to the storerooms where the articles for the sanctuary are kept and where the ministering priests, the gatekeepers and the singers stay.

Believers were now marrying unbelievers, intermingling with pagans – even a priest!

The people were buying and selling from foreign traders on the Sabbath

How does Nehemiah respond?

His response? He's angry. Some correction. He tosses Tobiah, bringing to mind Jesus in the temple. He reinstates the tithes, brings the Levites back to the temple, tells them to stop marrying unbelievers, closes the gates so no commerce would happen on the Sabbath. And some beatings. He is zealous. But also a little over the top. And he keeps asking the Lord to remember him for his devotion.

This chapter doesn't necessarily fill me with hope that these changes are going to stick.

What do we make of this chapter?

1) Without vigilance and repentance, we naturally fall into sin and self-centeredness

Notice this dynamic – our lives tend to be full of this. We sin, we repent, we dedicate ourselves to following the lord, and THIS TIME WE MEAN IT. Six months later, we can't even remember what commitments we made, and we have fallen back into our sin.

And sin begets sin – they stop tithing, stop hearing God's Word, start giving the room in the temple to a pagan, intermarry, lose their distinctiveness, and without intervention, would lose God entirely.

1 Timothy 4:16 - Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

1 Peter 5:8 - Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

How do you stay vigilant? Disciplines. Accountability. Fellowship. And continually repenting.

2) Without knowing God's Word, we don't know how to live according to God's will

As the Levites went back to farming, there was no teaching, and eventually the people returned to their sin. You need to know God's Word and how to understand it. Be in the Word regularly.

How can you know what God requires unless you read?

Isaiah 55:8-9 - "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. ⁹ "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Psalms 119:105 - Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

3) Without a Savior, our efforts will never save us

There was great progress, a lot to celebrate. But effort alone falls short. They are not able to keep the law, not able to hold to their commitments.

History is just one long repetition of this story – fall into sin, saved by God, repent, and then slide back into sin again.

Romans 7:15-25 - *I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ¹⁶ And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. ¹⁸ I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹ For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do-- this I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. ²¹ So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²² For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³ but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. ²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God-- through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.*

Thank you Jesus for your salvation. Without Him, we are lost.

As the singer-songwriter Andrew Peterson said:

“It’s the great, confounding reversal of the Gospel of Jesus. If the word we preach is one of attainable perfection, of law, of justification by works, then when we fail, our testimony fails with it. But if we preach our deep brokenness and Christ’s deeper healing, if we preach our inability to take a single breath but for God’s grace, then our weakness exalts him and we’re functioning as we were meant to since the foundation of the world.”

Israel could not measure up. And so God had to send His Son to save the world.

Isaiah 59:15-16 - *Truth is nowhere to be found, and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey. The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice. ¹⁶ He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm worked salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him.*

In the end, it’s not about our efforts. It’s about our savior. And as we understand His love and mercy, we find ourselves desiring to live for Him. Yes, we must

continually repent and strive for holiness. But thank God that we have a Savior, so that our salvation does not depend upon our efforts.