



Nehemiah 13:1-31

Reforms of Nehemiah

Perseverance is the ultimate mark of great leadership.

Winston Churchill admonished his people during WWII: 'Never give up. Never, never, never give up. 'And they didn't.'

When we come to the final chapter in Nehemiah, it is as if he stands shouting to his people: Never give up. Never, never, never!

We have come to the last chapter in the history of Israel in the Old Testament, and we still see the great Jewish leader fighting hard battles to the very end. There will be 400 silent years before God speaks again to His people. Old Testament revelation comes to a close with Nehemiah and the prophet Malachi.

John White writes: 'To the end of his days Nehemiah retained the same goal that mobilized the laws to rebuild the walls and that made him intervene earlier to abolish exploitation of the poor. Nehemiah was not a flash-in-the-plan leader but one who remained as long as he lived, consistent to his original vision.' (Excellence in Leadership, p. 127).

Nehemiah went back to Persia in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes. What he tells us in chapter thirteen takes place sometime later (13:6).

Nehemiah probably served two governorships in Judah. The first would have extended from the twentieth to the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes, 445 B.C. to 433 B.C.

We don't know how long Nehemiah has been gone, but it is sufficient time for the leadership and the people to slip back into their old ways of sinning and forsake the new covenant they had signed (10:1, 28-39).

Several scholars suggest the problems faced in chapter thirteen seem to have been between his first twelve year assignment and the second assignment some time later. There are major problems that have developed in Judah.

We have no way of determining how long the interval between the governorship lasted, but it was sufficient to reveal the spiritual problems in the nation.

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Howard Voss and Cyril Barber suggest Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem between 425 B.C. and 420 B.C., which would be near the end of the reign of King Artaxerxes.

His second governorship dealt with the same old spiritual problems he had dealt with ten-twelve years earlier. When you compare the covenant that the people signed in chapter ten with the problem in chapter thirteen, the only difference is in chapter thirteen the people still dedicate their first born to the LORD. However, problems still remain for the intermarriages with pagans, the Sabbath observances, provisions for the Temple and the tithes.

This is a good time to read the Book of Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets. He wrote shortly before 432 B.C. (possibly 450 B.C.) and parallels the conditions of Ezra and Nehemiah. It best fits the situations in this chapter, after the first visit of Nehemiah and before the return from Persia in 432 B.C. God sent the prophet with a message that dealt with the same problems Nehemiah encountered.

PROBLEMS THAT NEVER GO AWAY

The same sins that ruined their national life before their captivity had attacked again and again. Nehemiah faces exactly the same problems he dealt with earlier; i.e. the impurity of God's people, desecration of the Sabbath, and marriage with heathen people. The focus is on separation, service and sanctification.

How sad that we face again and again the same besetting sins in the Christian life.

Reading the Word (13:1-3)

The first thing they did was go back again and read the Word of God. The portion referred to is Deuteronomy 23:3-5. Then they enforced the marriage laws.

"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, 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. So when they heard the law, they excluded all foreigners from Israel" (Nehemiah 13:1-3).

The cancer of paganism still infected the nation and it had to be removed.

The historical background is found in Numbers 22:3-11. The Ammonites and Moabites had resisted Israel's march to the Promised Land. The enemies hired a false prophet whose curse backfired and was turned by God into a blessing upon Israel (Num. 22-25).

Compromised integrity

Compromised integrity

Tobiah had been a ruthless enemy to the building of the wall. Yet, while Nehemiah was away he wormed his way into the Temple. The high priest allowed it to happen (vv. 4-5, 7-8).

The room he occupied had been one of the Temple storerooms, which was a side room for storing grain offerings. From that advantage Tobiah could oppose God's work with pretense of support it.

"Now prior to this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, being related to Tobiah, 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" (Nehemiah 13:4-5).

Eliashib is the high priest and had given his daughters in marriage to Sanballat the Horonite of Samaria (v. 28). Yes, he is the same evil person encountered earlier (2:10, 19).

The high priest has provided Tobiah with rooms in the Temple where the Temple articles, tithes, and offerings would normally be stored. That is like letting the fox stay in the chicken house.

Nehemiah took decisive action (vv. 6-9)

When Nehemiah found what had happened in the Temple he exploded with righteous indignation.

In verse six Artaxerxes is called King of Babylon because his rule over Persian Empire included Babylon.

"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. It was very displeasing to me, so I threw all of Tobiah's household goods out of the room. 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" (vv. 7-9).

Perhaps this is what Malachi had in mind when he said because of the evil thing God was sending a curse on this priesthood (Mal. 2:2).

Make no apology for the righteous indignation of Nehemiah, Malachi or Jesus.

Every manner of evil is condoned today in the name of tolerance.

Where is the Nehemiah who will stand up to evil and defend the righteousness of God?

Reforms for the Temple (vv. 10-14)

Because the tithes for the operation of the Temple had not been paid, the Levites and the singers had left town and returned to their villages and farms in order to make a living.

"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" (v. 10).

The people had probably lost confidence in the spiritual leadership because of the lack of integrity of the high priest Eliashib.

That still did not excuse disobeying the biblical command to give God what He is due.

Nehemiah tackled the problem by rebuking the religious leaders, reinstating the Levites and the tithe-collections. "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. All Judah then brought the tithe of the grain, wine and oil into the storehouses. 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" (vv. 11-13).

Prayer of Nehemiah in verse fourteen: 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 Reform (vv. 15-22)

The Sabbath had become secularized once again and desecrated by the resumption of the commercial activities, harvesting of grain, and treading of grapes. Vendors from Tyre brought their fish for the markets. Of course, vendors don't come unless the people are ready to respond.

Note the words used to describe Nehemiah's action as a leader. I admonished (v. 15), I reprimanded the nobles of Judah (v. 17), I commanded (v. 19), I stationed (v. 19), I warned (v. 21), I will use force against you (v. 21), I commanded the Levites (v. 22).

There was nothing indecisive about Nehemiah. He rebuked the nobles, locked the city gates, ran the merchants outside the gates, and told the Levites to guard the city on the Sabbath.

Another prayer of Nehemiah is recorded in verse 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."

Family Reform (vv. 23-28)

Intermarriage with the surrounding pagan nations plagued Israel. It led the people into idolatry.

Domestic disobedience is stated in vv. 23-24. "In those days I also saw that the Jews had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. 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."

Israel was rearing children and grandchildren who could not speak or understand the language of the Scriptures. How could they know Yahweh?

Action of Nehemiah in verse 25 gets quite intense. The passage is strong because the problem is great. "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."

Nehemiah cursed them does not mean he used profanity. He does not use the LORD'S name in vain. Nehemiah cursed them in the sense that he treated them with contempt, to revile in the severest terms.

He also got a little rough with them. He pulled out their hair, meaning he made slick or polished their face or head. The situation was desperate and it called for desperate action.

Do you have some sins, favorite ones, that you had allowed to return home? Perhaps you have even invited them back. They will suck the spiritual life out of you and leave you spiritually drained. But just like Nehemiah, no sin can remain in the temple if you grab it by the neck and throw it out. Who is the enemy guest you have allowed in the temple of the Holy Spirit? What severe, even radical action will you take to regain control and cleanse your temple?

ABIDING PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

1. Nehemiah was obedient to God and His Word. He refused to compromise. He was obedient to the will of God. He condemned the evils severely. He had fearless convictions and stood by them.

2. Nehemiah kept focused on the right issues. He refused to let people side track him. He knew his priorities and stuck with them. He kept focused on his goals and objectives. Nehemiah kept working for a permanent correction to the evils of his day. But he also had the future of the nation in mind.

3. He was a man of prayer (13:14, 22, 29, 31). He was bold in the presence of God. He was consistent in his devotion to the Lord.

4. Nehemiah took bold action when he knew it to be the will of God. When you deal with sin, you have to deal with it head on. You cannot put off what must ultimately be done. The longer you wait, the worse it gets.

5. Has a Tobiah wormed his way into your life and now sits enthroned where Jesus Christ should be? Is the temple of the Holy Spirit cluttered with Tobiah's filth and defilement? Do you need to do some spiritual temple cleaning so Christ will be the Lord of your personal life? What are some attitudes, thoughts, behaviors, and compromises that diminish your love for Christ?

6. Has a daughter of Sanballat captured your affection and stolen your loyalty to Christ? How sad when Christian youth choose to enter into a marriage covenant with unbelievers. It would be far better to break your heart now than later when life really gets complicated. Yes, it does grieve the heart of God.

7. There can be no half-measures in the Christian life. Throw Tobiah out of the temple. Clean it up now.

8. Nehemiah was abandoned to the will of God. That is the first requirement of a great leader and all followers.

This great builder, reformer and Jewish leader was a man with his faith focused on Yahweh. He concluded his testimony to God's faithfulness praying, "Remember me, O my God, for good."

The apostle came to the end of his life's ministry and declared: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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