

CAPITOL STUDIES

APRIL 6, 2022 • WEEK 15



NEHEMIAH: THE CIVIL SERVANT FROM SUSA

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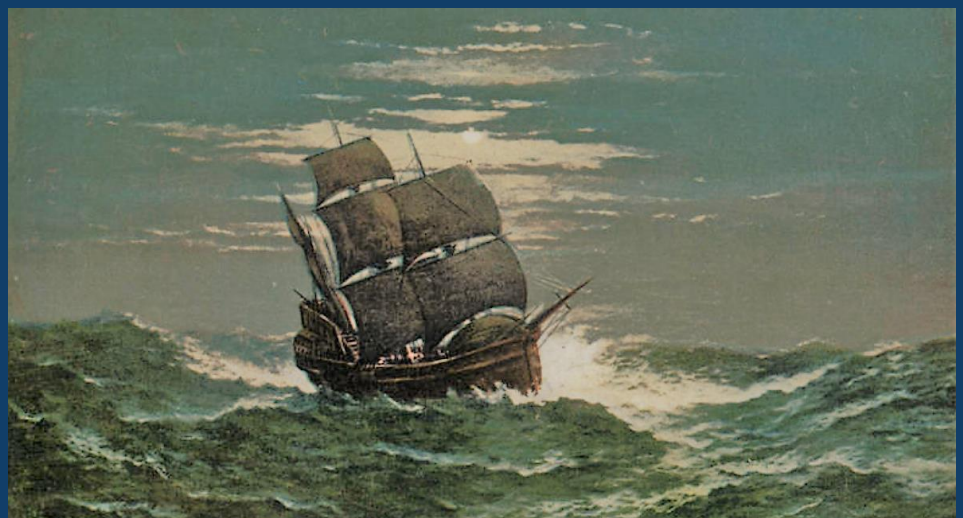
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Verse of the Week

Nehemiah 13:31b
*Remember me,
O my God,
for good.*

Nehemiah: Builder with Continuing Hope



Nehemiah has come to the close of his journal recording the “good hand of his God upon him” (2:8). Once again, he asks the LORD to remember his work and labor of love. Hope led him to return to his homeland and lead the former captives in the reconstruction of the walls of God’s Holy City, Jerusalem. Keeping his promise to King Artaxerxes, Nehemiah returned to his job in Susa after Jerusalem’s walls were completed and the city’s populace had pledged to follow God. It was some time before Nehemiah was able to visit Jerusalem again. When he did come, he found things in a disgraceful condition. His heart was broken for the sinfulness of his people, the Jews. Their disregard for the holiness of God’s house and His Sabbath was unfathomable to Nehemiah. We can make excuses, or we can just choose to honor God in the way He has asked. Throughout history we can find examples of both.

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“When the Pilgrims crossed the Atlantic Ocean in the tiny Mayflower, they observed the Lord’s Day each Sunday. One Sunday in December they reached Plymouth, which looked like a better area than Provincetown Harbor, where they had originally anchored in November. However—even though they had spent weeks in their small ship—they waited until Monday to get off the boat. This was their way of honoring God.”¹

INTRODUCTION

Four times Nehemiah repeats the phrase, “Remember me, O my God.” Having left these Jews with explicit instructions to obediently follow the LORD, he is now appalled with their indifference and disobedience to God’s law. They have fallen back into the sins of their forefathers and are ripe for divine judgment. Nehemiah admonishes the people to repent and change. He wants these people and himself, as their governor, to be remembered for fidelity to the Scriptures.

I. FAILURE IN SEPARATION

A. Foreigners Excluded: Temple Restrictions

Nehemiah 13:1-3

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, ²because 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. ³So when they heard the law, they excluded all foreigners from Israel.²

Though these verses may have been read before Nehemiah returned to the palace in Persia, God used the public reading of Scripture at this time to show the people the true spiritual needs of their hearts. What the Law of God said was clear. Israel had no other choice than to separate from these unregenerate foreigners. Their longtime enemies, the Ammonites and Moabites, had tried every way possible to curse and corrupt them. God did not want this bad influence on His people. They had not converted to become followers of YAHWEH as Ruth, the Moabitess, once had (Ruth 1:16-17). Jerusalem had “settled down in [Nehemiah’s] absence to a comfortable compromise with the Gentile world.”³

B. Tobiah Expelled: Temple Cleansing

Nehemiah 13:4-9

Now prior to this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, being related to Tobiah, ⁵had 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. ⁶But 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, ⁷and 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. ⁸It was very displeasing to me, so I threw all of Tobiah's household goods out of the room. ⁹Then 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.

One would think that part of the job as the religious leader would be to keep those who mock God out of His house. Instead, Eliashib had permitted intermarriage with the heathen peoples around Jerusalem and was now using the temple to house Tobiah, one of the main instigators of opposition to the rebuilding of the wall (Nehemiah 2:19ff). As one would expect, it would pollute the family of God to have unbelievers allowed in the temple and especially living there. Tobiah, likely a relative of Eliashib through marriage, was a known enemy of God's people and especially Nehemiah. To provide a sacred temple room to this enemy of God was unconscionable to Nehemiah. This dangerous kind of compromise with unbelief contaminated God's holy dwelling. Therefore, Nehemiah personally evicted Tobiah, removed Tobiah's household goods, and initiated the cleansing of the temple room. Now this room could once again be used for its intended purpose in God's house.

C. Tithes and Support Restored: Temple Neglect

Nehemiah 13:10-13

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. ¹¹So I reprimanded the officials and said, "Why is the house of God forsaken?" Then I gathered them together and restored them to their posts. ¹²All Judah then brought the tithe of the grain, wine and oil into the storehouses. ¹³In 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.

Nehemiah sternly rebuked the officials. Because the Levites and singers had not been compensated as God had commanded, they were forced to turn to other jobs for necessary income. The lack of godly leadership in things pertaining to the temple directly affected all of God's people. This leadership had to be restored if God's city was to survive. Discipline was needed in God's house, beginning with His own children. It is needed today as well. "For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God" (1 Peter 4:17a). Can you think of an example where judgment needed or needs to begin in God's house?

Nehemiah then appointed qualified ("reliable") leaders to oversee the return of the storeroom to its original use. They were also to see that the tithes and offerings were appropriately distributed to those who were ministering in the temple.





Nehemiah 13:14

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.

“God’s ‘remembering’ always implies His intervention, not merely His recollection or recognition. Incidentally *my good* [loyal] *deeds* could be rendered ‘my acts of loyal love’, *i.e.*, of *hesed* (Hebrew), which Brockington admirably defines here as ‘that quality which will accept an obligation and honor it, come what may’.”⁴ Nehemiah had displayed those qualities of loyalty and merciful love. Now he was asking God to intervene.

II. FAILURE IN SERVICE: DISREGARD FOR THE SABBATH

Nehemiah 13:15-22

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. ¹⁶Also 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. ¹⁷Then I reprimanded the nobles of Judah and said to them, “What is this evil thing you are doing, by profaning the sabbath day? ¹⁸Did 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.” ¹⁹It 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. ²⁰Once or twice the traders and merchants of every kind of merchandise spent the night outside Jerusalem. ²¹Then 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. ²²And I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come as gatekeepers to sanctify the sabbath day.... ^{22b}For this also remember me, O my God, and have compassion on me according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness.

God’s people had desecrated the holy day of God. They were merchandising rather than worshipping. From sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday, God’s law commanded them to rest. The Sabbath (seventh) day was to be set aside in honor of God. As the people put material gain before their commitment to Him, they profaned the fourth commandment (Exodus 20:8-11). Our nation’s view of Sunday has changed greatly since its early days. “Someone has observed, ‘Our great-grandfather called it the Holy Sabbath; our grandfather called it the Sabbath; our father called it Sunday; today we call it the weekend (and it is getting weaker all the time).’”⁵ What did you do this past Lord’s Day?



III. FAILURE IN SANCTIFICATION: MIXED MARRIAGES

Nehemiah 13:23-29

In those days I also saw that the Jews had married women from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. ²⁴As 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. ²⁵So 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. ²⁶Did 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. ²⁷Do we then hear about you that you have committed all this great evil by acting unfaithfully against our God by marrying foreign women?" ²⁸Even 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. ²⁹Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.

Here is another reference to Ammon and Moab. God had ordained for His people to be "set apart" in holiness to Him. Nehemiah was undoubtedly discouraged by how quickly the Jews had joined themselves to the ungodly nations around them. One "little thing" easily led to another. Holiness must be our priority as Christians. Even one wrong step can cause us to spiral downwards. "Unconfessed sin and unholy alliances with the enemy will, in time, deaden spiritual concern and draw the believer away from the house of God."⁶ "Catch the foxes for us, the little foxes that are ruining the vineyards, while our vineyards are in blossom" (Song of Solomon 2:15). "Now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require from you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and love him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the LORD's commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good" (Deuteronomy 10:12).

IV. FAILURE OVERCOME

Nehemiah 13:30-31

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

"I cleansed... I established... I provided... makes a far less brilliant epitaph than Caesar's boast. 'I came, I saw, I conquered.' But Nehemiah's work was the making of his people. His reforming zeal, partnered by the educative thoroughness of Ezra, gave to post-exilic Israel a virility and clarity of faith which is never wholly lost. This would have been the memorial most to his liking. This, indeed, now crowned





by the lasting benefits of his book to the Christian church, surely constitutes a major part of heaven's answer to his repeated prayer... (verse 14); *Remember me, O my God, for good.*"⁷

Nehemiah is asking to be remembered before God as he gives account for his earthly works. This is the climax of Nehemiah's "telegraph" prayers. Nehemiah wants to hear from the Lord, "Well done, good and faithful servant." What will God say when you appear before Him?

CONCLUSION

We must exercise caution when reflecting on our successes and failures. We can get puffed up with previous accomplishments, or we can live defeated lives because of our past sins. There is danger in not living for the present and future and just looking at the past. That is not healthy. Nehemiah addressed firmly the errors of the former captives. **Then he offered them hope** of restoration and blessing. Sometimes it takes a good review and rebuke of past sins to get us back on track for the LORD. **With God, there is always hope for a new beginning.** Let us each do some soul-searching and self-assessing and then make determination to ask forgiveness and correct our erroneous deeds. May God help us be courageous to fortify our inner walls with Spirit discipline and to restore the worship of God alone. What a magnificent testimony of God's great grace in using this civil servant, Nehemiah, to return Israel to a holy relationship with YAHWEH!

Alan Redpath says, "We are all engaged in an intense spiritual warfare in which there will be no armistice until we reach heaven. Satan hurls all his fiery darts at the child of God who is abandoned to the will of God...."⁸ So today is the day of decision to follow through on the promise made to Him.

Do not give up! "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (Hebrews 12:1-3). "**Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him....**" (Psalm 42:11).

John E. Bode has given us a special song that is appropriate here:

O Jesus, I have promised
To serve Thee to the end;
Be Thou forever near me,
My Master and my Friend;
I shall not fear the battle
If Thou art by my side,
Nor wander from the pathway
If Thou wilt be my guide.



O let me feel Thee near me,
The world is ever near;
I see the sights that dazzle,
The tempting sounds I hear:
My foes are ever near me,
Around me and within;
But, Jesus, draw Thou nearer,
And shield my soul from sin.

O let me hear Thee speaking
In accents clear and still,
Above the storms of passion,
The murmurs of self-will.
O speak to reassure me,
To hasten or control;
O speak, and make me listen,
Thou Guardian of my soul.

O Jesus, Thou hast promised
To all who follow Thee,
That where Thou art in glory,
There shall Thy servant be;
And, Jesus, I have promised
To serve Thee to the end;
O give me grace to follow,
My Master and my Friend.⁹


Pastor Arin Hess

FOOTNOTES

1. Martha Tyler, *Growing Through Crisis: Help from the Book of Nehemiah*, Regular Baptist Press, 2009, pg. 83.
2. All Scripture quotations, unless noted, are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*, 1995 Update.
3. Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, InterVarsity Press, 1979, pg. 129.
4. *Ibid.*, pg. 130.
5. Tyler, *Growing Through Crisis*, pg. 83.
6. *Ibid.*, pg. 84.
7. Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, pg. 133.
8. Alan Redpath, *Studies in the Book of Nehemiah: Victorious Christian Service*, Fleming H. Revell Company, 1958, pg. 182.
9. *The Celebration Hymnal*, edited by Tom Fettke, WORD Music, 1997, #676.



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*Verse of
the Week*

Nehemiah 13:31b
*Remember me,
O my God,
for good.*

Personal Study Notes



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