



"Remembering Nehemiah" (Nehemiah 13:1-31)

I. INTRO

A. Today we conclude our Nehemiah series with a look at Nehemiah 13. If you've read ahead you'll find it has a bit of a surprise and unsettling ending.

1. "Reality, in fact, is usually something you could not have guessed. That is one of the reasons I believe Christianity." --C.S. Lewis¹ [Lewis is saying you can't make this stuff up!]
2. The Bible is full of normal people who are deeply flawed – and yet a passionate and persistent God continues to pursue us.
3. The Bible is raw and real. We'll see some of that today. Nehemiah doesn't seem to be as humble and God-focused at the end of the book as he was in the beginning. What can we make of this? What is the larger lesson?

B. Before I read chapter 13 I will provide some context:

1. After 12 years as governor, Neh returned to his work for the king Persia. After some time (a few years?) he returned to Jerusalem, only to find that the people had fallen back into their self-indulgent ways. So Nehemiah quickly jumped in to set things right.
2. V. 2 will mention Balaam (from Numbers 22-24). Balaam was a wicked prophet. He's noteworthy because, although he was a wicked man, he was not a false prophet.
 - a. The king of the Moabites hired Balaam to curse Israel, but to his credit Balaam told the king he only prophesy whatever God told him.
 - b. After a number of sacrifices Balaam could only prophesy about God's blessing of Israel, which made the king angry and he sent Balaam away without paying him.

¹ C. S. Lewis. *Mere Christianity*, HarperOne 2015:42.

- c. But Balaam eventually found a way to get the king to pay him – he advised the king on how to entice the people of Israel with prostitutes and idolatry.
3. If you're new to the story, Tobiah and Sanballat are also mentioned. They are archenemies of Nehemiah and the Jewish people who were constantly trying to undermine Nehemiah's leadership and work for their own gain.
- C. I will read Nehemiah 13:1-31 and then I will pray and we will conclude our series...
"On that day they read aloud from the book of Moses in the hearing of the people; and there was found written in it that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, ² because they did not meet the sons of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them. However, our God turned the curse into a blessing. ³ So when they heard the law, they excluded all foreigners from Israel.

Tobiah Expelled and the Temple Cleansed

⁴ Now prior to this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, being related to Tobiah, ⁵ had prepared a large room for him, where formerly they put the grain offerings, the frankincense, the utensils and the tithes of grain, wine and oil prescribed for the Levites, the singers and the gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests. ⁶ But during all this time I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had gone to the king. After some time, however, I asked leave from the king, ⁷ and I came to Jerusalem and learned about the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, by preparing a room for him in the courts of the house of God. ⁸ It was very displeasing to me, so I threw all of Tobiah's household goods out of the room. ⁹ Then I gave an order and they cleansed the rooms; and I returned there the utensils of the house of God with the grain offerings and the frankincense.

Tithes Restored

¹⁰ I also discovered that the portions of the Levites had not been given them, so that the Levites and the singers who performed the service had gone away, each to his own field. ¹¹ So I reprimanded the officials and said, "Why is the house of God forsaken?" Then I gathered them together and restored them to their posts. ¹² All Judah then brought the tithe of the grain, wine and oil into the storehouses. ¹³ In charge of the storehouses I appointed Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and

Pedaiah of the Levites, and in addition to them was Hanan the son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah; for they were considered reliable, and it was their task to distribute to their kinsmen. ¹⁴ Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out my loyal deeds, which I have performed for the house of my God and its services.

Sabbath Restored

¹⁵ In those days I saw in Judah some who were treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sacks of grain and loading them on donkeys, as well as wine, grapes, figs and all kinds of loads, and they brought them into Jerusalem on the sabbath day. So I admonished them on the day they sold food. ¹⁶ Also men of Tyre were living there who imported fish and all kinds of merchandise, and sold them to the sons of Judah on the sabbath, even in Jerusalem. ¹⁷ Then I reprimanded the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing you are doing, by profaning the sabbath day? ¹⁸ Did not your fathers do the same, so that our God brought on us and on this city all this trouble? Yet you are adding to the wrath on Israel by profaning the sabbath."

¹⁹ It came about that just as it grew dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and that they should not open them until after the sabbath. Then I stationed some of my servants at the gates so that no load would enter on the sabbath day. ²⁰ Once or twice the traders and merchants of every kind of merchandise spent the night outside Jerusalem. ²¹ Then I warned them and said to them, "Why do you spend the night in front of the wall? If you do so again, I will use force against you." From that time on they did not come on the sabbath. ²² And I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come as gatekeepers to sanctify the sabbath day. For this also remember me, O my God, and have compassion on me according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness.

Mixed Marriages Forbidden

²³ In those days I also saw that the Jews had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. ²⁴ As for their children, half spoke in the language of Ashdod, and none of them was able to speak the language of Judah, but the language of his own people. ²⁵ So I contended with them and cursed them and struck some of them

and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor take of their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. ²⁶ Did not Solomon king of Israel sin regarding these things? Yet among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; nevertheless the foreign women caused even him to sin. ²⁷ Do we then hear about you that you have committed all this great evil by acting unfaithfully against our God by marrying foreign women?" ²⁸ Even one of the sons of Joiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was a son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite, so I drove him away from me. ²⁹ Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.

³⁰ Thus I purified them from everything foreign and appointed duties for the priests and the Levites, each in his task, ³¹ and I arranged for the supply of wood at appointed times and for the first fruits. Remember me, O my God, for good."

II. BODY

- A. How do we interpret what we just read? What is going on here?
- B. One theologian has said that if he were to make Nehemiah into a blockbuster movie he would certainly not include chapter 13. But the Bible includes chap 13... Why? ²
- C. There are six, mostly quick, points I'd like to make regarding what Nehemiah encountered when he returned...
 1. Vs. 1-3. **They opted for legalism** – See especially v. 3: "So when they heard the law, they excluded all foreigners from Israel" (emphasis added).
 - a. The Law did NOT say to exclude ALL foreigners, only the Ammonites and Moabites: "No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the Lord; none of their descendants, even to the tenth generation, shall ever enter the assembly of the Lord, ⁴ because they did not meet you with food and water on the way when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam..." --Deuteronomy 23:3-5

² Portions of the following outline were adapted from D.A. Carson's exegesis of Nehemiah 13 at The Gospel Coalition's 2014 National Women's Conference.

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- b. Also, they had forgotten that God had set His affection on some particular Moabites like Ruth – the Great Grandmother of King David, who ends up in the Messianic line of Jesus.
 - c. In chapter 13 of Neh they opted quickly for legalism and rules instead of searching for and seeking God's heart for adoption into God's family.
 - d. Was Neh party to this legalism? It seems that he was – notice v. 30a: *"Thus I purified them from everything foreign..."* (emphasis added).
2. Vs. 4-9. **They opted for nepotism (or favoritism).** Family relationships (or "peacekeeping"³) became more important than keeping God's Covenant.
- a. Eliashib, the high priest, provided an apartment in the city center for Tobiah – an enemy of Neh and the Jewish people. The one who had tried to intimidate Neh and the people when the wall was being built.
 - b. Jerusalem was starting to become a prosperous place again and Tobiah, because of his family relationship with the Jewish High Priest, gets a business apartment downtown – in the Temple!
 - c. Eliashib is simultaneously rejecting the covenant parameters and colluding with the enemy.
 - d. Favoritism had become more important than the covenant.
 - e. Jesus insists that we love God more than our own family (Mat 10:37).
 - f. Favoritism triumphed over faithfulness.
 - g. What we witness in these verses is a preview of Jesus cleansing the Temple in Mark 11, Luke 19, and John 2. The people had turned God's house into a marketplace instead of a house of prayer.
3. Vs. 10-13. **They opted to neglect the household of God with their tithes and offerings.**
- a. The people had refused to provide for the Levites and the singers (Neh 13:10), so they left their posts and found other employment.
 - b. The temple of God had become forsaken -- again.
 - c. Neh went out and found reliable people to serve in the Temple functions.
4. Vs. 15-22. **They opted to disrespect the Sabbath.**

³ Instead of *peacemaking* (Mat 5:9).

- a. They pursued profit over piety on the Sabbath.
 - b. Responsive, joyful obedience to God became secondary.
5. Vs. 23-28. **They opted for mixed marriages.**
- a. In a NT context it is not about marrying someone outside your race, it's about a believer not marrying an unbeliever.
 - b. *"Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers..."* --2 Corinthians 6:14
 - c. Solomon had his many wives and he ended up building temples to their gods in and around Jerusalem.
6. **Nehemiah seems different here in chapter 13 than he did in the earlier chapters.** *"Remember me O my Lord":* 5:19, 13:14, 22b, and 31.
- a. It would be (fairly) easy to read any one of these statements and conclude that these were just the faithful words of a godly man beginning to conclude his ministry.
 - b. We COULD even compare it to Paul in 2 Tim 4: 7-8: *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day..."* --2 Timothy 4:7-8
 - c. But Nehemiah seems to have drifted. He's not as humble and as quick to repent and to pray as he was in the earlier chapters. Here he seems overly concerned with his reputation and posterity – and a bit angry.
 - d. Some of Nehemiah's actions seem out of character for a mature man of God.
 - 1) V. 13:8: *"I threw all of Tobiah's household goods out of the room."* --Nehemiah 13:8 [We could probably go with righteous anger on that...]
 - 2) Vs. 13:11, 15, 17 Neh reprimanded or admonished...
 - 3) V. 21 Neh threatened force against the sellers...
 - 4) V. 25: *"So I contended with them and cursed them and struck some of them and pulled out their hair..."* --Nehemiah 13:25 [Maybe he crossed the line here ☺]
 - e. **Emotional Health:** Allowing the Holy Spirit's work of sanctification to touch my emotions as well as my mind and will.

- 1) *"Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."* --1 Thessalonians 5:23
 - 2) Emotional health has to do with naming, recognizing, and managing our own feelings in healthy, productive, and biblical ways.
 - 3) The fruit of integrating emotional health into the discipleship process is the capacity to speak honestly, listen attentively, and respond humbly.
- D. There are some people that God uses in some marvelous ways and then in their later years they begin to drift. Solomon was certainly one of those people. I think Neh may be drifting a bit.
- E. So, what do we make of this chapter? (It's a fairly depressing way to end a sermon series...)
1. Here is how one theologian put it: "There is sin in the beginning, there is sin in the middle, and there is sin at the end – and we're (all) looking for something more"
 2. This means we just have to wait for Jesus. There is some truth to that...
 3. Throughout the Bible and throughout history – we see cycles of sin that overwhelm God-followers. But much was accomplished in the short-term in and through Nehemiah:
 - a. There were days of mercy and grace in Jerusalem.
 - b. The wall was rebuilt
 - c. The city was repopulated
 - d. The sacrificial system was restored
 - e. There were moments of great private and public confession
 - f. There was a sense of the presence of God moving powerfully among them.
 - g. It was a magnificent time of great personal and national revival.

III. CONCLUSION

- A. As we close this series on Neh I want to say that my sense is that this book of the Bible fits KHC like a prophetic glove. With Jesus and the Holy Spirit's presence and power...
1. We are seeking God's mercy and grace
 2. We are seeking to rebuild the walls here

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3. We want KHC to be repopulated
4. We want healthy systems and relationships to be restored
5. We want moments of private and public confession to characterize us
6. We want God's presence in renewal and revival – for ourselves, the South Bay, and beyond.

B. The full title of the series is Nehemiah: God's Work, God's Way, For God's Glory. I'd like to close by turning the subtitle into three questions:

1. What is God's work in Nehemiah?
2. What is God's way in Nehemiah?
3. What is God's glory in Nehemiah?

C. I will close with short and succinct responses:

1. **God's work in Nehemiah is reconciliation.**

- a. A key verse is Neh 1:3: *"The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach..."* --Nehemiah 1:3
- b. We serve a God who has passionately pursued us since the beginning of time as we know it. I love how Eugene Peterson paraphrases Ps. 23:6a: *"Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life"* --Psalm 23:6a (MSG)
- c. The gospel is God doing for us what we couldn't do for ourselves. God sent his only Son, who was a better Neh, to live a perfect life and die a criminal's death so that we could call God Father.
- d. *"Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. ¹⁸ Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, ¹⁹ namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. ²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ..."* --2 Corinthians 5:17-20a

2. **God's work in Nehemiah is humble prayer.**

- a. Neh looked to God and prayed – 1:5; 2:4; 2:20; 4:4, 20; 6:16. Neh spent four months fasting, praying, repenting, and planning before he went to the king for permission to go to Jerusalem. The longest recorded prayer in the Bible is Neh 9:5-38.

- b. After considerable prayer Neh left the comfort and the opulence of the palace to go down into the rubble and brokenness of his people. Jesus left the comfort and perfection of heaven to come down into our brokenness.
 - c. The church is weak and impudent when it does not pray.
 - d. Prayer calls us to admit the fact that we are not in control.
 - e. Do you remember what Jesus said when He cleansed the temple? Jesus quotes both Isaiah and Jeremiah when He says: *"My house shall be called a house of prayer..."* --Matthew 21:13 (Isaiah 56:7; Jeremiah 7:11)
 - f. Notice it's not a house of preaching, or service, or ministry – the church is to be primarily a house of prayer.
 - g. *"The story of every great Christian achievement is the history of answered prayer. –E.M. Bounds [Elders prayer tonight at 6:30pm]*
3. **God's glory in Nehemiah is the presence of God restored.**
- a. Historically the manifest presence of God had dwelled with the people of God.
 - b. A Temple for God was built in Jerusalem and God's presence dwelt there (1 Kings 8; 2 Chron 7). The glory of God was obstructed or hindered for almost 150 years in Jerusalem.
 - c. The Temple was the place of sacrifice, the place of atonement for sin.
 - d. Then Jesus Himself becomes the great meeting-place between a holy God and His sinful people. He said, *"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."* --John 2:19
 - e. When Jesus died the temple curtain was ripped in two from top to bottom: *"And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom and the earth shook, and the rocks were split..."* --Matthew 27:51 [The presence of God is no longer confined to the Temple...]
 - f. Then the Church becomes the Temple (see 1 Cor 3:16; Eph 2:21-22; Heb 3:6)

D. To review:

1. God's work in Nehemiah – and at KHC is reconciliation.
2. God's work in Nehemiah – and at KHC is prayer.
3. God's glory in Nehemiah – and at KHC is the presence of God restored.

E. Let's move to a time of celebrating the Lord's Supper...

P.A.S.S. Questions For Further Reflection and For KHC Life Groups

P - Participation (get everyone involved in the dialog)

1. Has there ever been a time when you "acted completely out of character"? You may have let anger or frustration get the best of you and done and/or said some things you regretted. (No need to share gory details – stay "big picture.")

A - Application (makes it personal)

2. What does it mean to be a people reconciled and to be people who reconcile?
3. What does it mean to be people (or a church) of prayer?
4. What does it mean for the Church to be the Temple (the place where the presence of God dwells)?

S - Scripture (thinking biblically is a learned behavior! :-)

5. As we navigate Old Testament Law and narratives and seek to distinguish what was acceptable then with what the New Testament has to say about speaking the truth in love (Eph 4:15), how might we know when to be restrained and gentle and when to be bold and even emotional in confronting someone in sin?
6. Review what was said about emotional health: Emotional Health is allowing the Holy Spirit's work of sanctification to touch my emotions as well as my mind and will.
 - a. *"Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."* --1 Thessalonians 5:23
 - b. Emotional health has to do with naming, recognizing, and managing our own feelings in healthy, productive, and biblical ways.
 - c. The fruit of integrating emotional health into the discipleship process is the capacity to speak honestly, listen attentively, and respond humbly.

S – Sharing (aim for a time of honest reflection, authenticity, and transparency in a safe atmosphere modeled by you).

7. Assess the state of your current emotional health. What areas are you strong in? What areas could you continue to grow in?