

“Remember Me, O My God”

The Twenty-First (and Final) in a Series of Sermons on Ezra-Nehemiah

Texts: Nehemiah 13:1-9 (sermon covers entire chapter from 12:44 on); Hebrews 8:1-13

Nehemiah served as governor of Judah for twelve difficult years. Under his very capable leadership, the insults, plotting, and threats made by the Peoples of the Land (led by Sanballat, his lackey Tobiah, and Geshem) against the newly returned exiles had been thwarted. Jerusalem’s walls and gates have been rebuilt in a mere 52 days. Upon the public reading of the Book of Law and with preaching and exhortations from the books of Moses, a reformation broke out in Israel. The people conformed their feasts (i.e., the Feast of Tabernacles) to biblical mandates. They renewed their covenant with YHWH, and according to the testimony of Nehemiah 10:30-39, they swore on oath to separate themselves from the peoples of the land, to stop giving and taking pagan wives, to conduct no business on the Sabbath, and to support the temple and its sacrifices with their tithes. As we saw last time (in chapters 11-12), the people dedicated Jerusalem’s walls and gates to YHWH in a joyful and emotion filled ceremony, which was so loud, the celebration was heard for miles away. If the author wanted to go out on a high note, *this* is where the Book of Nehemiah should end. But it doesn’t.

His work completed (or so he thinks), Nehemiah is recalled by the Persian king Artaxerxes and leaves Jerusalem behind for the Persian winter capital of Susa, only to return to Jerusalem “after some time.” What does Nehemiah find in Jerusalem upon his return? A people keeping all the promises they made to YHWH when Nehemiah had last been among them? Does he find a people zealous to keep separate from pagan Gentiles? Does he find a people working hard not to neglect the house of their God (the temple) as they promised in Nehemiah 10:39? If we thought the great celebration in Nehemiah 12, was the conclusion to this wonderful story, we are sadly mistaken.

What Nehemiah finds upon his return to Jerusalem is a city and a people living very much as they did before God’s judgment came upon them in 587 B.C. when the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar sacked and destroyed Jerusalem as an act of God’s judgment upon Israel because of their sustained idolatry and worship of false gods. Nehemiah is angered by what he finds. The Book which bears his name ends not with the celebration of the dedication of the city (chapter 12:43), but with an epilog in which Nehemiah exercises his righteous anger against those in Israel who have not kept the faith, nor their promises to YHWH. In this we final chapter see the great lesson of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are intended to teach us—the Old Covenant, that national covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai through the mediation with Moses, cannot truly deal with human sin or the sinful human heart. After spending much time studying these two books, one thing should be patently clear—Israel needs a sinless Messiah who can deal with human sin once and for all. Until such a Messiah comes, short term “reformations” are the best the people can hope for or expect. A new and better covenant must replace the old.

As we turn to our text (the closing verses of chapter 12 and the entirety of chapter 13) we pick up where the joyful celebration ends, with the planning and preparation necessary so that the people of Israel might continue to worship YHWH as brought about by and necessary to the renewed covenant. We read in Nehemiah 12:44, that “*on that day*” i.e., the day (or shortly thereafter) the people of Israel rededicated the city and its walls to YHWH, “*men were appointed over the storerooms, the contributions, the firstfruits, and the tithes, to gather into them the portions required by the Law for the priests and for the Levites according to the fields of the towns, for Judah rejoiced over the priests and*

the Levites who ministered.” Nehemiah wasted no time in ensuring that those things necessary (humanly speaking) for this reformation to continue be put into place. The people of Judah are said to rejoice at these arrangements.

We read in verses 45-47, “*and the [Levites] performed the service of their God and the service of purification, as did the singers and the gatekeepers, according to the command of David and his son Solomon. For long ago in the days of David and Asaph there were directors of the singers, and there were songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. And all Israel in the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah gave the daily portions for the singers and the gatekeepers; and they set apart that which was for the Levites; and the Levites set apart that which was for the sons of Aaron.*” If the priests and Levites were to keep the city of Jerusalem “holy” they needed the resources to do so. If singers were necessary for worship in the temple, they must be provided with the necessities of life. The same was true of the gatekeepers who were devoted to opening and closing the gates at the times established by Nehemiah. The people of Israel had promised not to neglect the house of God and to pay tithes so that those things continued which kept the city “holy”—set-apart unto YHWH.

As chapter thirteen opens, we are still in the same period of time—shortly after the dedication of the city. Nehemiah tells us that “*on that day [i.e. this may refer to the same day the walls and city were dedicated to YHWH, or it may also mean that in the days following after the city was dedicated]¹ 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.*” This follows the practice spelled out in Deuteronomy 23:3-5. The Ammonites and Moabites had a long history with Israel, especially in regard to corruption of young Israelites through intermarriage with these peoples. For now, the people were devoted to God’s law and committed to obeying it. We read in verse 3, “*As soon as the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent.*”

So far so good. From the time of the dedication of the city, and for some time after, the people of Israel listened to the Book of the Law and strove to obey God’s commandments. God’s Spirit was still working in their midst through the reading and teaching of his Word—the basis for any true reformation. But in verse 4, we come to a new time reference, to an unspecified period of time (“*now before this*”) which takes place after the events depicted in Nehemiah 12:43-13:3, and which describes what follows in the rest of the chapter beginning with verse 4. We can also see this in the fact that what follows is written in the first person—Nehemiah himself is speaking in the bulk of chapter 13 (from verse 4 on) in what one commentator calls “as hard hitting and colorful a passage as any in the book.”² This material refers to events which took place after Nehemiah came back to Jerusalem after being gone “some years.” What transpires in verse 4 and following is what happens *after* Nehemiah leaves Jerusalem to return to Persia, and what he discovers upon his return. Nehemiah is not amused by what he finds.

Recall that back in Nehemiah 6:17-19, we first learned that one of Nehemiah’s chief antagonists (Tobiah) had a number of friends in high places. There we read, “*moreover, in those days the nobles of Judah sent many letters to Tobiah, and Tobiah’s letters came to them. For many in Judah were bound*

¹ See the discussions of time frame involved in: Kidner, Ezra & Nehemiah, 127-128; and Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, 380-384.

² Kidner, Ezra & Nehemiah, 129.

by oath to him, because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah: and his son Jehohanan had taken the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah as his wife. Also they spoke of his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. And Tobiah sent letters to make me afraid.” Although he was an Ammonite, and the Jews swore to break off all ties with Gentiles (including Ammonites), Tobiah had married the daughter of one of Israel’s leading families (the daughter of Shecaniah) and was even related by marriage to the current high priest, Eliashib. Based upon such ties, and once Nehemiah had left to return to Persia, Tobiah has not only moved back into the city of Jerusalem—despite the people’s promise to separate from Gentiles—but he took up residence within the temple. “The nerve.”

We read in verses 4-6, “*now before this,*” i.e., while Nehemiah was gone, “*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.*” We must not overlook the sheer audacity of Tobiah—an Ammonite political hack working for the Persians, has moved lock, stock, and barrel into the most sacred space in all of Israel, the temple. Specifically, he moved into the storage room in the temple where the offerings made to YHWH were kept. These had been moved out to set up a cozy space for a man who had no business even being in the city, much less in the temple, and in the very room where offerings to YHWH and the tithes for those ministering in the temple were to be stored.

Tobiah’s audacity is one thing, but the actions of Eliashib are another. They reflect a sheer defiance and outright rejection of the very things to which he had sworn throughout the time of Israel’s reformation, as well as the prohibitions recounted in the first three verses of this chapter. Because of his family ties to Tobiah (through intermarriage with pagans), Eliashib is willing to place himself and the people of Israel under the direct threat of covenant curse, for openly defying the will of God. We can only imagine what the other priests and Levites thought about this—did they go along willingly? What kind of power did Tobiah and Eliashib use to pull this off? What happened to the reformation? Did it just peter out as soon as Nehemiah was not around to enforce it?

Meanwhile, Nehemiah made plans to return to Jerusalem, for as we read in the last half of verse 6, “*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.*” Wait till your Nehemiah gets home! The now furious governor learns who has moved into the temple, as well as identifying who has made such a thing possible. As Nehemiah himself tells us in verse 8, “*and I was very angry, and I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber.*” One writer paraphrases this quite nicely; “*Nehemiah threw Tobiah’s furniture and his BVDs and T-shirts and dresser drawers and mattresses out on the curb for Wednesday trash pick-up.*”³ This is not far from the truth—Nehemiah tossed the guy out on his head. According to verse 9, “*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.*” Once Tobiah had been evicted by force, the storeroom was fumigated and returned to its intended function—to store the implements for worship and the offerings to YHWH.

At this point, we learn that for whatever reason (likely at the behest of Eliashib), the priests had failed to

³ Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah, part twenty.

maintain the house of God (as promised), by not paying the Levites nor the singers the tithe of the tithe. This forced them to return to their farms and villages. *“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.”* The promise recorded in Nehemiah 10:39 had been broken so many times and in so many ways nothing was left of the original promise.

Things were so bad that Israel’s high priest allowed an Ammonite family member to take up residence in the temple! The high priest had ordered the relocation of the temple implements and the Levites and singers were not being paid. The Israelites had not separated from the Gentiles—they even moved the chief pagan offender into the temple. Far from avoiding intermarrying with Gentiles, no doubt, Eliashib acted as he did because he had deep family ties to pagans. The priests neglected God’s house by allowing Tobiah to profane it, and by not paying the Levites and singers. This failure to pay those entitled to such support shows how the greed and indifference among the religious leaders was now the norm, not a worrisome sign of how far and fast the people have fallen.⁴ And how long was Nehemiah gone from Jerusalem? A couple of years, perhaps?

His dander up and ready to act, we read in verse 11, *“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.”* Such unbelief and disobedience cannot be tolerated. Nehemiah will return things to the way they ought to be. *“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.”* According to Numbers 18:21, and as reaffirmed in Nehemiah 12:44-47, the Levites were to be supported by tithes. Because they were no longer receiving these funds from the priests (the blame here seems to fall on Eliashib), they were forced to return to their homes in outlying areas so they could support themselves. The people of Israel are now guilty of the very thing they swore not to do—they have neglected the house of God. To ensure this will not happen again, Nehemiah appoints reliable men to oversee this process.

In verse 14, Nehemiah humbly prays, *“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.”* Nehemiah is not asking God to reward him because of his good works—a form of works righteousness. Rather, the prayer springs from Nehemiah’s zeal and genuine love for the work of God, not selfishness. He asks God to bless his good deeds and service in the temple—in other words, that God bless his efforts to return things to the way they should be. In a sense Nehemiah is invoking the promised blessings under the terms of the Sinai covenant. He cannot stand to see Tobiah living in the temple and the worship services and sacrifices not properly performed. He is filled with a righteous anger.

In the balance of the chapter, Nehemiah addresses the ways the Israelites turned their backs upon their promises made at the end of chapter 10. The first of these broken promises has to do with violations of the Sabbath as recounted in verses 15-18. Nehemiah tells us, *“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 into 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*

⁴ Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, 129-130.

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.'"

Before the Israelites came under God's covenant curse in 587 B.C. the Sabbath command was the one commandment which the faithless and idolatrous Israelites struggled most to throw off. Observance of the Sabbath was a visible sign that the Jews followed YHWH, not the "gods" of the pagans. They began ignoring it, finally provoking God to take away any rest they may enjoy by re-enslaving them in Babylon. The history here is important—unlike their Egyptian slave masters who rested, while the Jews in bondage in Egypt worked and got no rest. In the Exodus, YHWH freed them, and enabled them to cease from work—one day every week! "The Sabbath is a sign of grace and freedom, not of bondage. Slaves work all the time, but free people have the liberty of rest — including servants and livestock and sojourners!"⁵ People without faith or understanding of God's covenant promises tend to see the Sabbath not as a gift from God which points us ahead to our heavenly Sabbath rest, but as a strict and difficult burden. In his prophecy (Jer. 17:19-27), Jeremiah warned the people of Israel that God's day of rest was not being observed because of all the commerce being conducted within Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Jeremiah's prophetic warning is clearly in Nehemiah's mind here.

A man of action, in verses 19-22 Nehemiah quickly remedies the problem. *"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." Nehemiah ordered the gates closed throughout the Sabbath, stationed his men to make sure this was done, and even threatened to smack ("lay hands") any merchants who camped outside of the city on Friday night, hoping to get the best spaces in the city to sell their wares to those Jews who made this trade profitable.

Yet another way in which the people of Judah turned their backs upon their promises made at the end of chapter 10 is returning to the practices of intermarriage with pagan Gentiles. According to verses 23-27, *"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 an 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?'"* Apparently, foreign women are dangerous.

The issue here is not, as we have seen, one of race. It is a matter of religion. These peoples were pagans—they worshiped created things rather than the creator. If the second generation of returned

⁵ Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah, part twenty.

exiles continued to do this, not only would the Hebrew language disappear along with Israel's customs (woman transmitted the culture in these days), but such blatant disregard for God's will risks provoking God's judgment upon the entire nation. In righteous anger Nehemiah beats some of these people and pulls out the hair of others. Had not the people learned their lesson in 587 B.C. when Jerusalem fell? Will they risk God's wrath and exile again? As Kidner points out, "a single generation's compromise could undo the work of centuries."⁶ Satan knows this, and this is why one of his chief lines of attack upon our children is intermarriage with pagans. This is why Paul forbids it in the New Testament.

A third place in which Nehemiah discovered great unfaithfulness to YHWH and failure to keep their promises made at the end of chapter 10, can be seen in verses 28-31. "*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.*" If Tobiah was a pain, Sanballat was an even nastier foe to Nehemiah. One of the high priest's grandsons had actually married one of Sanballat's daughters. This adds insult to injury. A grandson of the high priest was now Sanballat's son-in-law. That's pretty bad. Nehemiah deals with the matter by striking at the very root of the problem, this time "chasing" Jehoiada and his bride from the scene. In other words, he excommunicated them both from the religious community of Israel. Finally, the poisonous influence of both Tobiah and Sanballat was at an end.

In Nehemiah's closing line (at the end of verse 31), "*Remember me, O my God, for good,*" we see not only Nehemiah's genuine faith and piety, but we get a hint at the real lesson of Ezra-Nehemiah. Nehemiah had removed Tobiah from the temple (vv. 4-9), he restored the practice of the tithe (vv. 10-14), he enforced the Sabbath (vv. 15-22), and he put the disobedient and unrepentant grandson of the high priest under church discipline (vv. 23-29). He had "chased," "cleansed," "established," and "provided." He has done everything humanly possible to see the reformation in Israel continue. In his closing prayer he simply asks once again that YHWH remember him.

The "reformation" which came about in the days of Ezra-Nehemiah was temporary. When Nehemiah was present to personally "chase," "cleanse," "establish," and "provide," the people of Israel conformed to the commandments, at least externally. Nehemiah made sure they did. The evidence is that for a time, the reforms were real and accomplished much—as seen in the joyful celebrations and zeal to obey God's commands. But as we have also seen, the "reformation" was short-lived—especially among the leadership of Israel who did not separate from their pagan families and who excelled at disobedience.

In this, we see the weakness of the old covenant in truly dealing with indwelling sin and human depravity. Nehemiah was a great man, but a very poor replacement for the Holy Spirit. A new covenant is needed—a covenant with a heavenly high priest who does not have the failings of a man like Eliashib. A high priest without sin, who can actually change human hearts from stone to flesh, unlike Nehemiah. A high priest who can baptize his people with the Holy Spirit who regenerate sinful human nature. In Hebrews 8:1-13 (our New Testament lesson), we read of such a covenant and such a priest, that one to whom the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah point us, and whose birth we contemplate this advent season;

Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the

⁶ Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, 131.

right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, 2 a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man. 3 For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. 4 Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. 5 They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, "See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain." 6 But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. 7 For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second. 8 For he finds fault with them when he says: "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, 9 not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. 10 For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 11 And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. 12 For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more." 13 In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

Beloved, the old covenant has vanished. A new covenant has come. When we cry out "remember me, O my God," we know that Jesus our heavenly priest at the right hand of our Father hears us, answers us, is merciful to us, and forgives us. And he won't put his hands on us, beat us, pull our hair, or chase us away.