

## **Nehemiah: The Cost of Reformation**

**Nehemiah 13:1-31**

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

*The Lord's Day Evening  
March 1, 2009*

Now turn with me for the last time to the book of Nehemiah. This is the thirty-eighth study of Ezra and Nehemiah, and the last one. Next Lord's Day evening I begin, I think, a series on

I Samuel. And because we have all changes during June, July, and August — partly because the Senior Minister is on sabbatical — that will take us until the end of May, and more or less end the story of Samuel. Then we'll pick up with the rest of I Samuel in September. So if you want to read ahead for next week, it's the first chapter of I Samuel.

But tonight we're in Nehemiah 13, and because the first three verses refer to a time period that's distinct from the rest of the chapter, I'm just going to read verses 1-3 and make a few comments about that, and then read the rest of the chapter after that. Now let's look to God in prayer.

*Father, we thank You for the Scriptures that holy men of old wrote as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. Help us now as we read this part of Scripture to know the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit in our minds, in our hearts, in our wills, in our affections. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.*

This is God's word:

On that day they read from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the people. And in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, for they did not meet the people of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them—yet our God turned the curse into a blessing. As soon as the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent.

Now let me pause there. You see that verse 1 tells you that this is “on that day,” and probably that's a reference to the events that we've been looking at in the preceding chapters — the day namely when this service of dedication was held

following the dedication of the walls of the city. What they discover as they read the Book of Moses (in this case the book of Deuteronomy), what they discover in chapter 23 is a prohibition that no Ammonite and no Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God.

Now you'll remember from Old Testament history that when the people of God were on the verge of entry from the wilderness and into the Promised Land, they came across the Ammonites. They asked them for bread and water. They were in dire need at the time. The Ammonites (and its king, King Sihon) refused — not only refused, but went to war against the Israelites (a fatal error of judgment on their part); and God, through the Israelites, routed the Ammonites. And then in the same context and same chapter in our Old Testament there's the story of the Moabites. And the Moabites, you remember, hired Balaam the prophet to pronounce a curse upon the Israelites, which God in His sovereignty turned into a blessing. Now because of that, the Ammonites and the Moabites were forbidden from entering into the assembly of God. They were forbidden to engage in worship, for example, in the temple.

This is not a prohibition against race. This is not a text in Scripture that you employ to justify the superiority of one race above another — in this case, the Israelites or the Jews against the Ammonites or the Moabites. Such things have been done in the past and even from within our own circles of Presbyterianism, and there is absolutely no justification for that whatsoever. That would be a reprehensible thing to do.

The concern here is that the Ammonites and the Moabites are near neighbors of Israel, and the concern is not one of race: the concern is one of the purity of worship. They were not allowed to enter into the assembly of God because the understanding is they were pagans...because they would bring with them their foreign pagan deities.

Now, in the Old Testament of course there is a wonderful, marvelous story of a Moabite, Ruth — a Moabitess, Ruth — who does indeed enter into the assembly of God and marries an Israelite: her kinsman redeemer, Boaz. It's one of the most glorious stories in the Old Testament, so it's important for us to understand what the nature of that prohibition is there in the first three verses.

Let's note that as soon as they read the Scripture, they were obedient to it. Whatever Scripture said, they did, no matter what the cost, no matter how difficult. But that was then, and things have now changed. Let's pick up the reading again in verse 4...and there is what grammarians call here an *ambiguous referent* in verse 4 — “Now before this....” And commentators go on *ad nauseum* as to what the “this” actually refers to. In the context it evidently takes place somewhere between what we've just read and what we're about to read in verse 6, which is twelve years later.

Now before this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, and who was related to Tobiah, prepared for Tobiah a large chamber where they had previously put the grain offering, the frankincense, the vessels, and the tithes of grain, wine, and oil, which were given by commandment to the Levites, singers, and gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests. While this was taking place, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I went to the king. And after some time I asked leave of the king and came to Jerusalem, and I then discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, preparing for him a chamber in the courts of the house of God. And I was very angry, and I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber. Then I gave orders, and they cleansed the chambers, and I brought back there the vessels of the house of God, with the grain offering and the frankincense.

I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them, so that the Levites and the singers, who did the work, had fled each to his field. So I confronted the officials and said, 'Why is the house of God forsaken?' And I gathered them together and set them in their stations. Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses. And I appointed as treasurers over the storehouses Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and Pedaiah of the Levites, and as their assistant Hanan the son of Zaccur, son of Mattaniah, for they were considered reliable, and their duty was to distribute to their brothers. Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God and for His service.

In those days I saw in Judah people treading winepresses on the Sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on donkeys, and also wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of loads, which they brought in to Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them on the day when they sold food. Tyrians also, who lived in the city, brought in fish and all kinds of goods and sold them on the Sabbath to the people of Judah, in Jerusalem itself! Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, 'What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day? Did not your fathers act in this way, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Now you are bringing more wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath.'

As soon as it began to grow dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and gave orders that they should not be opened until after the Sabbath. And I stationed some of my servants at the gates, that no load might be brought in on the Sabbath day. Then the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice. But I warned them and said to them, 'Why do you lodge outside the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you.'

From that time on they did not come on the Sabbath. Then I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come and guard the gates, to keep the Sabbath day holy. Remember this also in my favor, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of Your steadfast love.

In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but only the language of each people. And I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. And I made them take oath in the name of God, saying, 'You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin. Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?'

And one of the sons of Jehoiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite. Therefore I chased him from me. Remember them, O my God, because they have desecrated the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.

Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work; and I provided for the wood offering at appointed times, and for the firstfruits.

Remember me, O my God, for good.

[...And they all lived happily ever after.]

It's easy to forget, isn't it, that Nehemiah was in fact a servant of the Persian king Artaxerxes. That's easy to forget amidst all of what we've been reading in the past few weeks and months, that he was in fact a Persian civil servant. He had been commissioned to come to engage in this building work and reform in Jerusalem by a pagan king, but he must now return. Twelve years had passed from the end of chapter 12 to verse 6 of chapter 13. We are roughly 433 B.C. During his absence, decline set in — unbelievable decline, when you think of what's happened in this city: The revival; the rending of the heavens and God coming down; the reformation that's taken place; the delight in the worship of God; the six-hour-long services of reading and explaining the word of God; entering into a personal covenant; reforming their lives and their marriages; promising to live out and out for God no matter what.

But what does Nehemiah find when he returns? A dozen years have passed.

Firstly, he finds compromise in God's house, in no less a place than the very temple precincts. A priest by the name of Eliashib [probably not the same Eliashib as the high priest who is mentioned later in the chapter]... a priest by the name of Eliashib is related to none other than Tobiah. Do you remember him? Tobiah, Geshem and Sanballat? Do you remember when they were building the walls? These were the three cohorts attempting to prevent the kingdom of God from advancing, threatening them, mocking them, cajoling them. Tobiah is a Jewish name — *Tob* in Hebrew means *good*. “God is good,” that's what his name means. But he obviously works for the Ammonites. One imagines Tobiah is a careerist, an opportunist, ambitious...an Ammonite official. It would be bad enough to have Tobiah in the precincts of the temple, but it's worse than that. One of the storerooms in the adjoining walls of the outer section of the temple (there were all kinds of rooms where stuff was kept — frankincense and oil and grain, and so on — things that were required on a day to day and week to week, month to month basis in the administration of the temple), and some of this was offerings that the people had brought for the upkeep of the singers and the Levites and the priests. But one of these rooms (a small warehouse, if you like) had been vacated, its contents removed, and Tobiah has moved in with furniture. To what end, to what purpose? Who knows? But to no good purpose, for sure. And Nehemiah's response when he discovers it — well, we might say he has a hissy fit! [*Laughter.*] He throws the furniture out of the room, like some banshee, they might say in Ireland. He physically and personally evicts Tobiah from the temple.

He's angry. Verse 8 — “I was very angry.” Note that. Well, we might sit in judgment on Nehemiah tonight. There are lots of things here that make us question Nehemiah's character. You might read this text and think that Nehemiah has grown too big for his boots; that time spent in the presence of the great Persian king Artaxerxes has made him high and mighty, and a bit of a bully, and a bit of a tyrant. He's come back to Jerusalem and he's throwing his weight about. But let me ask you something, my friends. What is he angry about? That the holy temple of God has been desecrated. That vessels and items that were regarded under Jewish law as holy unto the Lord have been defiled, and the precincts defiled, and the equipment and the utensils defiled. The holiness of God is at stake here.

Now, my friends, does anything make you angry? Are you ever angry that the holy name of God, the honor of God, is defiled? Does that not make you angry? Righteously angry? Angry for the vindication of God that His name is trampled underfoot of men? Let's note his anger, and before you rush to judgment, surely this reminds you of an episode in the life of Jesus in this same temple — overturning tables and chairs of money lenders, coins that needed to be exchanged ...Roman coins that needed to be exchanged for use in the temple that had its own coinage system, and seeing a way to make some shekels, some profits, profiteers had set up stalls and commerce within the very precincts of the temple. Jesus, you remember, in anger — in righteous anger — stormed through

this place of merchandise, citing the book of Jeremiah that God's house had been made into a den of thieves and robbers.

Yes, the first thing that he discovers is that twelve years down the line, God's house has been desecrated.

The second thing that he discovers is that giving has been neglected. You see it there in verse 10. The portions of the Levites have not been given to them, and in fact the Levites have gone home. Instead of staying...you know they would do this duty...it would last sometimes for about a week, and during that time they would stay and lodge within the temple and then return to their homes (many of them lived outside of the city)...but they've gone home. They're not doing their duty anymore. They're not doing their duty perhaps (reading between the lines a little) they're disillusioned. If one of the priests is related to Tobiah, and Tobiah now has a place of administration in the very temple, they've lost heart. They've become disillusioned. They've gone home. The giving into the temple for the upkeep of the singers and the priests and the Levites evidently had stopped, perhaps for the very same reason. And Nehemiah is a good leader. He lays the blame where it belongs: not on the Levites who went home, but on the leaders of the administration of the temple. You remember what they had said back in chapter 10. At the very end of chapter 10, in verse 39 in that covenant that they made, "We will not neglect..."—the very last verse of chapter 10—"We will not neglect the house of our God." That's the promise that they had made. That's the covenant that they had made with God. Twelve years later they have broken it.

How long does it take for reformation to be undone? A decade? Maybe less. All the good, all the advancement, all the enthusiasm, all the spiritual fervor, all the excitement, all the promises, all the hopes, all the dreams—and they're already beginning to disintegrate.

The third thing that he sees upon his return is the desecration of the Sabbath, and you see that in verses 15-19. Israel had a love/hate relationship with the Sabbath. Nothing new there. Amos, in the seventh or eighth century B.C., 400 years before Nehemiah...Amos had accused Israel of chafing because of the lack of ability to engage in commerce on the Sabbath Day. Everything was shut down, and even in the eighth century they were complaining. By the time you come to the prophets (Jeremiah 17; Isaiah 58), there are long almost diatribes by the prophets against the desecration of the Sabbath. There's nothing new here. When Nehemiah returns he sees beasts of burden carrying grain and oil and all kinds of wares on the Sabbath Day into the city. The Sabbath has been forgotten as a principle of this one day in seven, this blessing that God has given to His people to set them apart and to remind them of His rest after Creation. But all they see is the burden of it. All they see is the legalism of it. All they see is the lack of opportunity to do business on the Lord's Day.

And what is Nehemiah's response? He does three things. He enlists Levites to

shut the gates as soon as it's getting dark on Friday evening. As soon as it's getting dark, as soon as the Sabbath is beginning, shut those gates! Don't let anybody in or out. Keep out the beasts of burden; keep out the commercialism of the Sabbath Day.

And as a good leader, he provides them with good motives for doing it. He tells them to purify themselves. Why should they need to purify themselves for shutting a gate? Do you see what he's saying? This is holy work. This is the holy city, these are holy gates. Before you do this menial task of shutting one of the gates of the city, purify yourself. In other words, he provides them with a motive that this they do for the glory of God and for the honor of God and the integrity of God.

And then he notices that upon the Sabbath, these merchants are camping outside the gates with their beasts and perhaps lighting fires. And there's a lot of brouhaha outside the gates, because as soon as the gates are open, they want the best space on the corner of some street to set up their stalls. So although they are keeping the Sabbath Day by force of Nehemiah's law, they're not keeping it in spirit. And what does Nehemiah do? [Something Ligon found funny as we read it.] He threatens to "lay hands on them." He threatens physical violence if they don't move themselves and their belongings away from this gate.

Now what's your response? I love that! I'm sorry! That makes Nehemiah so very much alive to me. Here's a real man of enormous passion and zeal for the things of God, and...was he right to threaten physical violence? Perhaps that's not how we should read it. He is the governor, after all. He is the head of the judiciary, after all. He is the head of civil enforcement in Jerusalem, after all. Perhaps what he's threatening is civil arrest for disturbing the peace. Maybe that's what he's threatening. (I have no problems with the fact that he may be threatening physical violence himself, you understand!)

You know, I can't help but think (as Ligon was saying this morning) when we hear talk about the Sabbath, what's our response? Ho-hum? Well, that might be true for that period of time, but it has absolutely nothing to do with me? And I think, for us, because our view of the fourth commandment is so tragically small and minimalistic we find it difficult to enter into the level of zeal and passion that Nehemiah has (granted, within a different administration of redemption under the old covenant). But again I want to ask you tonight, does anything arouse your passion? Does anything arouse your zeal? Does anything arouse in you perhaps the threat of physical violence? (Now you can modify that, you understand.) But that we are so taken up with the things of God that we are men and women of that one zeal?

The fourth thing that he saw was the defilement of marriage. Despite the promise that is made in the first three verses of this chapter, by the time he returns priests are even involved, and children have been born. And the high priest (another

Eliashib, I think)...the high priest's grandson is married to Sanballat's daughter...whom he chases from the temple.

Do you note how quickly things have declined? You see, you make promises...you and I...promises in our hearts, promises to serve God, promises to love Him, promises to read His word, promises with regard to acts of personal consecration. Perhaps you've made some of those even as we've been studying Ezra and Nehemiah together. But do you see the overwhelming lesson?

You know, this is not a way to end a book. You know, it would have been better for Nehemiah to have ended with chapter 12 and just ignored chapter 13 and just left it out, because chapter 12 ended with such a glorious high note. But that's not reality, my friends, because what Nehemiah is teaching us here is that the people of God are flaky; that the people of God...oh, they can't be trusted; that the people of God may make all the resolutions in the world, but unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain that build it. All their accomplishments, all their advancements, all the reformation that they had managed to engage in...at the end of the day, it was a work of the outpouring of the sovereign Spirit of God. And what Nehemiah 13 is declaring to us with such graphic detail is that left to themselves and apart from the grace of God, the people of God are more than capable of compromise and decline and neglect.

But there's a second thing that I want us to see here: not just the speed with which decline took place, but what is it about Nehemiah here? Throwing furniture out of this storeroom in the temple, threatening physical violence to merchants who are camping outside the city gates on the Sabbath Day, pulling the hair of certain individuals? [Again, that might be a reference to the law code that suggests shaving the hair as a penalty for certain crimes, you understand.] We find it difficult, don't we? We read a chapter like this and we begin to question Nehemiah's integrity. Perhaps he's not the man of God that we thought he was. Perhaps he's just some man with feet of clay. Perhaps he's grown too big for his boots. He's spent too much time in the presence of King Artaxerxes, and he's a bully now — a tyrant.

I rather think, my friends, that too many of us have bowed down at the shrine of Mr. Nice-Guy; that the epitome of godliness is Mr. Nice-Guy, and Nehemiah doesn't fit into that. If Nehemiah is not nice, if Nehemiah is not pleasant, if Nehemiah is not a "hail fellow well met" kind of person, he's a man of conviction. He's a man of principle. He's a man of zeal. He's a man who refuses to compromise. He's a man who stands upon the authority of the word of God and will not shake himself free from it.

I wonder tonight...I wonder tonight...is Mr. Moses a nice guy? Is Elijah a nice guy? Is David a nice guy? Is Paul a nice guy? Is Jesus — yes, does Jesus fit into that mold and template? These words, I think, in Nehemiah 13 make us question our worldview and our understanding of what true Christianity actually is. And



maybe...maybe...some of the rough edges of Nehemiah in chapter 13 is what the church actually needs for true reformation to take place.

Let's pray together.

*Our Father in heaven, we thank You for Your word. Thank You for these books of Ezra and Nehemiah. As we've studied them, we pray that it might not just simply be an act of mere formality. We pray that good and true and genuine change and reformation might be brought about by Your Spirit in our hearts — personally, individually, and collectively. We ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

Please stand; receive the Lord's benediction.

*Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with each one of you.*

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