

**Nehemiah 13**  
**December 19, 2021**

**Open with Prayer**

**HOOK:**

Imagine that you are Nehemiah. As seen in chapters 11-12, you have led the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem and the formal organization of Temple services. The people were purified before the actual ceremonies began. You and Ezra lead groups in a procession around the city. When you and the Israelites come to the Temple, they offer sacrifices with gladness. The services of the Temple are set in order.

Now imagine that after 12 years of service in Jerusalem, you return to the Babylon palace to serve King Artaxerxes for a year. Now you're ready to return to Jerusalem after serving the King for a year.

Q: How do you think you'd feel if you got back to Jerusalem and discovered that the situation had deteriorated dramatically, for the Israelites were not living up to the vows they had made (Chap. 10)?

**Transition:** If you skim chapter 10, you will see that the people failed to keep several of the promises that they had made to the Lord. So Nehemiah immediately began to act decisively to change the situation. Let's read Chp 13 and see if we can identify the promises that were not kept by the Jewish people. Let's begin.

**BOOK:**

***Nehemiah's Final Reforms***

**13** 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, <sup>2</sup> 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.) <sup>3</sup> When the people heard this law, they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent.

<sup>4</sup> 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, <sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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 <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> I was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah's household goods out of the room. <sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> All Judah brought the tithes of grain, new wine and oil into the storerooms. <sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> I rebuked the nobles of Judah and said to them, “What is this wicked thing you are doing—desecrating the Sabbath day? <sup>18</sup> 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.”

<sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> Once or twice the merchants and sellers of all kinds of goods spent the night outside Jerusalem. <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> 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.

<sup>23</sup> Moreover, in those days I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. <sup>24</sup> 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. <sup>25</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> Must we hear now that you too are doing all this terrible wickedness and are being unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women?”

<sup>28</sup> 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.

<sup>29</sup> Remember them, O my God, because they defiled the priestly office and the covenant of the priesthood and of the Levites.

<sup>30</sup> So I purified the priests and the Levites of everything foreign, and assigned them duties, each to his own task. <sup>31</sup> I also made provision for contributions of wood at designated times, and for the firstfruits.

Remember me with favor, O my God.

**Process Observations/Questions:**

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn't understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

**LOOK:**

The Book of Nehemiah illustrates how much a layperson committed to a life of prayer, God's Word, and active obedience can do. Nehemiah serves as a reminder that Christians are needed in leadership positions not only within the church but also in civil government. Those attempting to mold society on the principles of Scripture will doubtless experience opposition like Nehemiah did. Prayer, Nehemiah's most potent weapon, continues to serve Christians in their struggle to do God's will in spite of opposition.

**Close in Prayer**

### **Commentaries for Today's Lesson:**

**Wiersbe, W. W. (1993). Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the Old Testament (Ne 11–12). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.**

### **Dedication of the Walls (11–12)**

Nehemiah returns now to the story of the walls, which he had interrupted to tell about the spiritual work under Ezra. Everything from 7:5 to 10:39 has been parenthetical. The events in Nehemiah are not given in their exact order. It was necessary to get the Jews to live in the city, for both the good of the city and the glory of God. This, of course, demanded faith. The leaders were dwelling in the city, but now they wanted the citizens to join them, so they cast lots and moved one out of ten into the city. Verse 2 indicates that there were also some volunteers. The numbers in vv. 3–19 total 3,044. If this represented 10 percent of the male population, we can see how small the remnant was in the land. Note the mention of singers (vv. 22–23). The Jews had no song during their years of exile (Ps. 137), but now they had the joy of the Lord as their strength.

The actual dedication of the walls is described in 12:27–47. Ezra and Nehemiah divided the people into two great companies, with Ezra leading one and Nehemiah following the other (see vv. 31, 36, 38). They started probably at the valley gate. Ezra led his company along the east side of the city, then north to the temple area. Nehemiah and his company went straight north and then east, meeting the other company at the temple area. It was a reminder, perhaps, of when Israel marched around Jericho and won a great victory. It was also an opportunity to publicly thank the Lord as they witnessed the work accomplished. Verse 43 indicates that the joy of the city was heard miles away. What a day of dedication that was! When dedicated people unite joyfully to dedicate God's work, they will always experience God's blessing.

**Simmons, B. E. (1972). Nehemiah. In H. F. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs (Eds.), The Teacher's Bible Commentary (pp. 262-263) Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers.**

### **The Walls Dedicated and Temple Service Organized (Neh. 12:27–47)**

*The passage*—This passage records the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem and the formal organization of Temple services. For this gala occasion the Levitical singers were brought in from surrounding towns. The people were purified before the actual ceremonies began. Then Nehemiah led one group and Ezra another in a procession around the city. When they came to the Temple, they offered sacrifices with gladness. Then the services of the Temple were set in order.

### **Nehemiah Institutes Reforms (Neh. 13:1–31)**

*The passage*—At the time of this dedication the book of the Law was read publicly to the people. Then Nehemiah instituted these final reforms.

Tobiah was made to move out of the Temple where Eliashib had prepared him a private lodging. Nehemiah notes here that while all of this had been going on he was not at Jerusalem. He had gone to Babylon for a time.

The Levites also had been deprived of their rightful offerings and had to leave the Temple and work their lands for substance. Nehemiah then set to work to correct this problem.

The next problem he confronted was the breaking of the sabbath. Many were working, and commerce was carried on contrary to the law. Nehemiah had to threaten the use of force to correct this.

Some of the Jews had also intermarried with the heathen during his absence. This enraged Nehemiah, for he found that their children could not even speak Hebrew. He made them swear that they would not allow this practice to continue.

*Special points*—Though nothing is said of Nehemiah’s return to Babylon before verse 6, he had evidently been gone for some time. Just when he left and when he returned is impossible to determine with certainty. Undoubtedly, he left Jerusalem in 432 B.C. after serving twelve years as governor. Probably he was gone for several years. However, it is impossible to say exactly when he returned in relation to the events in chapter 13.

**Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *Be Determined* (pp. 138-149). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.**

### *Standing by Our Promises*

General William Booth, founder of The Salvation Army, once said to a group of new officers, “I want you young men always to bear in mind that it is the nature of a fire to go out; you must keep it stirred and fed and the ashes removed.”

Nehemiah discovered that the fires of devotion had gone out in Jerusalem. His first term as governor lasted for twelve years (5:14), after which he returned to the palace to report to the king (13:6). He was gone perhaps a year; but when he returned to Jerusalem, he discovered that the situation had deteriorated dramatically, for the people were not living up to the vows they had made (chap. 10). Nehemiah immediately began to act decisively to change the situation.

Without spiritual leadership, God’s people are prone to stray like sheep. One successful pastor told me, “If we didn’t keep our eyes on this work twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, it would be invaded and soon fall apart.” Moses was away from the people of Israel only a short time, and they became idolaters (Ex. 32). Paul would establish a church and leave it in the hands of the elders, only to have trouble begin soon after his departure. Then he would have to write them a letter or pay them a visit to straighten things out. (No wonder Paul exhorted the Ephesian church leaders as he did in Acts 20:28–32!) After Nehemiah was gone from Jerusalem only a short time, he came home to find the people defiled by compromise.

If you compare this chapter with chapter 10, you will see that the people failed to keep several of the promises that they had made to the Lord.

#### **1. The separation promise (Neh. 13:1–9, 23–31)**

*The mixed multitude (Neh. 13:1–3).* According to 10:28–29, the Jews had willingly separated themselves from the people of the land and united with their Jewish brothers and sisters to obey the Law and walk in the way of the Lord. But apparently their separation was incomplete, or some of the people formed new alliances; for they discovered that there were Ammonites and Moabites in their congregation, and this was contrary to the Law of Moses (Deut. 23:3–4).

Ammon and Moab were born from the incestuous union of Lot and two of his daughters (Gen. 19:30–38), and their descendants were the avowed enemies of the Jews. Somehow this “mixed multitude” had infiltrated the people of Israel in spite of previous purgings (9:2; 10:28). It was the “mixed multitude” that gave Moses so much trouble (Ex. 12:38; Num. 11:4–6), and it gives the church trouble today. The “mixed multitude” is composed of unsaved people who want

to belong to the fellowship of God's people without trusting the Lord or submitting to His will. They want the blessings but not the obligations, and their appetite is still for the things of the world.

Balaam was a hireling prophet who tried to curse Israel, but each time saw the curse turned into a blessing (Num. 22–24). Finally, however, he hit upon a scheme to defeat Israel: He encouraged the Moabites to be “neighborly” and invite the Jews to share in their religious feasts, which involved immorality and idolatry (Num. 25). Balaam knew that human nature would respond to the opportunity for sin and the Jews would disobey God. As a result of their sin, Israel was disciplined by God, and 24,000 people died.

The “mixed multitude” in the church today urges us to follow the philosophy of Balaam and do what the world wants us to do. I was told about a dedicated youth pastor whose ministry was bringing many teens to Christ and building them up in the faith. He didn't entice them with entertainment; he simply taught the Word, kept the young people busy witnessing, and met with them regularly for prayer. The church was being greatly helped by this group of dedicated teenagers.

But the enemy went to work. The youth pastor was called before the elders and asked, “What is your program for ministering to the carnal young people in the church?” He said that he had no special program for carnal teenagers, but that they were welcome to join in the Bible studies, prayer meetings, and witnessing trips. *The elders dismissed the youth pastor because he was not catering to the carnal teens in the church!*

When I was ministering over “Back to the Bible Broadcast,” the manager of a Christian radio station phoned me to complain about my messages about Lot and worldliness among professing Christians. He felt I was being too hard on the carnal Christians. “If you keep that up,” he said, “we're going to drop your program!”

The old Youth for Christ slogan is still true: In ministry, we must be “geared to the times and anchored to the Rock.” If we understand the times (1 Chron. 12:32), we can relate to people more easily and apply the Word with greater skill; *but we must not imitate the world in order to try to witness to the world.* Years ago, 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” (*The Servant As His Lord*, p. 17). “Today the world has so infiltrated the church,” said Vance Havner, “that we are more beset by traitors within than by foes without. Satan is not fighting churches—he is joining them.”

*An enemy intruder (Neh. 13:4–9).* Not only were some of the Jews married to Ammonites or Moabites, but also *an Ammonite was living in the Jewish temple!* Tobiah the Ammonite (4:3) had been given a room in the temple by Eliashib the high priest (13:28). Eliashib is the first one named in the list of workers (3:1), and yet he had become a traitor. Why? Because one of his relatives was married to Sanballat's daughter (13:28), and Sanballat and Tobiah were friends. They were all a part of the secret faction in Jerusalem that was fraternizing with the enemy (6:17–19).

Just because a family has been active in the church a long time and has helped to build the work, it is no sign that each generation will be spiritual, or that any generation will *remain* spiritual. Children and grandchildren can drift from the faith and try to bluff their way on the testimony of their ancestors, and fathers and mothers can depart from the faith just to please their children. Eliashib's relative was privileged to be born into the priestly family, yet he threw away his future ministry by marrying the wrong woman (Lev. 21:14; Deut. 23:3); and Eliashib apparently approved of it.

All this happened while Nehemiah was away at the palace, which suggests that those he appointed to lead in his absence had failed in their oversight. *It doesn't take long for the enemy to capture leadership, and too often the people will blindly follow their leaders in the path of compromise and disobedience.*

It was bad enough that an Ammonite was living in the temple, and that a Jewish high priest had let him in; but this intruder was using a room dedicated to God for the storing of the offerings used by the Levites. He defiled the temple by his presence and robbed the servants of God at the same time. Nehemiah lost no time throwing out both the man and his furniture, rededicating the room to the Lord, and using it again for its intended purpose. Like our Lord, Nehemiah had to cleanse the temple; and it appears that he had to do it alone.

But this is not an easy thing to do. A new pastor may discover officers or leaders in the church who are not spiritual people but who are entrenched in their offices. What does he do? He knows that these leaders have relatives in the church who, like Eliashib, will cooperate with their family rather than contend for the faith. Should the pastor try to “clean house” and possibly split the church? Or should he bide his time, lovingly preach the Word, and pray for God to work? With either approach, the pastor will need courage and faith, because eventually the blessing of the Lord on the Word will arouse the opposition of the “mixed multitude.”

*Mixed marriages (Neh. 13:23–31).* “We would not give our daughters as wives to the peoples of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons!” was the promise the Jews had made to the Lord (see 10:30, NKJV); but they did not keep it. In his survey of Jerusalem, Nehemiah saw women from Ashdod (see 4:7), Ammon, and Moab married to Jewish men; and he heard their children speaking foreign languages. (A child is more likely to learn how to speak from his mother, with whom he spends more time, than from his father who is away from home each day working.) If these children did not know the language of Israel, how could they read the Law or participate in the holy services? If a generation was lost to the faith, what was the future of the nation?

God's people and the people of the world can be identified by their speech. “They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood” (1 John 4:5–6, NIV).

While ministering at a summer Bible conference, I had dinner one evening in the home of the daughter of a well-known Christian musician and her husband. Both of them were able to talk about her father, now deceased, or about music and musicians; but when the conversation turned to the Word and the Lord, they were silent. I wondered if either of them really knew the Lord, or, if they did, if they were on speaking terms with Him. They had no problem talking about the things of the world, but they did not know “the language of Zion.”

Nehemiah dealt with the problem by first expressing his horror that such a thing should be done in Israel (Neh. 13:25). In a similar situation, Ezra had plucked his own hair and beard (Ezra 9:3); but Nehemiah plucked the hair of some of the offenders! Ezra had dissolved the mixed marriages (Ezra 10), but Nehemiah only rebuked the offenders and made the people promise that they would not do it again.

Nehemiah also delivered a sermon, reminding the people that Solomon, one of Israel's greatest kings, was ruined by marrying foreign women (Neh. 13:26; 1 Kings 11:4–8). In Solomon's case, his mixed marriages were a threat to the throne and the kingdom; and in Nehemiah's day, mixed marriages even threatened the priesthood. The Law of Moses was clear,

but both the priests and the common people had deliberately disobeyed it. Nehemiah then purified the priests and made certain that only those who were qualified served (Neh. 13:30). However, the problem with the priests was not completely settled, for the Prophet Malachi had to deal with disobedient priests in his day (Mal 1–2)

How important it is that we take a stand for separation from sin “and having done all, to stand” (Eph. 6:13).

## **2. The support promise (Neh. 13:10–14)**

“We will not forsake the house of our God,” was the final statement the Jews made in their covenant with the Lord (10:39). This meant paying the temple tax, providing wood for the altar, and bringing the required tithes and offerings to the priests and Levites (vv. 32–39). Without the faithful support of the people, the ministry at the temple would languish; and the Levites would then scatter to the villages, where they could work the land and survive (13:10).

But when Nehemiah returned to the city, he discovered that the people had failed to keep their promise. (This helps to explain why one of the storage rooms was available for Tobiah.) The priests and Levites were without support and were deserting their work in order to survive. The people ignored the warnings of Moses, “Take heed to yourself that you do not forsake the Levite as long as you live in your land” (Deut. 12:19, NKJV) and “You shall not forsake the Levite who is within your gates, for he has no part nor inheritance with you” (14:27, NKJV; and 18:1–8).

Nehemiah “contended” with them, which means he rebuked the leaders for breaking their promise and disobeying the Law. Before his survey of the city was completed, he also rebuked the nobles of Judah (Neh. 13:17) and the men married to foreign women (v. 25). While the Hebrew word can refer to arguing or even physical combat, it also carries the judicial meaning of “to plead a case.” Since Nehemiah presented God’s case and defended it from the Law, the offenders had to admit that he was right.

The temple officers in charge of the gifts had forsaken their posts because there was nothing coming in or going out, so Nehemiah “set them in their place” (v. 11; “stationed them at their posts,” NIV). He then saw to it that the people brought to God the offerings that rightfully belonged to Him (Mal. 3:7–12). He appointed four men to supervise the treasury and distribute the tithes and offerings. Note that these men represented the priests, Levites, scribes, and laymen; but they all had one thing in common: They were faithful to the Lord. “Moreover, it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful” (1 Cor. 4:2).

When God’s people start to decline spiritually, one of the first places it shows up is in their giving. “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:21). The believer who is happy in the Lord and walking in His will has a generous heart and wants to share with others. Giving is both the “thermostat” and the “thermometer” of the Christian life: It measures our spiritual “temperature” and also helps set it at the right level.

The prayer in Nehemiah 13:14 is the first one recorded since 6:14 and is the seventh of Nehemiah’s “telegraph” prayers found in the book. You find three more such prayers in 13:22, 29, and 31. He was in the habit of talking to God as he served Him, a good example for us to follow. He reminded God of his faithfulness and prayed that what he had done would not be blotted out. Nehemiah was not pleading for blessings on the basis of personal merit, because he knew that God’s blessings come only because of God’s mercy (v. 22). This prayer is similar to the one recorded in 5:19 where Nehemiah merely asked God to remember him and what he had done. He wanted his reward from God, not from men.



Someone asked the American Episcopal bishop Phillips Brooks what he would do to resurrect a dead church, and he replied, “I would take up a missionary offering.” *Giving to others is one secret of staying alive and fresh in the Christian life.* If all we do is receive, then we become reservoirs; and the water can become stale and polluted. But if we both receive and give, we become like channels; and in blessing others, we bless ourselves. American psychiatrist Dr. Karl Menninger said, “Money-giving is a good criterion of a person’s mental health. Generous people are rarely mentally ill people.” Someone wrote in *Modern Maturity* magazine, “The world is full of two kinds of people, the givers and the takers. The takers eat well—but the givers sleep well.”

### **3. The Sabbath promise (Neh. 13:15–22)**

When they signed the covenant, the Jews promised not to do business with the Gentiles on the Sabbath Day (10:31); but Nehemiah found the people not only doing business on the Sabbath, but also doing their daily work and carrying unnecessary burdens. The Jewish merchants didn’t want to lose the opportunity to make money from the Gentiles, and the Gentiles were quick to make a profit from their Jewish neighbors.

The child of God must choose spiritual wealth rather than material wealth and claim the promise of Matthew 6:33, “But seek first His kingdom, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you” (NASB). Whoever wrote Psalm 119 made it clear that he chose God’s Word rather than money (vv. 14, 72, 127, 162). King Saul made the wrong choice (1 Sam. 15), and so did Achan (Josh 7 (2 Tim. 4:10).

In one of the churches I pastored, a lovely young couple began to attend with their little boy. Then I noticed that only the mother and son were attending, so I stopped at the home to see what had happened to the father. I learned that he had taken a second job on weekends so he could save enough money to get a better house. The wife confided that they really didn’t need the extra money or a new house, but it was her husband’s idea, and she couldn’t stop him. The tragedy is, the extra money didn’t go to a new house; it went to doctors and hospitals. The little boy contracted an unusual disease that required special medicine and care, and the father’s extra income helped pay the bill.

I’m not suggesting that every family with a sick child is unfaithful in their stewardship, or that God makes children suffer for the sins of their parents. But I am suggesting that nobody can rob God and profit from it. If our priorities become confused and we start putting money ahead of God, then we must expect to be the losers.

Nehemiah took three steps toward changing the situation. First, he rebuked the Jews who were working and selling on the Sabbath and made them stop (Neh. 13:15). Then, he rebuked the nobles for allowing business on the Sabbath Day, reminding them that the nation’s violation of the Sabbath was one cause for their captivity (vv. 16–18; Jer. 17:21–27). Did they want to have more wrath come on the people?

His third step was a very practical one: He ordered the city gates shut on the Sabbath Day. The guards had been willing to open the gates to the Gentile merchants, possibly because they were bribed; so Nehemiah put some of his own servants on duty. He also ordered the Levites to set a good example on the Sabbath and minister to the people.

The Lord’s Day, the first day of the week, is not a “Christian Sabbath,” because the Sabbath is the seventh day of the week and belonged especially to the Jews. Therefore, the Old Testament laws governing the Jewish Sabbath don’t apply to the Lord’s Day. But Sunday is a special day to God’s people because it commemorates the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead as well as

the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. We ought to use the Lord's Day to the glory of the Lord.

More and more, especially in our cities, Sunday has become a day for shopping, sports, and chores around the house. The shopping center parking lot is as full on Sunday afternoons as it is on Saturdays. I once interviewed the manager of a shopping mall and asked him how he felt about being open on Sundays.

"The employees and I would rather stay home," he replied, "but it's a big day for business, especially from people on their way home from church."

In our family, my wife and I tried to follow the simple principle of not doing on Sundays whatever could be done on any other day of the week, things like mowing the lawn, washing the car, shopping, and so on. The home didn't become a prison, but neither did it turn into a circus; and the children didn't seem to suffer for it.

The French agnostic, Voltaire, is supposed to have said, "If you want to kill Christianity, you must abolish Sunday." I'm not sure I agree with him, but I do know that many Christians have killed their joy, witness, and spiritual power by turning Sunday into an ordinary day and not putting Christ first in their week.

Nehemiah closes with two prayers (Neh. 13:29, 31) that God would remember him for his faithful service. His conscience was clear, for he knew he had done everything for the good of the people and the glory of God. There would probably be little appreciation from the people, in spite of his sacrifices; but he knew that God would reward him accordingly.

May those who come behind us find us faithful!

**Getz, G. A. (1985). Nahum. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, pp. 694-696) Wheaton, IL: Victor Books**

#### *F. The reforms under Nehemiah (chap. 13)*

For 12 years Nehemiah served as governor of Judah, from Artaxerxes' 20th year to his 32nd year (5:14; cf. 13:6), that is, from 444 B.C. to 432 B.C. Other than his rebuilding and dedicating the wall, getting the people to agree to keep the Law, and organizing the work of the priests and Levites in the temple, little is known about Nehemiah's 12-year rule. Undoubtedly that was a successful period of time in his life.

When the 12 years were up Nehemiah returned to Persia (perhaps to the city of Susa; cf. 1:1; or to the capital, Persepolis), evidently once again to serve King Artaxerxes (cf. 2:6). How long he remained in this position is not known. Perhaps it was two years or so. While he was gone some rather startling changes took place in Judah, changes involving serious violations of the Mosaic Law. When Nehemiah once again returned to Judah (perhaps around 430 or later), he faced a task that in some respects must have been even more difficult than rebuilding the wall.

#### 1. ISRAEL'S EXCLUSION OF FOREIGNERS (13:1-3)

13:1-3. **On that day** refers not to 12:44 but to the time after Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem to be governor again, as indicated in 13:4-7. The portion of the Law (**the Book of Moses**) that **was read** is Deuteronomy 23:3-5. The Ammonites and Moabites had resisted Israel's march to Canaan, and the Moabites **had hired Balaam to curse** Israel but **God ... turned** that attempted **curse into a blessing** (Num. 22-25). Therefore Ammonites and Moabites were to have no part in

Israel's temple worship. Being reminded of this **the people** in Nehemiah's day eliminated those foreigners (as stated in Neh. 13:4–9, 23–28). Interestingly once again the reading of God's Word had an effect on **the people** (cf. 8:1–6, 13–17; 9:3).

## 2. NEHEMIAH'S ENCOUNTER WITH TOBIAH (13:4–9)

13:4–5. When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem he was shocked to find that **Eliashib, the high priest** in Judah (cf. 3:1, 20; 13:28), had prepared a **large** room in the temple for **Tobiah**. Eliashib and Tobiah were **closely associated**, which may mean family ties (cf. Tobiah's relationships by marriage with several Jews, 6:17–18). Tobiah had been an enemy of Nehemiah, opposing the wall-building (2:10–19; 4:3, 7; 6:1, 12, 17, 19); but now that Nehemiah was gone (13:6) Tobiah the Ammonite (cf. comments on vv. 1–3) moved into the **temple!** The room he occupied had been one of the temple storerooms (v. 4; see comments on 12:44), a side room for storing **grain offerings** (13:4–5). There Tobiah could oppose God's work while posing to assist it!

13:6–9. **Artaxerxes** is called the **king of Babylon** because his rule over the Persian Empire included Babylon. Nehemiah's return to Artaxerxes (at either Persepolis, the capital, or Susa) was in 432. **Some time later** (perhaps two years or more) Nehemiah asked to return to **Jerusalem**. How long he stayed this second time is not stated. Malachi may have ministered about that same time (see the chart "Chronology of the Postexilic Period," near Ezra 1:1).

Hearing what the high priest **had done** for **Tobiah** (Nehemiah called it an **evil thing**; cf. Neh. 13:17), Nehemiah was deeply distressed. **Eliashib** had been involved in restoring the walls (3:1), but now inconsistently he had allowed an opponent to reside inside the temple complex! Understandably Nehemiah was so angry that he went into the temple room and tossed out **all Tobiah's household goods**. He then had the **rooms** (apparently Tobiah had also occupied some rooms adjacent to the large chamber) purified, either ceremonially or by fumigation or both, and restored the temple articles and **offerings** that belonged there.

## 3. NEHEMIAH'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE OFFICIALS IN JUDAH (13:10–14)

13:10. Nehemiah's next task pertains to why Tobiah was able to occupy one of the temple storerooms. They were empty because the people had failed in their commitment to bring their tithes and offerings **to the Levites**. As a result **the Levites** and others who were to live off these offerings as they performed spiritual services for the people had to work in the **fields** caring for **their** livestock (cf. Num. 35:1–5). This meant they had less time to work in the temple.

13:11–14. Nehemiah reprimanded **the Jewish officials** for neglecting this aspect of the work of the temple (**the house of God**; cf. vv. 4, 7, 9, 14). Malachi addressed this problem too (Mal. 3:8–10). The officials had failed to make sure the people of Judah obeyed the Lord in these matters. What made this problem even more distressing for Nehemiah, and difficult to believe, is that these leaders had previously signed a document promising before the Lord and the people that they would never again let this happen (Neh. 9:38; 10:14–29, 35, 37, 39). They had even said specifically, "We will not neglect the house of our God" (10:39b).

Besides rebuking the leaders for their neglect, Nehemiah took action to correct the problem (cf. 13:17–19). He **stationed** the Levites **at their posts** in the temple and appointed four men—a **priest**, a **scribe**, a **Levite**, and an **assistant**, all **trustworthy** (v. 13)—to oversee the distribution of the peoples' **tithes** (**grain, new wine, and oil**, v. 12; cf. v. 5; 10:39). Also Nehemiah, as he so often did, prayed for God's help in the matter (13:14). **Remember** was a plea for help, not

merely a request that **God ... not** forget something (cf. “remember” in vv. 22, 29, 31; 5:19; 6:14 [twice]). Judah’s leader did not want his efforts of reform to be undone by the people’s neglect.

#### 4. NEHEMIAH’S ENCOUNTER WITH THOSE WHO WERE PROFANING THE SABBATH (13:15–22)

13:15–16. Another commitment Israel had made in writing was to keep God’s laws regarding **the Sabbath** (10:31). But when Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem he found that the people had also violated this promise. They were working on **the Sabbath** as they did on the other days of the week. They were **treading** grapes in the **winepresses**, and transporting the **wine**, along with **grain ... grapes, figs, and other** merchandise, **into Jerusalem** to sell it. They also were buying **fish** and other items from people of **Tyre** who resided **in Jerusalem**.

13:17–22. Again Nehemiah met the problem with a rebuke and action (cf. vv. 11–13). In rebuking their **Sabbath** desecration (calling it a **wicked thing**; cf. v. 7), he referred to a similar sin in Jeremiah’s day (cf. Jer. 17:19–27) which God punished by the Exile (**calamity**). Nehemiah had the city **doors ... shut on the Sabbath**, beginning on Friday evening, with guards posted to see that merchandise was not **brought in**. Even so, some **merchants** stayed all **night outside** the walls, perhaps hoping people would slip outside in the darkness to purchase their goods. When Nehemiah heard of this, he threatened to use force against them. Then he told **the Levites** (cf. Neh. 13:30) to help **guard the gates** (cf. 7:1; 11:19). Again (cf. 13:14) he asked **God** to help in this problem, showing **mercy** to him out of His **great love** (*hesed*, “loyal love”).

#### 5. NEHEMIAH’S ENCOUNTER WITH THOSE WHO VIOLATED THEIR MARRIAGE COMMITMENTS (13:23–31)

13:23–24. The people of **Judah** had also promised in writing that they would not intermarry with pagan people (10:30). Yet when Nehemiah arrived back in Jerusalem, he found that many of the **men** had violated this commitment also (cf. Ezra 9:1–4; 10:44; Mal. 2:10–11) by marrying **women from** the Philistine city of **Ashdod**, and Ammonite and Moabite (cf. comments on Ezra 10:1–3) women. This too had been forbidden in the Mosaic Law (Ex. 34:12–16; Deut. 7:1–5). These mixed marriages even meant that **their children** were speaking their mothers’ **language**, not Hebrew (**the language of Judah**).

13:25–27. Again Nehemiah responded with a rebuke (cf. vv. 11, 17). Also he asked God to judge them (**called curses down on them**) and even struck some of them physically, pulling **out their hair**, probably from their beards. To lose one’s beard was a disgrace (2 Sam. 10:4; also see Isa. 50:6). He **made them** swear before **God** that they would not continue to commit this violation of God’s Law. He reminded them of Solomon’s **sin** in marrying **foreign women** (cf. 1 Kings 11:1–8). This was **wickedness**, an act of unfaithfulness.

Nehemiah’s pulling out the men’s hair may seem to be violent and inappropriate for a man of God. However, Nehemiah was concerned that God’s judgment not fall again on Judah. He knew **God** would not tolerate this sin.

13:28–29. Even the priesthood was contaminated by this sin! A grandson of **the high priest** Eliashib (cf. 3:1, 20; 13:4) had married Sanballat’s daughter. **Sanballat**, perhaps governor of Samaria, had vigorously opposed Nehemiah’s work (cf. 2:10, 19; 4:1, 7; 6:1–2, 5, 12, 14), and now he, like Tobiah (cf. 6:17–18; 13:4), had apparently planned through this family relationship to destroy God’s work. Nehemiah had thrown Tobiah’s furniture out of the storeroom (v. 8); now he chased the guilty husband **away**.

Nehemiah prayed that **God** would judge the high priest's grandson. Who else is included in his word **them** is not specified, but probably Sanballat was in mind. Mixed marriages **defiled** the priesthood for a priest was to marry "only a virgin from his own people" (Lev. 21:14).

13:30–31. This problem, like the others reported in this chapter (cf. vv. 9, 22), called for ceremonial purifying. Again **the priests and the Levites** were **assigned** their **duties**. (Nehemiah was great at getting people to work!) He **also made** sure the people brought their **contributions** and **firstfruits** to the temple (cf. comments on vv. 10–13).

For the fourth time in this chapter this great leader prayed that **God** would **remember** him (see comments on v. 14), that is, that God would bestow His blessings on him in return for his diligence.

This book underscores the importance of physical protection for God's people in Jerusalem but, more importantly, it stresses the need for His people to obey His Word, not giving in to sin through neglect, compromise, or outright disobedience.

**Mathews, K. A. (1998). The Historical Books. In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), Holman Concise Bible Commentary (pp. 187-189). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.**

*Renewing the People (13:1–31).* Another line of defense constructed by Nehemiah was the community's spiritual life. The basis for the reforms Nehemiah enforced was the Mosaic law. He attempted to reflect the Mosaic ideal that Ezra's reading of the law had set before the people (chaps. 8–10). The people segregated themselves from foreign influences that would jeopardize their spiritual commitment (see Deut. 23:3–5).

However, Eliashib the high priest (Neh. 3:1, 20; 12:22; Ezra 10:6) had already compromised the holiness of God's temple. He cleared the storerooms for the Ammonite Tobiah (Neh. 6:18) to occupy. Nehemiah explained that he was in Persia when Tobiah occupied the temple. Upon his return, he immediately expelled Tobiah and cleansed and restored the storerooms for service. He reinstated the Levitical offerings, which had ceased during his absence, and charged the people with breaking their oath (13:10–14; 10:39; see Mal. 2:8–12). He took further steps against merchants who violated the Sabbath by selling goods to the Jews. He charged the Jews with repeating their fathers' sins and threatened the merchants' lives.

Nehemiah's final action addressed the continued problem of intermarriage (see Ezra 9:1–10:44). To Nehemiah, the different languages he heard spoken by Judah's children indicated that the Jews were losing their distinctive identity as God's people. The problem was the foreigners' religion, not their ethnicity. He argued that the Jews were reviving the sins of Solomon, whose unfaithfulness caused Israel to sin and suffer God's judgment. Nehemiah took drastic action because of the severe threat. He physically chastened those married to foreigners and forced them to abstain from such marriages. So sordid was the situation that even Sanballat's daughter (2:10, 19) had married into the priestly line.

Nehemiah concluded his reforms by caring for the needs of the priesthood. Nehemiah was conscious that he was carrying out God's mandates and not his own. With each reform he prayed for God's blessing on his faithful service.

*Theological and Ethical Significance.* The Book of Nehemiah illustrates how much a layperson committed to a life of prayer, God's Word, and active obedience can do. Nehemiah serves as a reminder that Christians are needed in leadership positions not only within the church but also in civil government. Those attempting to mold society on the principles of Scripture will

doubtless experience opposition like Nehemiah did. Prayer, Nehemiah's most potent weapon, continues to serve Christians in their struggle to do God's will in spite of opposition.

Nehemiah's call for divorce of foreign wives is not an endorsement of divorce or racism but a desperate command for a desperate time. (See Mal. 2:10–16; 2 Cor. 6:14–7:1). The survival of the Jews as a people committed to God demanded *exclusion* of Gentiles *for a time*. The survival of the church demands *inclusion* of *all* who will hear the gospel and commit their lives to Christ.

**The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). (Ne 13:1-31). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.**

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